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SHERIFF-CORONER

MEDIA RELEASE

Case Number:	BG24-0161
Date:	February 8, 2024, San Benito River, Fourth St at San Juan-Hollister Rd, Hollister, Ca., 95023
Location:	
Type:	Evading Pursuing Deputies Turns to Swift Water Rescue Efforts.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

On Wednesday 02-08-24, at around 0115 (am), San Benito County Deputies received a report of a disturbance at a makeshift homeless encampment, located in the San Benito Riverbed, around Fourth Street and San Juan-Hollister Road, Hollister Ca. The initial disturbance call came from a homeless adult female, who resides in her tent within the riverbed. The female reporting party related that she had encountered an adult male, who had unlawfully entered her tent. San Benito County Deputy Sheriff's responded into the riverbed to locate the encampment and contact the involved parties.

Once in the area at the encampment, Sheriff Deputies encountered a Hispanic male adult, described as having a bald head, wearing a grey sweatshirt and dark colored pants, who later was identified by only the first name "Jonathan." The female caller identified the male subject as being the male subject who had entered her tent and she demanded deputies take enforcement action. As deputies confronted the male subject, the male subject was uncooperative and immediately fled on foot from Sheriff Deputies. The male subject fled on foot through the riverbank's vegetation, towards the swiftly running river water. It was dark, had been raining and the outside temperature was roughly 37 degrees. Upon the subject reaching the riverbank and river water's edge, the male subject purposefully leaped into the freezing swift moving river water. Sheriff Deputies stood on the bank, monitoring the male subject, as he appeared by deputies to be struggling to swim and remain above the surface of the water. The male subject was quickly swept down river and out of the deputies' sight. The male subject made no requests for help or to make his location known to Sheriff Deputies, attempting to render aid.

Sheriff Deputies immediately advised that the suspect had jumped into the close to freezing fast moving river and was swept away westerly downriver. Sheriff Deputies searched the riverbanks to try to reacquire visual contact with the male subject, meeting with negative results.

Cal-Fire crews were summoned, as the situation had now developed into a water rescue. Sheriff Deputies continued to canvas the banks of the river and speaking with the homeless in the area, as to who the male subject was. Deputies were told that the male subject, "Jonathan", was homeless also and was reportedly from the Gilroy area and had just recently appeared among the river's homeless population. It was reported that Jonathan was not welcomed by the majority of other homeless who had taken up residency in the riverbed, due to his behavior and attitude. The original female reporting party, who had called for Sheriff Deputies to come and assist her, now wanted no action taken against the male subject, "Jonathan" for being in her tent. It was also reported that the male subject had asked other homeless persons in the riverbed if police frequently patrol the river's homeless encampments.

Sheriff Deputies, Cal-Fire personnel and personnel from San Jose Fire Department's swift water rescue unit searched the section of the river, between the Fourth Street bridge to the SR. 156 bridge. Cal-Fire deployed its agency's drone, equipped with night vision, and searched for the male subject, both in the swift water and along the river's banks. Once the sun began to rise, some five plus hours later, a CHP helicopter was able to respond and joined the efforts in searching the area for the male subject, Ultimately, first responders were unable to locate any substantive piece of evidence or information to indicate the male subject successfully reached a riverbank and was able to exit the river. Eventually with all available resources exhausted, the search was suspended, some eight hours later.

Later in the afternoon, at around 1230 hours, other homeless individuals alleged to Fire personnel that the male subject had exited the river around the Highway 156 bridge, a few hours prior, and had either flagged down a ride or had arranged to be picked up by a motorist and driven out of the area.

This is an example of a poor decision being made by the male subject, and the extreme measure he chanced to evade Sheriff Deputies. He quickly of his own accord escalated the situation from a relatively minor disturbance situation to one that became a matter of life and death, evolving into a much more significant situation requiring multi-agency cooperation and assistance, over the time span of several hours. This story could have very easily had a much more senseless and tragic outcome.

The Sheriff's Office and its deputies are committed to providing services to the community, including the homeless population that also reside within the borders of the county's jurisdiction. The San Benito County Sheriff's Office would like to thank its Fire Department public safety partners, Cal-Fire, Hollister Fire, San Jose Fire Department and assisting air crew of the California Highway Patrol, for the cooperation, coordination, and efforts to do our best to bring this to a favorable yet frustrating conclusion.

This situation further demonstrated the value of technology to assist first responders in the performance of their life saving duties, by the use the effectiveness drones have as a tool to develop situational awareness to first responders, and mitigate risk.

