



MADERA COUNTY PROBATION DEPARTMENT

RICK GALINDO, CHIEF PROBATION OFFICER

POLICY & PROCEDURE: MISSING FOSTER YOUTH

Effective Date: January 1, 2026

Approved By: Chief Probation Officer

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I. PURPOSE

This policy establishes mandatory procedures for Madera County Probation Officers when a foster youth under probation supervision is determined to be missing. The policy ensures compliance with California and federal law, promotes youth safety, and provides clear guidance for immediate action, documentation, and follow-up.

II. AUTHORITY

This policy is issued pursuant to the following authorities:

- Welfare & Institutions Code (WIC) §16501.35
- WIC §§602, 654.2, 727 (as applicable)
- 42 U.S.C. §671(a)(35) (Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act)
- California Penal Code §14211

III. APPLICABILITY

This policy applies to all Probation Officers supervising Foster Youth and Nonminor Dependents (NMDs)

IV. DEFINITION OF MISSING FOSTER YOUTH

WIC section 16501.35(c)(1) defines missing from foster care as “when the whereabouts of a child subject to an order of foster care placement are unknown to the county child welfare agency or probation department, or when the county child welfare agency or probation department has located a child subject to an order of foster care placement in a location not approved by the court that may pose a risk to the child, taking into account the age, intelligence, mental functioning, and physical condition of the child.”

Additionally, per WIC 16501.35(c)(2), section (c)(1) applies to nonminor dependents “if, based on the totality of the circumstances, the county child welfare agency or probation department suspects that the nonminor dependent did not voluntarily leave foster care or is at risk of substantial harm.”

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V. PROBATION OFFICER RESPONSIBILITIES

STEP 1: Confirm youth is missing from placement, notify their Probation Supervisor immediately, keep document of all actions, and enter them into the case management systems (CWS-CMS and Probation's Caseload Management System).

- Verify last confirmed sighting
- Confirm the youth did not have authorized leave, placement change, or court-approved visit

STEP 2: Immediately report youth is missing to local law enforcement and tribal law enforcement if applicable. No waiting period applies.

NOTE: It is recommended that if the child is placed outside of the jurisdictional county, that law enforcement should be notified in the jurisdictional county, where the parent(s), legal guardian(s) or Indian custodian reside.

- Provide all identifying, placement, and risk information.
- Ensure youth is entered into NCIC (National Crime Information Center)
- The notice shall include contact information for the probation officer and the supervisor.
- The report shall also include:
 - A photo of the missing or abducted child or youth.
 - A description of the child's or youth's physical features, such as height, weight, sex, ethnicity, race, hair color, and eye color.
 - Endangerment information, such as the child's or youth's pregnancy status, prescription medications, suicidal tendencies, vulnerability to being sex trafficked, and other health or risk factors, to the extent such information is released in compliance with other applicable laws.
 - Information about whether the child or youth is or may be an Indian child, as defined in WIC 224.1, including the name of the child's Tribe.

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STEP 3: Immediately report youth missing (no later than 24 hours) to NCMEC (National Center for Missing & exploited Children).

- <https://cmfc.missingkids.org/reportit/Account/LogOn>
- Phone: 1-800-THE-LOST (1-800-843-5678)
- Missing youth report shall include
 - A photo of the missing or abducted child or youth.
 - A description of the child's or youth's physical features, such as height, weight, sex, ethnicity, race, hair color, and eye color.
 - Endangerment information, such as the child's or youth's pregnancy status, prescription medications, suicidal tendencies, vulnerability to being sex trafficked, and other health or risk factors, to the extent such information is released in compliance with other applicable laws.
 - Information about whether the child or youth is or may be an Indian child, as defined in WIC 224.1, including the name of the child's Tribe.

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STEP 4: Continue to notify required parties:

- **The child's or NMD's parents or Indian custodians**, unless parental notification has been limited or terminated by the court.
- **The child's or NMD's legal guardians**, unless guardian notification has been limited or terminated by the court.
- **The attorneys for the parents, legal guardians, or Indian custodians** unless notification of the parents, guardians or Indian custodians has been limited or terminated by the court.
- **The child's or NMD's attorney** appointed pursuant to WIC section 317(c) or WIC section 634.
- **The child's or NMD's Court-Appointed Special Advocate (CASA)**, if one has been appointed.
- **The court of jurisdiction.**
- **The child's or NMD's Tribe or Tribal Representative**, if the child or nonminor dependent is, or may be, an Indian child.

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• **Any known sibling of the child or NMD who is 10 years of age or older and adjudged to be a dependent child of the juvenile court.** If such notice would not be contrary to the safety and well-being of that sibling. Notice to siblings shall be provided in a trauma-informed manner.

VI. SUPERVISOR RESPONSIBILITIES

The Probation Supervisor shall:

- Confirm required reports and notifications were completed.
- Provide guidance on high-risk cases.
- Ensure court notification occurs when required.
- Coordinate with department administration as necessary.

VII. LOCATION EFFORTS

Probation Officers shall make reasonable and documented efforts to locate the youth, including contact with caregivers, family members, service providers, schools, and known associates, consistent with safety and confidentiality requirements.

Reasonable Efforts: Timely, active, ongoing, and documented actions taken by probation to locate a missing youth, proportionate to the youth's age, vulnerability, and risk factors.

Promising Search Practices: Enhanced, youth-centered strategies shown to improve recovery outcomes and reduce harm, beyond minimum compliance. Promising practices go beyond minimum compliance and are associated with higher recovery rates and safer returns.

How to ensure reasonable efforts are being made:

- Were efforts timely?
- Were efforts active and ongoing?
- Were they proportionate to the youth's risk?
- Were they documented clearly?
- Were strategies adjusted when initial efforts failed?

What are NOT considered reasonable efforts:

- Only filing a police report and stopping
- Waiting days to begin searching
- Relying solely on database checks
- Failing to follow up on leads
- Punitive responses that discourage return

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Active Search Efforts:

- Direct outreach
 - Call, text, and/or message the youth
 - Contact friends, siblings, relatives, former caregivers, associates
 - Reach out to school staff, counselors, coaches
 - Contact known romantic partners (if appropriate and lawful)
 - Contact service providers and mentors.
- Physical location checks
 - Visit last known location
 - Check frequented hangouts, areas, and places (friends' homes, parks, malls, libraries)
 - Visit prior placements or family homes
- Digital and records checks
 - Review social media activity (where legally permitted)
 - Check school attendance records
 - Review medical, probation, and/or service appointment attendance
 - Check shelter and hospital intake lists

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Ongoing Efforts (While Youth Is Missing)

Reasonable efforts must be continuous, not one-time.

- Regular follow-ups
 - Reattempt contact at regular intervals
 - Re-contact law enforcement
 - Re-check known contacts and locations
 - Update court and supervising entities
 - Follow up on leads
- Documentation
 - Dates, times, and methods of each search effort
 - Names of individuals contacted
 - Outcomes (successful, no response, wrong lead, etc.)
- Escalation: Increase intensity if risk increases
 - Request specialized units if exploitation or trafficking is suspected
 - Multidisciplinary team consultation

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Promising Search Practices

A. Trauma-Informed and Youth-Centered Engagement

- Use non-punitive language when contacting the youth
 - Avoid threats of sanctions or custody
 - Emphasize safety and support, not consequences
- Identify a trusted adult the youth is more likely to respond to

B. Multidisciplinary Collaboration

- Coordinate between:
 - Child welfare
 - Tribe
 - Probation
 - Law enforcement
 - Schools
 - Behavioral health providers
 - Community-based organizations
- Share information lawfully and quickly

C. Exploitation-Informed Practices

- Screen for:
 - Human trafficking
 - Sexual exploitation
 - Labor exploitation
- Use specialized advocates or task forces when exploitation indicators exist
- Avoid treating survival behaviors as violations

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D. Community-Based Search Strategies

- Partner with:
 - Youth drop-in centers
 - Homeless youth providers
 - Faith-based or cultural organizations
- Distribute flyers only when appropriate and safe
- Utilize community outreach workers familiar with local youth networks
- Utilize culturally competent community contacts

E. Technology-Assisted Practices

- Case-managed use of:
 - Phone and text outreach
 - Email and messaging apps
 - Lawfully accessible social media monitoring
- Maintain updated contact information before a youth goes missing

F. Safe Return Planning

Promising practices include planning before the youth's return.

- No automatic placement disruptions or sanctions
- Immediate health and safety screening
- Opportunity for the youth to explain circumstances
- Services adjusted to address reasons for going missing

VIII. DOCUMENTATION STANDARDS

Probation shall document in both the Probation case management system and CMS-CWS:

- Date and time youth identified as missing
- All notifications made
- Each search action taken, including:
 - Method, Person(s) contacted, and Outcome
- Risk assessments and reassessments
- Adjustments to strategy
- Return date and circumstances

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IX. SPECIAL RISK CONSIDERATIONS

Enhanced response is required when there is reasonable suspicion of:

- Commercial Sexual Exploitation or trafficking
- Serious medical or mental health needs
- History of repeated runaway behavior

Such cases require immediate supervisor consultation and close coordination with law enforcement.

X. COURT NOTIFICATION

When required by court order or local practice, the Probation Officer shall notify the Juvenile Court of the youth's missing status at the next court day or sooner if exigent circumstances exist.

XI. UPON LOCATION OR RETURN

*The Missing/Runaway Youth Debriefing Form provided in ACIN I-13-17 is a helpful tool for when a youth has been located and returned to care.

Link: [PROMISING PRACTICES FOR YOUTH WHO ARE MISSING OR RUN AWAY FROM FOSTER CARE ACINI-13_17](#)

PROCEDURES UPON LOCATION OR RETURN

A. Immediate Notifications

Upon confirmation that a youth has been located or has returned:

1. Notify Law Enforcement that the youth has been located.
2. Notify the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) without delay.
3. Document all notifications in the case management system.

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B. Immediate Safety and Well-Being Assessment

Officers shall conduct or arrange for an immediate assessment of the youth, including:

- Physical health and need for urgent or emergency medical care
- Mental health status, including trauma, suicidal ideation, or exploitation indicators
- Screening for commercial sexual exploitation (CSEC) indicators
- Substance use or withdrawal concerns

Action Requirements:

- Seek medical attention when indicated
- Refer to crisis or behavioral health services as needed
- Ensure the youth is in a safe and supervised environment

C. Documentation Requirements

Officers shall document:

- Date, time, and location of return
- Circumstances of absence (if known)
- Individuals the youth was with
- Any identified risks, harm, or exploitation
- Actions taken upon return

Documentation must be completed in accordance with departmental timelines and entered in all required reporting systems.

RETURN-TO-CARE INTERVIEW (ACIN I-13-17)

A. Interview Requirements

A Return-to-Care Interview (RTCI) shall be conducted as soon as practicable, preferably within 24–72 hours of the youth's return.

Refer to ACIN I-13-17 for examples of helpful debrief and interview forms.

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B. Interview Standards

The RTCI must be:

- Conducted in a private, safe, and non-threatening setting
- Completed by a trained, trauma-informed professional
- Youth-centered and voluntary in tone (not interrogative)

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C. Required Focus Areas

The interview should explore:

- Reasons for leaving placement
- Experiences while absent
- Exposure to violence, exploitation, or trafficking
- Basic needs (food, shelter, safety) while absent
- Relationships and connections influencing behavior
- Youth-identified needs and supports

D. Documentation

All findings must be documented and used to:

- Inform case planning
- Adjust placement and supervision strategies
- Identify service needs

INTERAGENCY COORDINATION

Upon return, Officers shall coordinate with:

- Child Welfare Services
- Behavioral Health
- Law Enforcement (if applicable)
- Caregivers and placement providers
- The Court (as required)



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COURT NOTIFICATIONS

Officers shall ensure all required notifications to the Court are completed, including:

- Status updates on the youth's return
- Any changes in placement or supervision
- Safety concerns or service needs

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QUALITY ASSURANCE & COMPLIANCE

Supervisors shall:

- Review documentation for completeness
- Ensure RTCIs are conducted timely
- Confirm placement preservation efforts are documented
- Monitor adherence to harm reduction principles

XII. PLACEMENT PRESERVATION STRATEGY (ACL 19-26 & 22-100)

A. Core Requirement

Placement changes shall be avoided whenever safely possible. The youth's return shall trigger a placement preservation review.

B. Required Actions

Officers shall:

1. Engage the youth and caregiver to identify placement concerns
2. Conduct a case review to determine root causes of the absence
3. Convene a Child and Family Team (CFT) meeting when appropriate
4. Implement targeted supports, including:
 - Behavioral health services
 - Increased visitation or supervision
 - Conflict resolution support
 - Safety planning

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C. Placement Change Protocol

If a placement change is being considered:

- It must be justified, documented, and approved
- The decision must demonstrate that preservation efforts were attempted
- The youth's input must be considered and documented

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XIV. HARM REDUCTION APPROACH

All responses shall incorporate harm reduction principles, recognizing that youth may engage in high-risk behaviors and require supportive, non-punitive interventions.

A. Core Principles

Officers shall:

- Avoid punitive responses solely due to absence
- Focus on safety, engagement, and trust-building
- Meet youth "where they are" without requiring immediate behavior change
- Prioritize relationship-based interventions

B. Practical Application

Officers should:

- Provide access to basic needs (food, hygiene, clothing)
- Offer medical care and STI screening when appropriate
- Connect youth to CSEC advocacy and specialized services
- Develop personalized safety plans
- Encourage ongoing engagement rather than compliance-based responses



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HARM REDUCTION GUIDANCE REFERENCES

Officers shall utilize the following guidance as applicable:

- ACIN I-59-18 – Introduction to Harm Reduction (CSEC)
- ACIN I-28-19 – Social Worker Guidance
- ACIN I-50-19 – Probation Officer Guidance
- ACIN I-36-21 – Law Enforcement Guidance
- ACIN I-31-22 – Caregiver Guidance
- ACIN I-51-23 – Juvenile Court Guidance

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APPENDIX A – QUICK REFERENCE CHECKLIST

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- ☐ Youth confirmed missing (no waiting period)
- ☐ Law enforcement notified immediately
- ☐ Missing person report number obtained
- ☐ NCIC entry confirmed
- ☐ NCMEC notified within 24 hours
- ☐ Supervisor notified
- ☐ Youth's attorney notified
- ☐ Parents/guardians/Indian custodians notified (if permitted)
- ☐ Location efforts documented
- ☐ Court notified if required
- ☐ Law enforcement and NCMEC notified upon return



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APPENDIX B – MISSING FOSTER YOUTH RESPONSE FLOWCHART

1. Youth whereabouts unknown or in unapproved/unsafe location
↓
2. Probation Officer confirms youth is missing (NO waiting period)
↓
3. Immediately report to local law enforcement
↓
4. Obtain missing person report number and confirm NCIC entry
↓
5. Notify Probation Supervisor immediately
↓
6. Notify NCMEC within 24 hours
↓
7. Notify youth's attorney and parents/guardians/Indian custodians (if permitted)
↓
8. Conduct and document reasonable location efforts
↓
9. High-risk indicators present?
→ YES: Immediate supervisor consultation and enhanced law enforcement coordination
→ NO: Continue monitoring and documentation
↓
10. Youth located or returns
↓
11. Notify law enforcement and NCMEC of recovery
↓
12. Assess safety, document return, coordinate placement and court notifications

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MADERA COUNTY PROBATION DEPARTMENT

RICK GALINDO, CHIEF PROBATION OFFICER

APPENDIX C – TRAINING ACKNOWLEDGMENT FORM

I acknowledge that I have received training on the Madera County Probation Department Missing Foster Youth Policy and understand my responsibilities.

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Employee Name: _____
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Signature: _____
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