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The Duty to Arrest a Respondent Who Violates an Order of Protection

Dear Reader:

The following document was created from the CTAS electronic library known as e-Li. This online library is maintained daily by CTAS staff and seeks to represent the most current information regarding issues relative to Tennessee county government.

We hope this information will be useful to you; reference to it will assist you with many of the questions that will arise in your tenure with county government. However, the *Tennessee Code Annotated* and other relevant laws or regulations should always be consulted before any action is taken based upon the contents of this document.

Please feel free to contact us if you have questions or comments regarding this information or any other e-Li material.

Sincerely,

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Law enforcement officers generally have considerable discretion about whether to make an arrest in a given situation and are usually protected from liability if the decision not to arrest results in harm to a member of the general public. However, Tennessee does *not* allow officer discretion when it comes to arresting individuals who violate protective orders. Arrest is *mandatory*.

Illustrating how inflexible state law is on the matter, the attorney general's office issued an opinion that "a law enforcement officer, having observed the commission of a felony, may choose not to arrest or charge the offending party, *except when the officer has probable cause to believe that a suspect has violated an order of protection.*" Op. Tenn. Atty. Gen. No. 01-119 (July 27, 2001).

In other words, while an officer has discretion to ignore a felony committed right before his or her eyes, that option does not exist if the misconduct violates a valid order of protection, regardless of whether it would otherwise constitute a misdemeanor, or no criminal offense at all. If Petitioner or Petitioner's property come to harm after an officer fails to arrest the violator, the county is subject to liability for damages. *Matthews v. Pickett County*, 996 S.W.2d 162 (Tenn. 1999); *Hudson v. Hudson*, 2005 WL 2253612 (W.D. Tenn. 2005).

On the other hand, if the law enforcement agency fails to notify TCIC and NCIC that an order has been dismissed or of its expiration date, and the former Respondent is wrongfully arrested, the prospect of legal liability again rears its ugly head. That is one of many reasons it is so important that such orders be correctly served and that modifications and other required information be correctly entered in the Tennessee and National Crime Information Systems.

An arrest for violating a protective order may be made *with or without* a warrant. A law enforcement officer shall arrest Respondent without a warrant if:

1. The violation took place in the officer's jurisdiction;
2. The officer reasonably believes Respondent has violated or is violating the order; and
3. The officer verifies that an order of protection is in effect, which can be through telephone/radio communication with the appropriate law enforcement department.

T.C.A. § 36-3-611(a)(1-3).

Even if Respondent is violating an ex parte order and not a standard order of protection, the officer is required to make an arrest, *but only if* Respondent "has been served with the ex parte order or otherwise has acquired actual knowledge of the order." T.C.A. § 36-3-611(b). The term "actual knowledge" means Respondent has direct, clear knowledge of information that would lead a reasonable person to inquire further. *Black's Law Dictionary, 7th Edition*. Otherwise, an ex parte order cannot be enforced by arrest.

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