

	<div>Division of Family and Children Services</div> <div>Child Welfare Manual</div>	<div>Chapter: 1011: Needs of the Child</div> <div>Effective Date: April 1, 2012</div> <div>Previous Policy #: 1011.16</div>

**POLICY TITLE: Runaway Children/Youth**

**POLICY NUMBER: 1011.16**

#### CODES

#### REQUIREMENT

The Division of Family & Children Services (DFCS) shall ensure the following tasks are initiated when a child in the custody of DFCS is determined to have run away:

1. File a missing person report with the law enforcement agency. The party responsible for filing the missing persons report is the person who first determines that the child has run away.
2. Activate a Protective Services Alert in SHINES (DFCS SSCM).
3. Notify the DFCS SSCM (for reports being made by the placement provider or caregiver).
4. Coordinate and conduct a comprehensive search for the child.
5. File a runaway report with Juvenile Court within two (2) days of the child running away.

DFCS defines a runaway as a child/youth up to age 18 in the care and custody of DFCS, whose whereabouts are unknown to the caregiver, and the circumstances of the absence indicate that there is reasonable suspicion that the child/youth has absconded from the placement, and preliminary efforts to locate the child/youth have yielded no results.

If similarly, the whereabouts of youth 18 years and older receiving Extended Youth Supportive Services (EYSS) is unknown to the caregiver, efforts must be made by the caregiver, placement provider and DFCS to locate the youth. While legally youth over 18 are adults, it remains our responsibility to contact law enforcement if it is believed that the youth may be in danger.

**NOTE:** See separate Absent without Permission (AWOP) policy (Section 1011.16.1) for definition, requirements and procedures for such cases.

#### PROCEDURE

1. Determine whether the child/youth has run away, based on the following:
  - a. The child/youth is missing, and any of the following are true:

- i. The child/youth has stated their intent to run away, and/or the caregiver, placement provider, and/or SSCM suspects the child has run away.
    - ii. The caregiver, SSCM or another party has indicated that they have reason to believe the child is not returning to the placement.
    - iii. Some or all of the child's possessions are missing.
    - iv. The child/youth has a history of running away.
  - b. The following coordinated efforts by the caregiver, placement provider and DFCS have been taken to locate the child/youth have not yielded the child's safe return:
    - i. Contact with the child/youth on his or her cell phone, or social media site (as agency policy permits).
    - ii. Contact with the child's parent, other family members, friends or other persons with whom the child frequently associates.
    - iii. Contact with the caregiver/placement resource and other household members to determine when the child was last seen and the child's state of mind at that time.
    - iv. Visit to the location (s) the child was last seen or where the child frequents. (i.e. school, park, movie theatre)
- 2. If the child is determined to have run away:
  - a. Immediately file a missing person report with law enforcement.
    - i. The missing person's report shall be filed by whoever first determines that the child has runaway (caregiver, placement provider or DFCS)
    - ii. Provide the child's information to assist in locating the child. (See Practice Guidance for suggested information to be provided to law enforcement to assist in locating the child).
      - 1. If the report is made by the caregiver or placement provider, provide law enforcement with DFCS SSCM name and contact information.
      - 2. Obtain the missing person's case report number, the Officer's name, badge number, contact number and precinct.
      - 3. Some law enforcement jurisdictions will not accept missing person's reports for a specified number of hours. If the report is being made prior to such timeframe, it is important to impress upon law enforcement the urgency of the situation and possibly provide information regarding the child's vulnerability to assist in getting report accepted. If despite such advocacy, law enforcement insists on waiting out the timeframe, enlist



the DFCS SSCM/Supervisor in advocating with law enforcement.

- b. If the law enforcement report was made by the caregiver or the placement provider, notify the DFCS SSCM by telephone and email (if applicable) that the missing person's report has been filed and provide the case number, name and contact information for the officer to whom the report was received.
- c. The DFCS SSCM shall:
  - i. Contact law enforcement to provide additional information and obtain any information regarding progress in locating child, if necessary.
  - ii. Input all information into SHINES, Contacts/Summaries Tab, along with any contact information provided by law enforcement.
  - iii. Activate a Protective Services Alert in SHINES. (See Practice Guidance for steps to activate and remove the alert)
    - 1. Deactivate the alert when the foster child is located or the agency is relieved of placement authority
  - iv. Notify the parent as soon as possible. When feasible, contact should be done in person.
    - 1. If parental rights have been terminated, parent notification is not required. However, consult with the supervisor/county director to determine whether seeking the parent's assistance may be needed in locating the child.
    - 2. Solicit the parent's assistance in locating the child. Remind them that the court's order for protection contains legal sanctions for the child's return home if the court's consent has not been granted.
  - v. Notify the court within two (2) work days of the child's disappearance by filing a runaway report. The motion shall include efforts made to date to locate the child.
  - vi. Notify any other Division/Department/Agency/Organization that also serves the child, within two (2) work days of the child's disappearance, including the child's school officials, probation officers, attorneys, service providers, etc.
  - vii. Send a "Runaway Alert" through the Georgia Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children (ICPC) Office within two (2) workdays of the child/youth running away, if it is believed that the child may be in another state but there is insufficient information to know which state. Submit an Out of State CPS Alert form to the ICPC Section Manager/Designee that includes:
    - 1. Names, birth dates, social security numbers and physical

- descriptions of all family members;
  - 2. A brief summary of the youth circumstances with an explanation of why follow-up is needed;
  - 3. Legal custody status; and
  - 4. Name and telephone number of contact person, if child/youth is located.
  - 5. ICPC will send an alert nationwide if the state is not known.
  - 6. When the child/youth specific destination is subsequently identified, inform the ICPC office.
- viii. Call 1-800-THE-LOST (800-843-5678) – National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) to report the child missing, within two (2) workdays of the child being missing. To utilize this resource, there must be an active missing persons/police report. Report that the runaway child is in the temporary or permanent custody of the agency.
- 1. Provide the child's name, DOB, Social Security Number, the address or location of where the child is missing and the SSCM's contact information.
  - 2. The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children will send media forms requesting a release of information and a photo of the child. The media release, including the photo can **only** be authorized under the following circumstances:
    - a. If the child is in the temporary custody of DFCS, written parental authorization or a court order is required for any media release of the photograph.
    - b. If the child is in the permanent custody of DHS/DFCS, the DHS Office of Communications may authorize the media release.
- ix. Document a comprehensive search for the child. Search efforts shall occur at least monthly until the child is located or DFCS has been relieved of custody: Search efforts shall include the following:
- Interview/Re-interview the caregiver or placement resource to determine the child's state of mind when last observed.
  - Continue efforts to determine where the child was last known to be located and whom s/he was with. Visit/Revisit locations as needed or contact those she was last seen with.
  - Continue to attempt contacts with the child via their cell phone or if they utilized social media (Facebook,



MySpace, Twitter, etc), with the appropriate departmental/agency approval. Utilize voicemail, text messaging and other messaging to communicate to the child the need to return or to a safe place (police station, fire department, hospital, government building, homeless shelter)

- Interview/Re-interview other children at the child's placement to determine if the child shared their plans, or whom his/her known friends are and how the friends can be contacted. Again, ask about the child's use of cell phones or social media.
  - Contact law enforcement to determine if they have made any progress on locating child.
  - Interview/Re-interview the child's friends to determine if they are aware of the child's whereabouts and/or of their plans.
  - Contact/Re-contact the child's parent(s), extended family members and other adults who work with the child/youth to gather information that may be of assistance in locating them. Assure that they understand their legal responsibility to notify DFCS should the child contact them.
  - If the child is on probation, contact the child's probation officer.
  - Screen SUCCESS.
3. If the child/youth remains on runaway for 90 days, a staffing must be conducted by the county department to discuss efforts to locate the child/youth and to address ongoing strategies to locate child. The staffing must include the county director/designee, SSCM and Supervisor, and any other relevant parties; and address the following:
- a. The department's efforts so far to locate the child/youth and whether efforts have been sufficient,
  - b. What additional efforts/strategies should be employed to locate the child/youth,
  - c. Whether there is a plan in place for the child/youth to receive ongoing support/services when located,
  - d. Whether the department plans to petition the court to be relieved of custody if the child/youth remains on runaway status for six (6) months or more. (Only youth in the temporary custody of DFCS.)
  - e. Document Staffing in SHINES
4. If the youth remains on runaway status for six (6) months or more, the youth is considered to be on long-term runaway status.
- a. If the county has court-ordered **temporary** custody, on a case by

case basis, the county may consider petitioning the court to be relieved of custody after the child is on long-term runaway status (6 months or more).

- i. The county director's approval is needed prior to any decision to petition the court.
- ii. Document the reasons for requesting to be relieved of custody in SHINES.
- iii. If the court relieves the DFCS of custody, close the foster care case.
- iv. If the court does not relieve the county department of custody,
  1. Maintain an open foster care case and document the filing of the petition and outcome in the SHINES legal tab.
  2. Continue comprehensive efforts to locate the child.
  3. Continue six-month periodic reviews and permanency hearings on the original schedule as long as DFCS maintains custody of the child that is on runaway status.
- b. If parental rights have been terminated or surrendered and the county department has **permanent** custody of the child/youth:
  - i. The child's case remains open until the department is relieved of custody through the child reaching 18 years of age.
  - ii. Efforts to locate the child are to continue and must be documented at least monthly.

If the foster child is located, the following must occur:

1. The DFCS SSCM shall:
  - a. Discontinue the Protective Services Alert in SHINES and the Runaway Alert (ICPC).
  - b. Notify law enforcement that the child has been located.
  - c. Notify any other agencies or persons assisting with the search and inform them that the child has been located.
  - d. Notify the parent and the placement resource that the child has been located.
  - e. If the child was a victim of commercial sexual exploitation (CSEC), contact the Georgia Care Connection Office (GCCO) at 404-602-0068 to coordinate services for the child/youth.
2. The DFCS SSCM in conjunction with the placement provider shall interview the child within 48 hours of the child's return. (See Practice Guidance for sample interview questions).



- a. Schedule a medical examination with the child's primary physician and/or other appropriate medical professional within 48 hours of the child's return;  
**NOTE:** This decision should be based on information revealed during the interview with the child and/or based on the length of time the child has been on runaway.
- b. Visit the child more frequently; treat it as an initial placement in order to work with the child and caregiver to stabilize the placement to prevent further disruption. (Recommended weekly or more often as needed). DFCS and the CPA or CCI must make efforts to coordinate visits.
- c. Assist the child in making a contingency plan for situations that might lead to a recurrence of the runaway episode. This plan must be written and uploaded in SHINES.
- d. Update the case plan/Written Transitional Living Plan/Individualized Service Plan when there are newly identified or modified services, treatment and/or placement needs based on the runaway episode. Ensure the case plan/WTLP/ISP is developed collaboratively with the child.
- e. All case plan/WTLP revisions require judicial approval.
- f. Update/modify any Graduated Independence Plan (GIP) that may have been in place prior to the child running away.

### **DFCS Supervisor**

Upon notification by the SSCM that a child has run away, the DFCS supervisor will:

1. Confirm that the SSCM has completed all required reports and contacts.
2. Assist the SSCM in developing and implementing a plan that contains specific strategies to locate the missing child and assure the child's safety as quickly as possible. This plan will include monthly activities to locate the child and include the following:
  - a. Review the ongoing strategies and efforts to locate the child; consider the following:
    - i. Does the child/youth have a runaway history,
    - ii. Is this a one- time event verses chronic runaway pattern,
    - iii. Whether the child/youth is running to a specific place or person,
    - iv. The permanency plan and case plan goals,
    - v. The child/youth's progress and compliance with services,
  - b. Determine if additional steps should be taken to locate the child;
  - c. Develop a placement plan for when the child is located;



- d. When appropriate, identify alternative case goals, such as changes in guardianship status, case termination, or referral for services;
  - e. Confirm that the SSCM has updated documentation of efforts to locate the child in SHINES within 72 hours of occurrence.
3. Document supervisory guidance in SHINES.

## **PRACTICE GUIDANCE**

### **Runaway Children/Youth**

Runaway children are at great risk of victimization and exploitation. They usually do not perceive the inherent risks or see themselves as potential victims. This is especially true for children where there are present danger indicators. Because of the potential dangers to the child, the child's SSCM is to consider a runaway episode as a major event that requires intensive intervention.

### **Present Danger Indicators:**

These are conditions or behaviors that, in conjunction with the child/youth's absence from an environment known to be safe, severely compromise the child's safety.

Present danger may include one or more of the following:

1. The child has been or is believed to have been abducted.
2. The child is age 13 or younger.
3. The child has one or more health/mental health conditions that will place the child at serious harm without required treatment.
4. The child is pregnant and/ or parenting and the infant/child is believed to be with him or her.
5. The child has a physical or developmental disability/delay that impairs the child's ability for self care.
6. The child has a substance abuse problem.
7. The child was previously the victim of human trafficking or sexual exploitation
8. The child is in a potentially life threatening situation
9. The child is believed to be with persons who could endanger his or her welfare.

### **Law Enforcement Report on Missing Children**

When notifying law enforcement of a missing child, the following information shall be provided:

1. The child's full name, aliases and nicknames, age and date of birth; social security number; driver's license number ( if applicable);
2. The child's description i.e. height, weight, hair color, eye color, skin color; braces, clothes worn, book bag, hat, shoes, contact lenses, eyeglasses, dentures, gold or silver teeth, impairment (physical, hearing, vision, speech), moles, scars, body piercings, tattoos;
3. Physical or psychological conditions, developmental delays, or any condition that may affect the ability of the child to respond to environmental dangers;



4. Other factors of endangerment, such as young age, hazardous location, medical needs, disability, etc.;
5. Medications or history of suspected substance abuse;
6. Photo of the child; (If written consent is received from the parent/custodian or a court order granting such consent has been received. If the child is in the permanent custody of DFCS, consent can be granted from the DHS Office of Communications.)
7. A copy of the most recent court order granting legal custody of the child and other relevant facts about child's custody status;
8. Type of missing episode (runaway, family abduction, non-family abduction, etc.)
9. Where, when, and with whom the child was last seen;
10. Possible method of travel, i.e. car, bicycle, public transportation, or on foot;
11. Names and addresses of foster parents, birthparents, relatives, former foster parents, and friends; Locations and activities the child is known to frequent;
12. Any suspected destinations; and any prior disappearances and outcomes.

#### **Interview with the DFCS/CPA Foster Parent, CCI Staff**

The SSCM must explore with the placement provider the following issues:

1. Has the child ever run away before, for how long, and where did the child go?
2. Did the child express a desire to run away, go to a specific place or see a specific person?
3. Did the placement provider observe any cues that the child was planning to run away?
4. Whom is the child permitted to visit? Where (neighborhood, home, school)? Are the parents of the child's friends known by the placement provider?
5. What are the rules of the residence concerning allowable areas for the child to be without first securing caregiver permission?
6. Has the child started any new friendships, or "hanging out" with new people?
7. Have there been any changes in the child's behavior? What are the changes?
8. Are there issues being experienced by the placement provider that may have contributed to the child running away?
9. Who are the child's friends? Is their contact information known to the placement provider?
10. What steps can be taken to avoid future occurrences of running away?

#### **Interview with Child/Youth Returning from Runaway**

The interview should be conducted in a manner which demonstrates empathy and concern for the youth, while also communicating to the youth that their safety is the primary concern.

The SSCM/CPA/CCI staff shall explore the following questions with the child/youth:

1. Why did you run away from the placement? (Explore what they expected to accomplish from running away)



2. What lead up to the decision to run away?
3. Who did you run away with?
4. Were you encouraged to run away, if so, by whom?
5. Where did you go? (list all the places)
6. What were all the places you visited while they were gone?
7. Who were some of the people you visited or stayed with while away?
8. What is your relationship with them?
9. How did you survive while away? (food, clothing, shelter, hygiene, money)
10. Did you engage in any risky behaviors? (i.e. sexual activity, substance abuse)
11. Were you the victim of a crime while away? If so, is a referral to law enforcement needed?
12. What was the best thing about being away?
13. What was the worst thing about being away?
14. What did you miss the most while you were away?
15. What would have stopped you from running away?
16. What services/supports did you need while being away?
17. What were some of the reasons you returned?
18. Have you thought about leaving again since you've been back?
19. What would prevent you from running away again?
20. What can the caregiver/DFCS do to prevent you from running away again?
21. What advice would you give another kid who was thinking of running away?

### **Important Tips When a Child First Enters Care**

1. Obtain the child's medical and dental records.
2. Take the child's picture and upload it to SHINES. Update at a minimum, every 6 months.
3. Request parent/guardian's signature on consent forms for DFCS to release the child's picture to NCMEC should the child become missing, or obtain a court order granting such consent. (This is especially important if the child has a history of running away)
4. Provide the child with the contact information for the National Runaway Switchboard (1-800-RUNAWAY) and explain the purpose.
5. Assist the child in making a contingency plan for situations that might lead to the child running away from care.

### **REFERENCES**

#### **RESOURCES FOR MISSING OR ABDUCTED CHILDREN/YOUTH**

**National Runaway Switchboard (Crisis Hotline for Youth)**

**1-800-RUNAWAY (1-800-786-2929)**

**[www.nrscrisisline.org/](http://www.nrscrisisline.org/)**

**National Center for Missing and Exploited Children**

**1-703-274-3900**

**Hotline: 1-800-843-5678**



[www.missingkids.com](http://www.missingkids.com)

**Amber Alert**  
**Georgia Bureau of Investigation**  
**404-244-2600**

**Georgia Care Connection Office (GCCO)**  
For children/youth who are victims of Commercial Sexual Exploitation)  
**404-602-0068**  
[www.georgiacareconnection.com](http://www.georgiacareconnection.com)

**DHS Office of Communications**

**SHINES TIPS (Protective Services Alerts (aka Runaway Alerts))**

Protective Service Alerts can be activated in any active stage in SHINES. For children in DFCS custody the most appropriate stage to activate an alert is in the FCC stage.

**Steps for Documenting a CPS Alert**

- Click Stage Name hyperlink on the Assigned Workload page
- Click the 2<sup>nd</sup> level Person tab
- Click the 3<sup>rd</sup> level Protective Service Alert tab
- Enter the Date and Time
- Enter the Date Absconded (runaway or missing)
- Select Reason For Alert
- Enter a Comment in the text box
- Select The check box next to the name of the Person Absconded
  - You can select one or more names from the list
- Click the **Save button**
  - A **red** exclamation mark will display next to the Runaways and/or missing persons name

**To remove the Alert:**

- Click Stage Name hyperlink on the Assigned Workload page
  - Click the 2<sup>nd</sup> level Person tab
  - Deselect The check box next to the name of the Person Absconded
  - Select the **All Person Located** check box
- NOTE:** You can select this box even if you found one person; the red exclamation mark will only be removed for that individual. The name person who was located will move to the bottom of the list

**How to View an Alert**

- Click the 1<sup>st</sup> level Search button
- Select Full Name from the Person Information Search list
- Enter the last Name and First Name

- Enter DOB, Gender, County
- Click the Search button
  - A **red** exclamation mark will display next to the Runaway and/or missing persons name in the Match results on the Person Search page