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Missing Probation Foster Youth Protocol

Purpose

This policy covers the requirements and protocols for Deputy Probation Officers (DPO) and Social Workers (SW) at the San Francisco Juvenile Probation Department (JPD) to locate and respond to 602 WIC youth who run away or go missing from foster care.

Background

Federal law (PL 113-183 Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act) requires child welfare agencies and probation departments to have protocols in place to locate any minor youth or non-minor dependent (NMD) who has gone missing from foster care.

Consistent with the federal law, California passed SB 794 (Chapter 425, Statutes of 2015), which includes statewide standards to locate missing foster youth (WIC § 16501.35) and data requirements (WIC § 16501.45). In 2016, the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) provided instruction regarding these policies and procedures in [All County Letter \(ACL\) No: 16-15](#) (April 28, 2016).

In 2024, California passed AB 2108 (Chapter 660, Statutes of 2024) requiring DPOs to immediately notify specified entities or persons including local law enforcement and parents, guardians, and Indian custodians when they receive information that a youth receiving child welfare services is missing from care (WIC § 16501.35). California also passed AB 161 (Chapter 46, Statutes of 2024) which requires further communication between child welfare and probation departments, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), and other law enforcement agencies regarding missing youth receiving child welfare services who are reasonably believed to be or are at risk of being victims of commercial sexual exploitation (CSE) (PEN § 11166). In 2025, CDSS provided instructions to incorporate these legislative changes into existing policies and procedures in [ACL No: 25-67](#) (September 16, 2025).

Definition of Missing from Foster Care

Missing from foster care is defined 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” (WIC § 16501.35(c)(1)).

This definition shall only apply to a nonminor dependent (NMD) if JPD suspects based on the totality of the circumstances that the NMD did not voluntarily leave foster care or is at risk of substantial harm (WIC § 16501.35(c)(2)).

General Policy

When a youth runs away or goes missing from a placement, the assigned DPO or SW will make

diligent efforts to locate the youth on an ongoing basis until the youth is located, or court jurisdiction is terminated.

Caregivers, resource families, foster family agencies, and staff of residential facilities are expected to file a missing person report with law enforcement and notify the youth's assigned DPO within 24 hours.

Noticing Requirements (602 WIC Youth)

Upon learning that a 602 WIC foster youth is missing, the DPO will ensure the timely reporting of the missing youth to appropriate authorities and prompt notification of other parties entitled to know the missing status of the youth. DPOs will:

1. Notify law enforcement immediately, if not completed by the caregiver. In all cases, the DPO will obtain the missing person's report number and the responding officer's badge number as documentation that the report was filed.
2. If the law enforcement agency refuses to accept the missing person report, document the date of the attempt, and the name and badge number of the law enforcement personnel refusing to accept the report.
3. Immediately notify the youth's parents, Indian custodians (if any), legal guardians (if any), the youth's Tribe or tribal representative (if any), Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) (if any), youth's attorney(s), the attorney(s) for parents, Indian custodians, or legal guardians, the court of jurisdiction, and any known sibling(s) of the youth who are 10 years of age or older and adjudged to be a dependent child of the juvenile court. Notify youth's attorney(s) within 24 hours. All notices issued for these purposes shall include contact information for the DPO and their supervisor.
4. If applicable, submit a request for an arrest warrant to the Juvenile Court within one business day. If the missing youth meets with law enforcement, the warrant should alert law enforcement to contact the DPO to coordinate the youth's return to placement or booking into custody at JJC.
5. If a youth is suspected of being at-risk of CSE, report the youth missing to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) within 24 hours (<https://cmfc.missingkids.org/reportit> or 1-800-843-5678). Provide a photo of the youth, a description of the youth's physical features (height, weight, sex, ethnicity, race, hair color, and eye color), information about the youth's endangerment (pregnancy status, prescription medications, suicidal tendencies, vulnerability to sex trafficking, and other health or risk factors), and information as to whether the youth may be an Indian child, including the name of the youth's Tribe.
6. Contact the foster care eligibility staff as soon as possible to inform them of the youth's missing status, and to initiate payment termination per current policy.
7. Notify the out-of-home caregiver of the payment termination date.
8. Maintain regular communication with NCMEC and applicable law enforcement agencies, including tribal law enforcement, for all reported children missing from care. Information may include but is not limited to the most recent location of the youth, name of persons recently in contact with the youth, new social media handles of the youth or recently updated information on existing handles, and any new photos obtained from persons in contact with the youth.

Search Requirements (602 WIC Youth)

DPOs are required to conduct and document monthly attempts to locate the missing youth. DPOs will:

1. Attempt to contact the youth by telephone/text, mail, and/or e-mail in coordination with the youth's Child and Family Team (CFT).
2. Make an in-person visit, as appropriate, to the missing youth's last known address, school, place of employment, or locations they are known to frequent.

3. Make inquiries as appropriate to any other persons such as parents, Indian custodians, siblings, relatives, extended family members, friends, former caregivers, former and current schools, teachers, therapists, CASA, attorney, and service providers who might have any knowledge regarding the youth's whereabouts. Work collaboratively with the youth's Tribe or tribal representative (if any) on efforts to locate the youth and ensure that the Tribe is regularly updated regarding the child's status.
4. Instruct any person contacted to make inquiries appropriate to the situation and to immediately report back any information regarding the missing youth.

Documenting Missing Status (602 WIC Youth)

In accordance with the CDSS Manual of Policy and Procedures (MPP), Division 31-320, DPOs must document their attempts to locate missing youth in the Child Welfare Services Management System (CWS/CMS) or CWS-CARES when live. Document in CWS/CMS the youth's missing status, the missing person report number, and the responding officer's badge number.

1. If the law enforcement agency refuses to accept the missing person report, document in CWS/CMS the date of the attempt, and the name and badge number of the law enforcement personnel refusing to accept the report.
2. Document the arrest warrant in CWS/CMS.
3. Document all efforts to locate the youth and any active efforts when an Indian youth is missing from care in the Contact Notebook in CWS/CMS, and in each Status Review Report filed during a youth's absence.

Confidentiality

Information may be shared with law enforcement, parents, attorneys, care providers, and community service providers as necessary for the purposes of investigation, safety planning, and/or service provision. Photos may be released to law enforcement and the NCMEC to assist in the search for missing youth, once the DPO has obtained a court order.

Noticing, Search, and Documentation Requirements for Missing Non-Minor Dependents (NMDs)

These requirements apply to non-minor dependents (AB 12 young people in extended foster care) who are reasonably determined to be missing because of harm, foul play, or competency issues. SWs will:

1. File a missing person report for such missing non-minor dependents.
2. Notify the youth's attorney and notify the court, consistent with local county practice.
3. Notify the parents as appropriate if they are receiving Family Reunification services or have been working with the SW to assist with the youth.
4. As appropriate, inform the Child and Family Team (CFT), which includes any relatives involved in the NMD's case.
5. Include contact information for the SW and their supervisor in all notices.
6. Document the youth's missing status in CWS/CMS.

Missing Youth At-Risk for Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC)

SB 794 (2015) requires all counties in California to report missing youth who are suspected of being at-risk of CSEC within 24 hours to law enforcement, who will then enter the information into the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) database of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).

1. In addition to all the requirements described above, confirm with law enforcement that the information will be entered into the Federal Bureau of Investigation's National Crime Information Center (NCIC) database.
2. Document the youth's CSEC-risk status in CWS/CMS, which law enforcement agency was contacted, and the missing person report date and number.

3. Report the missing youth and CSEC-risk status within 24 hours to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (<https://cmfc.missingkids.org/reportit> or 1-800-843-5678).

DPOs and SWs will continue to receive relevant training in the identification, documentation, and determination of appropriate services for youth in foster care who are or are at risk of becoming victims of CSEC.

Harm Reduction

DPOs and SWs will utilize a harm reduction approach in both preventing and mitigating risks to a youth when they are missing from care by:

1. Having honest discussions with the youth, including discussing how the youth can maintain their own safety while missing from care.
2. Creating harm reduction informed safety plans that include identified alternatives to the youth leaving care, emergency contact information, and name and contact information for persons that the youth agrees to check-in with while away from care.
3. Ensuring that a youth does not become overwhelmed by too many attempts to communicate while they are missing from care by coordinating communication with the youth's CFT.
4. Remaining neutral and focused on the youth's well-being and refraining from punitive or condescending language if contact is made with a youth while they are away from care.
5. Creating a safe and actionable plan for the youth's return to care in coordination with their CFT.
6. Continuously assessing the youth's situation for increased risk and contacting law enforcement as needed.

Returning Missing Youth to Placement

When a missing youth has been located, the DPO or SW is responsible for arranging the immediate return of the youth to care, assessing their physical and mental health condition, and addressing the factors that contributed to the youth running away/being absent from care. DPOs and SWs will:

- Conduct a debriefing interview to assess the youth's immediate needs, identify and address the reasons that led the youth to be missing, including where/to whom they ran, and why. For NMD youth, inform them that leaving their placement without informing the SW could result in being terminated from the Extended Foster Care (EFC) program. Document the interview in the Contact Notebook in CWS/CMS.
- Identify the youth's experiences while missing. Evaluate the youth's needs for mental health services, foster youth services, or law enforcement assistance due to victimization/exploitation, exposure to/participation in criminal activity, absenteeism/missing school credits, etc. If the missing youth was a victim or is at risk of CSE, document the information in CWS/CMS, and assess if the youth should be medically examined to detect and/or treat possible injuries, illness, or exposure to sexually transmitted diseases, and arrange for such examination or testing.
- Contact law enforcement within 24 hours of being notified that the youth has returned or has been found to request that the Missing Person Report be withdrawn and notify NCMEC that the missing youth has been located. If an arrest warrant was requested, recall the warrant.
- If the parent, legal guardian, or Indian Custodian has been informed that the youth was missing, notify them and the youth's attorney(s) within 48 hours (no later than 72 hours) that the youth has been found or returned.
- Notify the eligibility worker within one business day of the youth's return.
- Notify the CFT of the youth's return to care. Convene a CFT meeting and collaborate with the youth's supportive network and the CFT to discuss placement preservation and/or explore

placement options if the youth cannot return to their previous placement. Placement preservation strategies may include, but are not limited to:

- Initiating a CFT meeting to collaboratively develop and implement an individual plan designed to meet the youth's and family's needs.
 - Applying conflict resolution practices to address concerns and discuss solutions.
 - Reviewing the IP-CANS assessment tool to identify and discuss strengths and unmet needs to guide case planning.
 - Reviewing notes from previous CFT meetings to identify barriers to implementing the CFT's recommendations that may impact placement stability or a youth meeting their goals.
 - Actively engaging or recruiting additional educational and natural community supports to join the CFT.
 - Making every effort to ensure the timely provision of support services as deemed appropriate by the CFT.
- Address the youth's service, treatment, and placement needs in a revised case plan, developed collaboratively with the youth based on information collected in the debriefing interview as well as their CFT. The revised case plan may include alternative case goals when appropriate, changes in guardianship status, case termination, and referral for services from other state agencies.
 - Document all the above efforts, including placement preservation efforts, in the Contact Notebook in CWS/CMS. See Attachment A of [ACL 25-67](#) (p.14-20) for more details.

Resources

- [ACL 16-15 \(April 28, 2016\) – Youth Who Are Missing from Foster Care](#)
- [ACIN I-13-17 \(April 25, 2017\) - Promising Practices for Youth Who Are Missing or Run Away from Foster Care](#)
- [ACIN I-59-18 \(September 14, 2018\) – Introduction to the Harm Reduction Strategies Series Regarding Commercially Sexually Exploited Children](#)
- [ACL 19-26 \(May 8, 2019\) – Placement Change Requirements](#)
- [ACIN I-28-19 \(July 22, 2019\) – Harm Reduction Series – Social Worker](#)
- [ACIN I-50-19 \(July 29, 2019\) – Harm Reduction Series – Probation Officer](#)
- [ACL 22-100 \(December 6, 2022\) – Placement Preservation Strategy FAQ](#)
- [ACL 24-18 \(March 15, 2024\) – Providing Active Efforts Where it is Known, Or There is Reason to Know, A Child is an Indian Child](#)
- [ACL No: 25-67 \(September 16, 2025\) – Youth Who Are Missing and/or Run Away from Care and Protocol Development](#)
- [National Center for Missing and Exploited Children](#)
 - Phone: 1-800-THE-LOST (1-800-843-5678)
 - [Case Worker Guide to Reporting Missing Children](#)
 - [Online Report](#)
 - [Sound Policy and Practice Recommendations](#)