

	GEORGIA DIVISION OF FAMILY AND CHILDREN SERVICES CHILD WELFARE POLICY MANUAL			
	Chapter:	(10) Foster Care	Effective Date:	August 2014
	Policy Title:	Missing Children		
	Policy Number:	10.24	Previous Policy #:	1011.16

CODES/REFERENCES

O.C.G.A § Section 35-3-83

REQUIREMENTS

The Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS) shall ensure the following actions are taken when a child in DFCS custody is believed to be missing:

1. File a missing person report with the appropriate law enforcement agency.
2. Activate a Protective Services alert in the Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System (Georgia SHINES). Deactivate the alert after the child is located or DFCS is relieved of custody.
3. Notify the DFCS Social Services Case Manager (SSCM) if the SSCM is not the person filing the missing person report.
4. Coordinate and conduct a comprehensive search for the child.
5. File a runaway report with the Juvenile Court within two business days of the child running away.

PROCEDURES

If a child is believed to be missing, the Social Services Case Manager (SSCM) will:

1. Attempt to contact the child on his/her cell phone or social media.
2. Contact the caregiver and other household members to determine when and where the child was last seen and the child's state of mind at that time.
3. Contact the child's parents, other family members, friends, and persons with whom the child associates and to determine if they have knowledge of the child's whereabouts.
4. Check to see if any of the child's possessions are missing from their placement.
5. Visit the location(s) where the child was last seen and where the child frequents (e.g. school, park, and movie theatre).

If the child is determined to have run away, the SSCM will:

1. Ensure a missing person report is filed with law enforcement:
 - a. Provide the child's identifying information (See Practice Guidance: [Law Enforcement Report on Missing Children](#)).
 - b. Obtain the missing person's case report number, the officer's name receiving the report, his/her badge number, contact number, and precinct.
 - c. Enter all information into the Contact Detail in Georgia SHINES, including contact information for law enforcement.
2. Activate a Protective Services Alert in Georgia SHINES.

NOTE: Deactivate the alert after the child is located or DFCS is relieved of custody.

3. Notify the child's parent(s) as soon as possible.
 - a. If parental rights have been terminated, parental notification is not required. In such instances, consult with the Social Services Supervisor and County Director before seeking the parent's assistance in locating the child.
 - b. Solicit the parent's assistance in locating the child. Remind them that the child may not return to their home without consent from the Juvenile Court.
4. Notify the court within two business days of the child's disappearance by filing a runaway report. The motion shall include efforts made (to date) to locate the child.
6. Notify any other Division/Department that also serves the child within two business days of the child's disappearance, including the child's school officials, probation officers, attorneys, service providers, etc.
7. Submit a "Runaway Alert" to the Georgia Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children (ICPC) Section Manager/Designee within two business days of the child's disappearance, if the child is believed to be in another state, but there is insufficient information to know which state. Include the following on the CPS Alert Form:
 - a. Child's name, DOB, SSN, and a physical description of all family members;
 - b. Brief summary of the child's circumstances with an explanation of why follow-up is needed;
 - c. Child's legal custody status;
 - d. Name and telephone number of who to contact if the child is located.
8. Contact the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) at 1-800-THE-LOST (1-800-843-5678) to report the child missing within two business days of the child's disappearance.
 - a. There must be an active missing person police report, and the child must be in DFCS custody.
 - b. **Do not** reveal that the child is in foster care.
 - c. Provide the child's name, DOB, SSN, placement address, and contact information for the SSCM.
 - d. The media release, including the photo can **only** be authorized under the following circumstances:
 - 1) 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.
 - 2) If the child is in the permanent custody of DHS/DFCS, the DHS Office of Communications may authorize the media release.
9. Document a comprehensive search for the child, which shall continue until the child is located or DFCS is relieved of custody.
 - a. Interview/re-interview the child's parents and placement resource to determine the child's state of mind when last observed.
 - b. Revisit locations where the child was last seen.
 - c. Continue to attempt to contact the child via cell phone, social media, etc. Utilize voicemail, text messaging and other messaging to communicate to the child the need to return or go to a safe place (e.g., police station, fire department, hospital, etc.).
 - d. Interview/re-interview other children at the child's placement to determine if the child shared their plans or contact information for other friends. Inquire about the child's use of cell phones or social media.
 - e. Contact law enforcement to determine if they have made any progress in locating

- the child.
 - f. Continue/re-contact the child's friends, parents, extended family members, other adults with whom the child had a relationship for any update information. Ensure they understand their legal obligation to notify DFCS should the child contact them.
 - g. Contact the child's probation officer (if applicable) for any updated information.
 - h. Screen SUCCESS.
10. If the youth remains on runaway status for 90 days, staff case with the Social Services Supervisor (SSS). The staffing must include the County Director/designee, SSCM, and SSS and be documented on the Contact Detail page in Georgia SHINES. The following must be addressed in the staffing:
- a. Efforts made to locate the child;
 - b. Additional strategies that may be employed to locate the child;
 - c. Whether the child has a history of running away;
 - d. Whether the child is running to a specific place or person;
 - e. The Permanency Plan and Case Plan Goals;
 - f. The plan for providing ongoing support/services to the youth when he/she is located (e.g., Alternative Case Plan goals needed, changes in Permanency Plan);
 - g. Whether DFCS plans to petition the court to be relieved of custody if the child remains on runaway status for six (6) months or more. (Applies only to children in the temporary custody of DFCS);
 - h. Confirmation that the SSCM has updated documentation of efforts to locate the child on the Contact Detail page in Georgia SHINES.

If the child remains on runaway status for six months or more, the child is considered to be on long-term runaway status and the SSCM will:

- 1. Seek the approval of the County Director to petition the court to be relieved of temporary custody.
- 2. Document the reasons for requesting to be relieved of temporary custody on the Contact Detail page in Georgia SHINES and update the Legal Actions page when the petition is filed.
- 3. If the court relieves DFCS of temporary custody of the child, close the foster care case.
- 4. If the court does not relieve DFCS of temporary custody:
 - a. Maintain an open foster care case and document the filing of the petition and outcome under the Legal tab in Georgia SHINES.
 - b. Continue diligent efforts to locate the child.
 - c. Continue periodic case reviews and permanency hearings on the original schedule as long as DFCS maintains custody of the child.
- 5. If parental rights have been terminated and DFCS has permanent custody of the child:
 - a. Maintain an open case until DFCS is relieved of custody upon the youth reaching the age of majority (18 years of age).
 - b. Continue diligent efforts to locate the youth and document efforts on the Contact Detail page in Georgia SHINES.
 - c. Continue periodic case reviews and permanency hearings on the original schedule as long as DFCS maintains custody of the youth.

If the child is located, the SSCM will:

1. Deactivate the Protective Services Alert in Georgia SHINES and the Runaway Alert (ICPC).
2. Notify law enforcement and the court of the child being located.
3. Notify any other agencies or persons assisting with the search and inform them that the child has been located.
4. Notify the parent and the placement resource that the child has been located.
5. Locate a new placement if the previous placement resource is not available.
6. Contact the Georgia Care Connection Office (GCCO) at 404-602-0068 to coordinate services for the child/youth, if the child was or may have been a victim of commercial sexual exploitation (CSEC).
7. In conjunction with the placement provider, interview the child within 48 hours of the child's return. (See Practice Guidance for [sample interview questions](#).)
8. 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: The decision to take this action 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.
9. 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.
10. 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 into External Documents in Georgia SHINES.
11. Update the Case Plan, Written Transitional Living Plan (WTLP) and Individualized Service Plan (ISP) when there are newly identified or modified services, treatment and/or placement needs based on the runaway episode.
 - a. Ensure the case plan/WTLP/ISP is developed collaboratively with the child.
 - b. Obtain judicial approval of all Case Plan/WTLP revisions.
12. Update/modify any Graduated Independence Plan (GIP) that may have been in place prior to the child running away.

PRACTICE GUIDANCE**Runaway Children/Youth**

The term "runaway" is used by DFCS to refer to youth (under 18 years of age) in DFCS custody, whose whereabouts are unknown to their caregiver and there is a reasonable suspicion that the child/youth has absconded from the placement, and preliminary efforts to locate the child/youth have yielded no results. This also applies to youth 18 years of age and older who are receiving Extended Youth Supportive Services (EYSS) whose whereabouts are unknown. In all instances, diligent efforts must be made by the caregiver and DFCS to locate the 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 a major event that requires intensive intervention.

Some law enforcement jurisdictions will not accept a missing person report for a specified number of hours. If attempting to make a report prior to such timeframe, it is important to impress upon law enforcement the urgency of the situation and provide information regarding the child's vulnerability to persuade law enforcement to accept the report. Seek assistance from the Social Services Supervisor and Special Assistant Attorney General (SAAG) in advocating with law enforcement.

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/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/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. A description of the child [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; any impairments (physical, hearing, vision, speech); moles; scars; body piercings; or 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 (Requires written consent from the parent/custodian or a court order. 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;
12. Locations and activities the child is known to frequent;
13. Any suspected destinations; and any prior disappearances and outcomes.

National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC)

The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children was established in 1984. It is the leading nonprofit organization in the U.S. working with law enforcement, families and the professionals who serve them on issues related to missing and sexually exploited children. When contacted, the NCMEC will send media forms requesting a release of information and a photo of the child. The media release, including the photo may **only** be authorized as follows:

1. Written parental authorization or a court order is required for any media release of the photograph if the child is in the temporary custody of DHS/DFCS.
2. The DHS Office of Legislative Affairs and Communications may authorize the media release, if the child is in the permanent custody of DHS/DFCS.

Interview with the Placement Provider

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 and placement provider 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 you 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? (e.g., food, clothing, shelter, hygiene, money)
10. Did you engage in any risky behaviors? (e.g., 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 be done 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 initially enters foster care it would be helpful to do the following, especially if the child has a history of running away:

1. Obtain the child's medical and dental records.
2. Take the child's picture and upload it into External Documentation in Georgia SHINES. Update at least every six (6) months.
3. Request parent/guardian's signature on consent forms for DFCS to release the child's picture to the 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.

FORMS AND TOOLS

National Runaway Switchboard (Crisis Hotline for Youth)
1-800-RUNAWAY (1-800-786-2929)
www.nrscrisisline.org/

National Center for Missing and Exploited Children
1-703-274-3900
Hotline: 1-800-843-5678
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