

Protocol for Youth Missing from Foster Care

Updated 08/10/2026

Missing Foster Child Protocol

Youth in Foster Care (RFA or STRTP) placement who run away from the Court's placements are at risk of exploitation, injury, and even death.

The following subsections describe the three basic procedures which are to be followed (notification, search, and ongoing efforts) when a child is discovered to be missing.

Definition of Missing Foster Child

A youth missing from foster care is any youth whose whereabouts are unknown to the Resource Parent, STRTP, Caretaker or Probation Department.

This procedure only applies to a Non-Minor Dependent (NMD) if, based on the totality of the circumstances, the Probation Department suspects the NMD did not voluntarily leave foster care or is at risk of substantial harm [WIC 16501.35(c)(2)].

Notification Procedure for Missing Child

The following steps will be taken when a child is missing:

1. The caregiver will notify the Probation Officer as soon as they believe a youth in their care is missing, no longer than 1 hour of a child not returning home.
2. Once notified and as soon as practicable, the DPO will alert the placement supervisor.
3. The DPO should verify the caregiver has filed a missing person's report with local law enforcement. If this has not been done, the DPO should file the report or direct the caregiver to immediately file a report. The DPO is also required to contact law enforcement to ensure all of the required information was provided. (See **Law Enforcement Communication and Reporting** section below)

The DPO will obtain the police report number and document the information in field notes.

[ACL 16-15](#): "SB794 requires that agencies report missing youth to law enforcement immediately (within two hours), but in no case later than 24 hours from receipt of the information. When a child or youth who is receiving child welfare services and who is

Protocol for Youth Missing from Foster Care

Updated 08/10/2026

reasonably believed to be the victim of, or is at risk of being the victim of, commercial sexual exploitation, as defined in WIC section [11165.1](#), is missing or has been abducted the County probation or welfare department *shall immediately, or in no case later than 24-hours from receipt of the information*, report the incident to the appropriate law enforcement authority. The local law enforcement agency enters the information into the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) database of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC)."

4. The DPO will immediately, but in no case later than 24 hours from receipt of the information that the youth is missing, attempt to contact all of the following people to advise the youth is missing.

*Notices shall include contact information for the case carrying probation officers/social workers and their supervisors, within the placing agency issuing the notice.

- **Parents, legal guardians, Indian custodians**, *unless notification of parents, guardians, or Indian custodians has been limited or terminated by the court.* Advise the parent(s) or guardian(s) to contact the department immediately if they obtain any information regarding the youth's whereabouts.
- **Attorneys for parents, legal guardians, Indian custodians**, *unless notification of parents, guardians, or Indian custodians has been limited or terminated by the court.*
- **Attorney for child or NMD**, appointed pursuant to WIC 317(c) or WIC 634.
- **Court-Appointed Special Advocate (CASA)**, if one has been appointed.
- The **Court of Jurisdiction**.
- The Child's or NMD's **Tribe or Tribal Representative**, as defined in Section 224.1.
- Any known **sibling of the child or NMD who is 10 years of age or older** and adjudged a **Dependent** 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.*
- The **local law enforcement agency and the law enforcement agency in the jurisdiction of residence**, and in the case of an Indian child **any tribal law enforcement agency** for the child's Tribe. See [Law Enforcement Communication and Reporting](#) section below.

Protocol for Youth Missing from Foster Care

Updated 08/10/2026

5. The DPO must immediately prepare a Warrant, no later than the close of the following business day after receiving the initial notification.
6. The DPO will consult with the Placement Supervisor about whether to hold the youth's placement for up to 14 days before ending the placement episode.

Law Enforcement Communication and Reporting

When filing a report with law enforcement the following information must be included:

- A photo of the missing or abducted youth, if available.
- A description of physical features, such as height, weight, sex, ethnicity, race, hair color, and eye color.
- Endangerment information, such as pregnancy, prescription medications, suicidal tendencies, vulnerability to being sexually trafficked, and other health or risk factors, *to the extent such information is released in compliance with other applicable laws.*
- Information about whether the youth is or may be an Indian child, as defined in WIC 224.1, including the name of the Tribe.

Due Diligent Searches

The following steps should be taken when searching for a missing child:

1. Determine whereabouts by contacting significant people in the youth's life and encouraging the caretaker and/or parent to do so as well.
2. The Probation Department will follow up on leads regarding the whereabouts of the youth, check areas/perform visits to locations the child is known to frequent, the parents' home(s), or where the child has connections, or inform law enforcement of such.
3. Consult with the city's Runaway/Missing Children Liaisons (example: Napa Police Department's Youth Services Coordinator)

Protocol for Youth Missing from Foster Care

Updated 08/10/2026

4. Active efforts should also include the search of social media websites and search of public locator databases (e.g., The California Missing Child Clearinghouse (1-800-222-FIND), National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (1-800-843-5678), etc.

Continuing Plan for Missing Child

Every month from the date of the initial discovery, DPO confirms and documents in CWS/CMS and/or CARES that the youth's whereabouts are unknown.

Efforts must include the DPO contacting the parent/guardian and collaterals; and any information that is obtained is passed on to appropriate law enforcement personnel. In this case, the minimum visitation requirements do not apply.

Searches must also include social media, California Missing Child Clearinghouse, and National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.

Maintain regular communication with NCMEC and applicable law enforcement agencies, including tribal law enforcement. (This information may include- location or previous recent location of youth, names of people recently in contact with the youth, new social media handles, and any new photos obtained of the youth).

If the child contacts any staff member, every attempt must be made to ascertain the child's whereabouts and current health/safety status.

If a youth is found or returns, the DPO will:

1. Arrange any necessary transportation, which may include requesting assistance from law enforcement, to bring the youth back.
 2. Notify all parties. Contact the law enforcement agency where the Missing Person's Report was filed to request that the Missing Person's Report be withdrawn.
 3. If the youth is an Indian child update the Tribe the youth has been found, to determine the most appropriate placement, if a placement change is necessary.
 4. Update CWS/CMS.
-

Protocol for Youth Missing from Foster Care

Updated 08/10/2026

Investigation

Interview the youth to identify the factors that led the youth to leave placement, as well as the youth's experiences while absent from care, including whether the youth is a sex trafficking victim.

If the youth is the victim of sex trafficking, or any other abuse, identify and provide appropriate services. A Suspected Child Abuse Report (SCAR) Form must be filed with Child Protective Services.