

Missing and Runaway Youth

CHILD LOCATOR UNIT

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West Virginia Department of Human Services
Bureau for Social Services
Office of Policy and Programs
May 2024

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Section 1 Introduction

Youth who run away from foster care potentially place themselves at risk of harm. The expeditious location of missing youth is critical to reducing the chance of harm. Youth run for many reasons; for the excitement, out of frustration or boredom, to see friends or family. While many runaway youths quickly return on their own, certain situations or youth characteristics increase the likelihood of harm, demanding increased attention and focus on their recovery.

Section 1.2 Definitions

Comprehensive Child Welfare Information System (CCWIS) means a computerized data collection system used to track child welfare case information. West Virginia's CCWIS is called PATH.

Child Locator Unit means a unit within the Department of Human Services which assists child welfare workers in locating missing foster children.

Foster Care - 24-hour substitute care for children placed away from their parents or guardians and for whom the State agency has placement and care responsibility. This includes, but is not limited to, placements in foster family homes, foster homes of relatives, group homes, emergency shelters, residential facilities, childcare institutions, and pre-adoptive homes.

Missing and Endangered child means any missing child for which there are substantial indications the child is at high risk of harm or in immediate danger, and rapid action is required, including, but not limited to:

- Physically or mentally disabled and dependent upon an agency or another individual for care;
- Under the age of 13;
- Missing under circumstances which indicate the child's safety may be in danger; or
- A foster child and has been determined a missing and endangered child by the Department of Human Services.

Missing child means any child under the age of 18, or 21 if under the auspices of the juvenile court, whose whereabouts are unknown to the child's legal custodian.

NCIC means the database of the National Crime Information Center, the nationwide, online computer telecommunications system maintained by the Federal Bureau of Investigation to assist authorized agencies in criminal justice and related law-enforcement objectives.

NCMEC means the database of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children

Missing and Endangered Child Advisory a system used to alert the public of a missing and endangered child to aid in the child's rapid recovery.

Section 1.3 Roles

Child Welfare Worker – the child welfare worker is the primary or secondary worker assigned to the child's case. The child welfare worker is responsible for ensuring their child is reported to law enforcement and a run referral and/or return report is made to Centralized Intake (CI). The child welfare worker maintains ultimate responsibility for the location and recovery of the missing child on their caseload. Further, nothing in this policy supersedes the child welfare worker requirements as identified in the Foster Care policy.

Child Locator – The child locator will assist in the location and recovery efforts of certain youth. The child locator will assist the child welfare worker in carrying out interviews of collaterals, information sharing

with law enforcement, completing NCMEC referrals, and other activities which will assist in the location of the child. The Child Locators will also be responsible for screening children for trafficking by completing missing child debriefing interviews when required.

Centralized Intake – Centralized Intake will receive reports of runaway and returned runaway youth.

Section 2 Missing Child Intake

Section 2.1 Reporting a Missing Child

After law enforcement has been contacted, Centralized Intake is the designated unit to receive all reports of youth who run from care or are otherwise reported as missing, and subsequent returns to care.

When a foster child runs away or is missing from a foster care placement, the child must be reported to Centralized Intake. The Centralized Intake employee will request specific information as identified on the *Runaway Reporting Tool* Google form. The Centralized Intake worker must collect details relevant to the runaway event and the status of the child as Missing and Endangered, documenting specific details which justify the reporter's assertion of the child's status. Once the appropriate information is collected, utilizing the *Runaway Reporting Tool* Google form the Centralized Intake worker receiving the report must take the following actions:

1. Immediately provide the *Runaway Reporting Tool* Google form in email to:
 - a. The youth's assigned caseworker and the caseworker's supervisor
 - b. The Social Service's Manager (SSM)
 - c. The Child Locator Unit staff and the unit supervisor
 - d. The Centralized Intake Supervisor on duty
2. The Child Locator Unit will follow up with local district offices within one business day of a foster child who is reported as missing to verify the following steps have been completed:
 - a. The child has been entered into the NCIC database by law enforcement and a missing person ID was obtained, unless the child returned prior to contact (see more about return reports below).
 - b. The child has been reported to NCMEC, unless the child has returned prior to contact.
3. A contact has been entered indicating the child ran, and the *Missing from Care* screen in the CCWIS has been completed. Once a child has been reported as missing for more than 48 hours the Child Locators will initiate search efforts. The Child Locator Unit will follow up with the district to obtain the NCMEC case ID and Case Manager. (see section 3.2 *Missing and Endangered Child Advisory* for more information).
 - a. When endangerment statuses are identified by a provider but the justification is lacking, the Child Locator unit will contact the provider, child's assigned case worker, or review the CCWIS record to determine whether to proceed with the child's status as endangered.
 - b. The Child Locator Unit is responsible for obtaining periodic status updates from the child's assigned worker, regarding any information related to the child's status as missing and the efforts made to locate the youth. This information will be documented in the *Missing from Care Tracking Log*.

Section 2.2 Reporting a Located Child

When a child returns to care Centralized Intake **must** be notified. The Centralized Intake worker will document the youth's return to care details utilizing the *Runaway Reporting Tool* Google form and select "return report" option. The following actions must occur:

1. When Centralized Intake receives a report that a child has returned to care, the Centralized Intake worker will gather the information necessary from the reporter to complete the *Runaway Reporting Tool* Google form. The Centralized Intake worker will then email the form to:
 - a. the youth's assigned caseworker and the caseworker's supervisor
 - b. The Social Service's Manager (SSM)
 - c. The Child Locator Unit staff and the unit supervisor
 - d. The Centralized Intake Supervisor on duty
2. If notification of the child's return is sent directly to the assigned child welfare worker the worker will notify CI to have the appropriate Google form completed. The Child Locator unit will log the return information into the *Missing from Care Tracking Log*
3. The Child Locator unit will contact the child's assigned caseworker, the worker's supervisor and SSM to inform them of the child's return and the child's case worker's requirement to notify law enforcement and NCMEC of the child's return as is required by foster care policy section 6.22 *Runaway, Missing, or Abducted Children*.

Section 3 – Missing Child Searches

Section 3.1– Assignment of Child Locator

Child Locators are assigned to assist the child welfare worker in locating missing and runaway foster youth, but the child's assigned worker assumes primary responsibility for searching for the youth. Examples of activities to assist the child welfare worker include contacting familial and collateral contacts to obtain any helpful information, coordinating information sharing with law enforcement and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) and in-person searches of areas the child is believed to be located.

Once a child is reported missing or on runaway status, a Child Locator will begin a search when an endangerment status (See section 3.2 *Missing and Endangered Child Advisory* for more information) has been identified or when the child has been missing for a period of 48 hours or longer. Locators will immediately contact the child's assigned case worker, including the worker's Social Services Manager and supervisor (if known), to obtain information such as:

- Photographs
- Cell phone number and social media accounts
- Friends or family details
- Ensuring details in the case are accurate.
- Any notable or distinguishable case activity or physical attributes

The Child Locator will utilize the information obtained from the worker, as well as information from CCWIS searches and social media searches, to aid in their investigation.

Section 3.2 Missing and Endangered Child Advisory

A Missing and Endangered Child Advisory is a system which allows law enforcement to solicit the public's help in locating a missing and endangered child. Certain characteristics, or endangerment criteria, children possess may place them at a heightened risk of injury while on runaway status. Chronic medical conditions requiring life-saving medication, homicidal or suicidal ideation, age, and history of trafficking are examples of these characteristics. Certain situations may also create an endangered child, such as the weather at the time of a child's run, or a child who is party to a protection order goes missing. When endangerment criteria are identified and verified at the time of a child's run, a Child Locator will be assigned immediately.

When a child is a missing and endangered child, the Child Locator shall request a Missing and Endangered Child Advisory, when available, within 48 hours of the child's status as missing. Whenever possible the Child Locator should utilize the child's NCMEC poster to supply law enforcement for any public broadcast which may occur. When sharing information with the public any indication that the child may be a foster child, suffer from a mental or behavioral health condition or any other specific characteristics as to the child's status as endangered should be avoided. Such information can further endanger the child.

Section 3.3 Social Media Use

Social Media applications provide a valuable tool to aid in the location and recovery of missing foster youth. Searching for the youth's profile and relatives' profiles may provide the Child Locator with location information, additional contacts, and friends which may have information pertaining to the youth's whereabouts. Child Locators should attempt to obtain any known social media handles of the missing child, and any phone numbers associated with the child, from the child's worker, placement provider, or caregivers (when appropriate). When accounts are unknown and the Child Locator believes they have found the child, or family, on social media the Child Locator should verify the information with the child's assigned case worker. Any known social media accounts and their handles should be documented in the CCWIS system.

Once verified, the Child Locator will begin monitoring the social media accounts for activity and potential leads on the child's location. Relevant information will be shared with the assigned law enforcement agency. If no current pictures of the child are available from the child's caregivers or in the CCWIS, the Child Locator may utilize a photo from the social media site to request a Missing and Endangered Child Advisory when appropriate (see section 3.2 *Missing and Endangered Child Advisory* for more information). Any photograph utilized should be uploaded to the CCWIS if not already available.

When a missing child is actively posting on social media, the posts can provide information critical to the location of the youth. Posts which include other individuals, residences, background scenes, etc. can shed light on the child's current whereabouts. Coordinating information sharing with law enforcement, the child's worker, the child's family, etc. can help determine the location or area of the state the child may be in. All individuals should be reminded of the value these posts have in locating a missing child and encouraged to only share information about posts or possible locations with the Child Locator, assigned worker, and law enforcement.

Section 3.4 Family and Collateral Contacts

Information related to the child's history, friends, familial bonds, likes, and hobbies can all provide clues to the child's potential whereabouts. Obtaining relevant information from family and collaterals is critical to the expeditious location of the child. Examples of collateral contacts includes:

- Juvenile Probation Officers
- Guardians Ad Litem
- Child's attorney
- Child's friends
- Teachers or school personnel
- Local homeless shelters, hospitals, and local youth programs
- Kin/Relatives
- Child's past and current placement provider

Confidentiality is always of paramount concern when speaking with collateral contacts. When speaking with collateral contacts information shared should be limited to elements in which the collateral is already aware. For example, if speaking with a child's friend, information pertaining to the child's current placement or legal circumstance should be avoided. Information gathering should be limited to questions regarding any recent contacts with the child, possible whereabouts, etc. Once assigned, the Child Locator should contact the child's placement provider to obtain additional information about the child's run. Information such as the child's behavior prior to the run event, anyone the child may have spoken to and the contents of that discussion, if known, and anywhere the child may have fled such as known hang-out spots can be critical information to assist in the recovery of the youth. In some instances, it may be necessary to interview other children at the child's placement to determine if they shared their plans or contact information for other friends.

Contacts with the Missing Child

In some instances, a Child Locator may have communication with a child while they remain on runaway status. When this occurs the Child Locator should inform the child that they cannot guarantee information shared between the child and the Child Locator will be kept in confidence and certain information may be required to be shared. Child Locators should attempt to understand the reasons the child ran and motivations they may have to return to care. Changes in placement or visitation or communication with certain family or friends may be factors that could contribute to the child's return to care. Data suggests some of the primary reasons children run from care is a desire to regain control of their lives or reestablish familial bonds. When such requests or interests are expressed the Child Locator may communicate this information to the court of jurisdiction or request an Multidisciplinary Treatment Team (MDT) with the child's team and explore the child's requests or interests as a means to ensure the safe return of the child.

Section 3.5 Field Searches

When Child Locators are provided with credible leads as to a child's potential whereabouts, field searches may be necessary. These searches may include places such as parks and recreation areas, known "hang-out" spots, parking lots, retail stores, and residences. Community members may be collateral contacts and can often provide valuable information about the potential whereabouts of missing children. The Child Locator may not compel an individual or entity to provide access to their property to conduct a search but may request law enforcement assistance when there is reasonable or credible information indicating the child may be located within it. All information must be documented thoroughly in the CCWIS case record including information relevant to possible whereabouts, steps taken to search, and the outcome.

The Child Locator should ensure when conducting field searches, they bring:

- A contact number for the child's assigned case worker and a back-up worker or supervisor
- Contact information for local law enforcement in the area in the event a rapid response and assistance is needed
- A recent candid photograph of the child
- A description of the child if they are believed to, or known to have, an altered appearance since the most recent available photograph
- Agency business cards and state ID
- Relevant information concerning the child's mental, behavioral, or physical health characteristics to ensure the safety of the child, the Child Locators, and any other responding agency.

When a Child Locator finds a child, law enforcement and the child's worker should be contacted immediately to assist in transportation of the child back to their placement of origin or to secure a new

placement for the child. If a child is located but is not recovered, information as to the last known whereabouts should be immediately reported to law enforcement and the child's assigned case worker.

Section 3.6 Children who Age-Out on Runaway Status

Some children may age out of foster care on runaway status. In these instances, when the youth's court case is dismissed, the youth should be removed from NCIC and NCMEC, however the Child Locator will continue efforts to locate the youth until the child's 19th birthday. The Child Locator will not be attempting to recover the youth but will attempt to contact the youth, inform the youth of any services that may be available to them, and request to conduct a debriefing interview.

Other missing foster youth

Foster Care policy section 6.22 requires a Child Welfare worker to request a modification of disposition, removing a runaway child from the custody of the department when the child has been missing for more than 180 days, unless the child is a ward-of-the-state. The Child Locator will continue to assist the child welfare worker to locate these children.

Section 3.7 Located Child

Regardless of how a child returns to care Centralized Intake must be notified and the *Runaway Return Notification* form completed. The completed form will be emailed, as indicated in Section 2.2 *Reporting a Located Child*, and must be uploaded by the Child Welfare worker to the CCWIS electronic filing cabinet. The Child Locator will complete a Debriefing Interview when a child has been located as indicated in the below guidelines.

Debriefing Interview

Children who are missing for longer than 6 hours or have engaged in three or more runs in the previous six months must undergo a missing child debriefing interview. The primary purposes of the interview are:

- Attempt to ascertain the reasons the child ran from care
- Determine the child's experiences while on the run
- Identify strategies to prevent future runs, and
- Assess the possibility of trafficking.

Debriefing interviews may provide valuable information to the case worker, family, and other stakeholders such as court personnel. The interview may also provide valuable information to the child's placement provider such as strategies to prevent future running events. Once the interview is completed, the Child Locator will complete a summary of the findings, any service recommendations resulting from the discussion, and document in the CCWIS. Upon request the Child Locator may provide the summary of findings to the court utilizing local district protocols.