

ALPINE COUNTY HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES | CHILD WELFARE SERVICES

Protocol: Youth Missing from Foster Care Placement (Including Probation Response)

Revised to Address ACL 25-67 / AB 2108 Requirements

Authority: WIC §§ 16501.35 and 16010.7; ACL 25-67; ACL 24-18; ACL 22-100; ACL 19-26; AB 2108 (Ch. 660, Stats. 2024); AB 161; applicable federal missing-child requirements

Effective Date: Upon approval

Applies To: All CWS staff, supervisors, on-call workers, probation staff with placement responsibility, caregivers, and contract providers

I. Purpose

This protocol establishes Alpine County's required response when a child, youth, or qualifying nonminor dependent (NMD) is missing from foster care. It is intended to ensure an immediate, coordinated, trauma-informed, youth-centered response; timely notification and documentation; ongoing efforts to locate and safely recover the youth; placement preservation; and appropriate post-location assessment and services.

This protocol also establishes the respective responsibilities of Child Welfare Services (CWS), Probation when serving as the placing or supervising agency, caregivers, law enforcement partners, and tribal partners.

II. Scope

- Children and youth subject to an order of foster care placement for whom Alpine County CWS or Probation has placement or case-management responsibility.
- Nonminor dependents when, based on the totality of the circumstances, Alpine County suspects the NMD did not voluntarily leave foster care or is at risk of substantial harm.
- Youth whose whereabouts are unknown and youth who have been located in a location not approved by the court when that location may pose a risk to the youth.
- Dual-status youth, with CWS and Probation coordinating responsibilities and avoiding duplication whenever possible.

III. Definitions

Missing from Foster Care: A child or youth subject to an order of foster care placement is considered missing when the youth's whereabouts are unknown to the county child welfare agency or probation department, or when the agency has located the youth in a location

not approved by the court that may pose a risk to the youth, taking into account the youth's age, intelligence, mental functioning, developmental needs, and physical condition.

Nonminor Dependent (NMD): For an NMD, the missing-from-foster-care definition applies only when, based on the totality of the circumstances, the agency suspects the NMD did not voluntarily leave foster care or is at risk of substantial harm.

Located but Not Returned: A youth may remain "missing from foster care" for purposes of this protocol even when the agency knows the youth's location if the youth is in a non-court-approved location that may pose a safety risk or refuses to return to an approved placement.

Critical Incident Report (CIR): Alpine County's internal incident-reporting mechanism. The CIR does not replace required statutory notifications, CWS/CMS entries, law enforcement reports, NCMEC reports, court filings, or placement-related forms.

Harm Reduction: A trauma-informed approach that seeks to reduce immediate and long-term harms associated with risky behavior while maintaining engagement, promoting self-determination, and addressing the conditions contributing to the behavior rather than relying on punitive responses.

IV. Guiding Practice Standards

A. Trauma-Informed and Youth-Centered Response

- Treat going missing as a safety and well-being concern, not as misconduct or an identity.
- Use neutral, nonjudgmental language and avoid shaming, threatening, punitive, or condescending responses.
- Maintain contact and engagement whenever possible through the youth's preferred communication methods and trusted supports.
- Give the youth meaningful voice and choice in planning for safe return, placement, services, and supports, consistent with safety and court orders.

B. Harm Reduction

Staff shall use harm-reduction principles when working with youth who are missing, repeatedly leave care, or are at risk of commercial sexual exploitation (CSE). The goal is to reduce risk and preserve connection even when the youth is not ready or able to immediately stop all risky behavior.

- Prioritize immediate needs identified by the youth, including food, clothing, hygiene, safe transportation, medical care, shelter, communication, and connection to trusted adults.

- Acknowledge incremental progress and continued engagement.
- Address associated risks such as unsafe relationships, substance use, sexual health risks, exploitation, homelessness/couch surfing, and repeated episodes of leaving care.
- Avoid making access to support contingent on perfect compliance or an immediate return to placement when doing so would undermine engagement or safety.
- Develop practical safety strategies with the youth, including who to call, safe locations, transportation options, and ways to request help.

V. Immediate Response When a Youth Is Reported Missing

A. Caregiver / Placement Provider

- Immediately notify the appropriate law enforcement agency and make a missing-person report. An abduction or immediate emergency should be reported through 911.
- Immediately notify the assigned CWS social worker and, when applicable, the assigned probation officer. After hours, notify the designated on-call worker.
- Provide the youth's last known location, date/time last seen, clothing, possible destination, companions, transportation information, recent photograph if available, medications/medical concerns, known safety risks, CSE concerns, and likely contacts.
- Preserve the youth's belongings and relevant information when exploitation, trafficking, abduction, or other victimization is suspected.
- Remain available to assist with search, recovery, and placement-preservation efforts.

B. Assigned Social Worker / Probation Officer

Upon receipt of information that a youth or qualifying NMD is missing from foster care, the assigned worker shall act immediately. Required notifications must occur immediately and in no case later than 24 hours after receipt of the information.

- Confirm that a missing-person report has been filed with law enforcement; if not, make or ensure the report is made. Obtain and document the agency name and report/case number.
- Notify the worker's supervisor and initiate the Alpine County CIR process.
- Gather sufficient information to assess immediate danger, likely whereabouts, CSE risk, medical/behavioral health needs, suicide/self-harm concerns, substance use concerns, developmental vulnerabilities, and potential abduction or coercion.

- Begin active efforts to locate the youth, including contact with relatives, siblings, friends, school personnel, current/former caregivers, service providers, CFT members, and other significant persons; follow all viable leads.
- Use appropriate databases, social media, welfare checks, and cross-jurisdictional law enforcement contacts when indicated.
- Develop an initial plan for safe recovery and return, including transportation and placement options.

VI. Required Notifications and Documentation

A. Notifications - Immediately, but No Later Than 24 Hours

The assigned social worker or probation officer, as applicable, shall provide notice, including worker contact information, to the following unless a court order or law provides otherwise:

- The youth's parents or Indian custodian, unless notification has been limited or terminated by the court.
- The youth's legal guardian, unless notification has been limited or terminated by the court.
- Attorneys for the parents, legal guardians, or Indian custodian when required by WIC § 16501.35 and not limited by court order.
- The youth's appointed attorney.
- The youth's CASA, if one has been appointed.
- The youth's Tribe or tribal representative if the youth is or may be an Indian child.
- **MANDATORY AB 2108 SIBLING NOTICE:** Immediately, and in no case later than 24 hours after receipt of information that the child or nonminor dependent is missing from foster care, the assigned social worker or probation officer shall notify any known sibling of the missing child or nonminor dependent who is 10 years of age or older and has been adjudged to be a dependent child of the juvenile court, unless the notice would be contrary to the safety and well-being of that sibling. Notice to the sibling shall be provided in a trauma-informed manner. The notice shall include contact information for an appropriate Alpine County social worker or probation officer. The date, time, method, recipient, and any determination that notice would be contrary to the sibling's safety and well-being shall be documented in the case record.

- The local law enforcement agency, including applicable tribal law enforcement. If information indicates the youth is in another jurisdiction, coordinate with the law enforcement agency having jurisdiction there.
- The juvenile court/court of jurisdiction as required, including appropriate warrant or informational filings based on the youth's legal status.
- The out-of-county placing agency or other responsible agency, when applicable.

B. AB 2108 - Dependent Sibling Notification

This requirement is mandatory. When a child or nonminor dependent is missing from foster care, the assigned social worker or probation officer shall immediately, and in no case later than 24 hours after receiving the information, identify and notify every known sibling who is both (1) 10 years of age or older and (2) adjudged to be a dependent child of the juvenile court. The only statutory exception is when providing the notice would be contrary to the safety and well-being of that sibling. Notice shall be trauma-informed and shall include contact information for an appropriate social worker or probation officer.

Supervisory review shall specifically verify compliance with this sibling-notification requirement, including documentation of the notification or the individualized safety-and-well-being basis for not providing it.

C. NCMEC / CSE Reporting

For a child or youth who is reasonably believed to be a victim of, or at risk of being a victim of, commercial sexual exploitation, the assigned worker shall immediately, and in no case later than 24 hours, ensure required reporting to the appropriate law enforcement agency and the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC). The worker shall provide information permitted by law that assists with identification, risk assessment, location, and safe recovery.

The assigned worker shall maintain regular communication with law enforcement and NCMEC when NCMEC is involved, share significant case updates and recovery information as permitted by law, and document those communications.

D. CWS/CMS and Probation Documentation

- Document the missing status, date/time learned, last known location, law enforcement report number, risk assessment, notifications, search efforts, contacts, leads, CSE assessment/reporting, and recovery planning in CWS/CMS and the applicable probation case-management system.

- If the youth's location becomes known but the youth has not returned to an approved placement, document the known location and the safety assessment; do not treat knowledge of the location alone as resolution of the missing episode.
- While the youth remains missing, confirm and document the youth's status and ongoing efforts to expeditiously locate the youth at least once every 30 days and more frequently as circumstances require.
- Document search efforts and relevant status in each court report filed during the youth's absence.
- Document information-sharing with other counties or agencies when used to locate or protect the youth.

VII. Communication and Reporting Standards / Critical Incident Report (CIR)

The CIR is an internal Alpine County management and communication tool. It shall be completed within 24 hours of confirmed missing status and updated when material information changes or the youth is located. Completion of a CIR does not satisfy or replace any separate statutory reporting, notification, court, law enforcement, NCMEC, CWS/CMS, or placement-form requirement.

At minimum, the CIR shall include:

- Youth/NMD identifying information and legal/placement status.
- Date, time, and source of the missing-youth information; last known location and circumstances.
- Law enforcement agency, report number, and NCIC-related follow-up when applicable.
- Known risk factors, including medical/behavioral health needs, developmental vulnerabilities, CSE risk, exploitation/abduction concerns, substance use, and immediate safety concerns.
- All required notifications, including date/time, method, recipient, and any unsuccessful attempts.
- Search and engagement actions completed and planned.
- Tribal notification, collaboration, active efforts, and updates when applicable.
- NCMEC report/reference information and continuing communications when applicable.
- Placement-preservation actions, return planning, and any required placement forms.

- Recovery information, post-location assessment, services offered, safety plan, and follow-up actions.

CIR routing: assigned supervisor, ACHHS Deputy Director, ACHHS Director, and Alpine County Probation when Probation has case responsibility or a coordination role.

Supervisors shall ensure statutory notifications and case-system documentation are completed independently of CIR routing.

VIII. Ongoing Search, Engagement, and Case Management

- Continue active, individualized search efforts until the youth is located, jurisdiction ends, or another lawful disposition applies.
- Follow new leads promptly and adjust the search plan based on the youth's circumstances and known patterns.
- Maintain regular communication with law enforcement and, when involved, NCMEC.
- Attempt direct engagement through phone, text, email, social media, or trusted intermediaries when safe and appropriate. Communications should express concern for the youth's well-being and offer practical help rather than punishment.
- Use CFT members and natural supports to assist with engagement and safe-return planning while coordinating communications so the youth is not overwhelmed.
- For a youth remaining missing beyond 30 days, conduct and document due-diligence efforts no less than monthly, in addition to any more frequent efforts warranted by risk.

IX. Active Efforts for an Indian Child

When an Indian child is missing from care, Alpine County shall make affirmative, active, thorough, and timely efforts consistent with ICWA, WIC requirements, and ACL 24-18.

- Notify the Tribe immediately and no later than 24 hours after receiving information that the child is missing.
- Invite and collaborate with the tribal representative in efforts to locate the child and in decisions concerning safe recovery, services, and placement.
- Share relevant information with the Tribe as permitted by law and regularly update the Tribe regarding the child's status, including significant new location or safety information and when the child is located.
- Include the Tribe in CFT, placement-preservation, conflict-resolution, and return-planning efforts when applicable.

- Document all active efforts and tribal communications in the child's case record.

X. Placement Preservation and Required Forms

A missing episode shall not automatically result in a placement change. Before changing a dependent foster youth's placement, staff shall consider and document placement-preservation strategies consistent with WIC § 16010.7, ACL 19-26, and ACL 22-100, unless an exception applies or immediate safety requires otherwise.

- Contact the prior caregiver/placement to determine whether the placement can safely remain available or whether the youth may return.
- Consult the youth and the CFT regarding factors contributing to placement instability and strategies that could make return successful.
- Use conflict-resolution, respite, behavioral health, wraparound, family/natural supports, school supports, and other individualized services as appropriate.
- For an Indian child, involve the Tribe in placement-preservation and any placement-change planning.
- Document the placement-preservation strategy in CWS/CMS contact notes and document the youth's voice, CFT consultation, barriers, services offered, and outcome.
- When return to the prior placement is not safe or feasible, explore relatives, NREFMs, licensed family-based care, or other placements that best meet the youth's needs and applicable placement preferences.

Forms and records shall be completed as applicable to the youth's legal status and agency responsibility, including the Alpine County CIR, required CWS/CMS placement/temporary-leave entries, SOC 815 or successor eligibility/placement notification when required, court warrant/recall or informational filings, law enforcement documentation, NCMEC documentation, and any placement-preservation or safety/support plan used by the agency. Staff shall use the current state/county version of each form.

XI. Recovery and Post-Location Follow-Up

When the youth is located, the assigned worker shall promptly coordinate safe recovery and return to foster care when appropriate. The response shall focus on safety, connection, and understanding the reasons for the missing episode.

A. Immediate Recovery Actions

- Notify law enforcement and NCMEC, when involved, that the youth has been recovered and coordinate closure/update of the missing-person record as appropriate.

- Notify the parent/guardian or Indian custodian as permitted, the youth's attorney, CASA if applicable, Tribe/tribal representative if applicable, caregiver/placement, court as required, and other parties previously notified as appropriate.
- Assess urgent medical, behavioral health, substance use, exploitation/victimization, housing, transportation, clothing/hygiene, educational, and other immediate needs.
- Arrange for safe transportation and placement. Give consideration to return to the prior placement when safe, appropriate, and consistent with placement-preservation principles.

B. Required Post-Location Meeting

As soon as possible, and no later than three business days after the youth returns to foster care, the assigned social worker/probation officer shall meet with the youth, preferably face-to-face in a comfortable and private setting.

- Determine the primary factors that contributed to the youth going missing or remaining away from placement.
- Ask open-ended, non-blaming questions about the youth's experiences while absent, including whether the youth experienced or was at risk of CSE, abuse, coercion, violence, or other victimization.
- Assess medical, mental health, substance use, educational, legal, and practical needs resulting from the absence.
- Identify what the youth believes would make placement safer and more stable.
- Determine whether a CFT meeting is needed and include the Tribe for an Indian child.
- Develop or revise a youth-centered safety/support or runaway-prevention plan, including alternatives to leaving placement and specific supports the youth can access.
- Address the identified causes of the missing episode in subsequent placement and case planning to reduce recurrence.
- Offer and facilitate appropriate services. Information disclosed by the youth shall be used consistent with law and, when permitted, primarily to tailor safety and services rather than to punish the youth.

C. Post-Location Documentation

- Update CWS/CMS and the probation case-management system with recovery date/time, location, notifications, assessment, services, placement decision, and safety/support plan.

- Update/close the CIR with recovery and follow-up actions.
- Document any mandated child abuse report, CSE report, law enforcement referral, NCMEC update, and tribal communication.
- Complete or update required placement, eligibility, warrant/recall, and court documentation.
- Document the post-location interview and resulting case-plan changes within required state timeframes.

XII. Youth Located but Refusing to Return

When a youth is located but refuses to return to foster care, staff shall not treat the refusal alone as a voluntary discharge, placement termination, or a reason to cease engagement. The assigned worker shall promptly assess safety, meet with the youth when possible, continue required court and case-management responsibilities, use harm-reduction engagement, and work with the youth, CFT, caregiver, Tribe when applicable, and legal parties to develop the safest feasible plan.

XIII. Probation Responsibilities

- When Probation is the placing agency, Probation shall perform the statutory and procedural duties assigned to the county placing agency under this protocol.
- For dual-status or jointly served youth, Probation shall coordinate with CWS and law enforcement, document supervision/search efforts, provide relevant safety and court information, and participate in recovery, CFT, placement-preservation, and service planning.
- Probation shall not rely on a CWS CIR or CWS/CMS entry as a substitute for Probation's own required case notes, court actions, or statutory duties.
- When a youth is located out of state and is under juvenile court supervision, Probation shall assess whether Interstate Compact for Juveniles (ICJ) procedures apply.

XIV. Supervisory Oversight

- Confirm all immediate/no-later-than-24-hour notifications were completed and documented, **including the AB 2108 notification to every known dependent sibling age 10 or older**, unless an individualized determination establishes that notice would be contrary to that sibling's safety and well-being.
- Confirm law enforcement and NCMEC requirements, when applicable, were completed and follow-up communication is occurring.

- Review search/engagement efforts and ensure they are individualized to risk and circumstances.
- Ensure missing status and due-diligence efforts are documented at least every 30 days while the youth remains missing.
- Confirm tribal active efforts are documented for Indian children.
- Review placement-preservation actions and required forms/documentation.
- Ensure the required post-location meeting, assessment, services, and safety/support planning occur.

XV. Quality Assurance and Training

- ACHHS shall review missing-youth incidents at least quarterly for timeliness of notification, documentation, recovery follow-up, recurrence, placement stability, CSE concerns, and service gaps.
- CWS and Probation staff with placement responsibilities shall receive training on this protocol, trauma-informed engagement, harm reduction, CSE identification/reporting, ICWA active efforts, placement preservation, and post-location interviewing.
- This protocol shall be reviewed at least annually and revised when statutes, regulations, ACLs, state forms, or CDSS-approved protocol requirements change.

XVI. References

- California Department of Social Services, ACL 25-67, Youth Who Are Missing And/Or Run Away From Care And Protocol Development.
- Welfare and Institutions Code § 16501.35 (missing-youth notification, response, and post-location requirements).
- Welfare and Institutions Code § 16010.7; ACL 19-26; ACL 22-100 (placement preservation and placement-change requirements).
- ACL 24-18 (active efforts for Indian children).
- CDSS Missing Youth Protocols webpage and CDSS-approved county protocols.
- San Luis Obispo County Probation Department Procedure 4.24, Youth Who Are Missing from Foster Care.
- Orange County Social Services Agency Policy K-0214, Missing/Runaway/AWOL (example protocol supplied by CDSS).

- ACIN I-59-18 and related CDSS harm-reduction guidance for commercially sexually exploited children/youth.

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Appendix A - CDSS Correction Crosswalk

Harm Reduction — IV.B: Adds trauma-informed harm-reduction principles, practical safety supports, continued engagement, and nonpunitive response.

Post-location follow-ups — XI: Adds recovery notifications, immediate needs assessment, meeting within 3 business days, CSE inquiry, safety/support planning, services, and documentation.

New Definition of Missing Youth — III: Uses WIC/ACL definition, including known but non-approved risky locations and the separate NMD standard.

Notification/documentation — VI: Adds immediate/no-later-than-24-hour notices and a dedicated AB 2108 subsection expressly requiring notification of every known sibling age 10 or older who has been adjudged a dependent of the juvenile court, unless notice would be contrary to that sibling's safety and well-being; requires trauma-informed notice, worker contact information, and documentation. Also addresses attorneys, law enforcement, court, CWS/CMS, monthly status confirmation, and NCMEC/CSE reporting.

Communication and Reporting Standards (CIR) — VII: Clarifies CIR is supplemental and specifies required content, routing, updates, and continuing communication.

Placement Preservation and forms — X: Adds placement-preservation strategy, CFT/youth/Tribe involvement, documentation, and applicable forms/records.

Active Efforts — IX: Adds immediate tribal notice, collaborative search, regular updates, placement/recovery participation, and documentation.