

**Missing From Care Practice Guide****21-15PG****Target Population**

Children or young adults up to the age of 23 who are in the care and custody of the Department of Children and Families (DCF) that are missing from their placement (foster home, in-home cases and any congregate care setting, including placements through the Chafee Grant).

**Definitions of Missing from Care**

Federal Law 34 U.S.C. section 11292 defines a child missing from care as a person younger than 18 whose whereabouts are unknown to their legal guardian.

DCF classifies missing from care incidents as follows:

- Runaway/Missing: Child left their placement and DCF does not know where they are and cannot communicate with them.
- Abduction: Unauthorized removal of a minor from the custody of the child's parent, guardian or congregate care facility.

Under federal and state law, children missing or abducted must be reported to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC). Children who are AWOL are not required to be reported to NCMEC.

**NOTE:** DCF also defines an AWOL when a child is not where they should be, but DCF knows where the child is or is communicating with them. The child may have left the residence without permission or may not have returned at a predetermined time from school, work or other event. AWOL children are not considered missing from care under the federal definition and notification to NCMEC is not required.

**Legal reference:** Federal Law 34 U.S.C. section 11292; 42 U.S.C. section 671; C.G.S. section 17a-8b

**Missing Persons Notification**

A child's caregiver or staff from the child placing agency or congregate care facility shall report by telephone, to the DCF area office, during business hours, or to Careline, after hours and on holidays when the child is missing from care.

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Persons  
Notification**  
, continued

Through the Critical Incidents and Significant Events notification process, DCF shall ensure that the appropriate local law enforcement agency is notified and shall report missing and abducted children to NCMEC within 24 hours of receiving information that the child is missing from care.

DCF shall maintain regular communication with law enforcement and NCMEC to provide a safe recovery of a missing or abducted child or youth, including sharing information about the child's or youth's recovery and circumstances related to the recovery.

Where reasonably possible, reports submitted to law enforcement agencies and NCMEC should include the following:

- a photo of the missing or abducted child or youth (reference KIDPIX requirements pursuant to Policy 23-3)
- a description of the child's or youth's physical features, such as height, weight, sex, ethnicity, race hair color, and eye color, and
- endangerment information, such as prescription medications, suicidal tendencies, vulnerability to being sex trafficked and other health or risk factors.

This notification process shall also include written notification to the child's attorney by the social worker assigned to the case.

It is an incorrect assumption that 24 hours, or any other time frame, must pass before a law enforcement unit will accept a missing person report.

**Note:** There is NO waiting period for reporting a missing person.

If a law enforcement agency refuses to accept a missing person report, the social worker shall notify the Central Office Legal Affairs immediately.

**Caregiver  
Responsi-  
bilities**

DCF staff and providers shall make every effort to prevent a child from going missing from care by providing the child with:

- planned, proactive and preventive services
- mental health assessment and treatment

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Responsi-  
bilities,**  
continued

- strategies (e.g., coaching and modeling) that consistently address underlying issues and build skills, and
- assessment of placement issues

When a child is considered at risk to run away, the child's social worker shall use the DCF-21-15P, "Youth Run Prevention Plan" to develop an action plan and strategies to prevent future occurrences.

Some risk factors could include, but are not limited to:

- missing from care history
- placement in STTAR home
- history of victimization while in care
- verbalized desire to run away

Foster parents and congregate care staff may access Mobile Crisis Intervention Services (MCIS) and Urgent Crisis Centers (UCC) to assist in addressing behavioral health crises and mitigating against a child missing from care.

**NCMEC and  
Law  
Enforce-  
ment  
Notification**

When a child is missing from care from a congregate care setting, DCF foster home or therapeutic foster home, DCF shall report immediately, and in no case later than 24 hours after receiving report of a missing child, information on missing or abducted children or youth to the law enforcement authorities for entry into the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) database of the Federal Bureau of Investigation and to the [National Center for Missing and Exploited Children](#). Factors to be considered, and reported to NCMEC as required, include the child's:

- danger to self, others, the community
- risk of being a victim of trafficking
- medical and physical health
- chronological age
- developmental age
- behavioral and mental health status, including prior trauma history and especially sexual abuse, exploitation or trafficking
- social and emotional functioning
- geographical location, and the location of family and friends
- appropriateness of placement.

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Law  
Enforce-  
ment  
Notification  
, continued**

When a report is made to NCMEC, a DCF point of contact for NCMEC must be identified.

**Immediate  
Law  
Enforce-  
ment  
Notification**

The decision to contact law enforcement immediately to file a missing person report for entry into the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) database shall be governed by the following criteria:

- the facility staff or foster parent(s) belief that the child is a danger to self, others or the community, regardless of age
- the child has a prior history of sexual exploitation, or
- the child is under the age of thirteen years.

In these cases (1) the facility staff or foster parents shall immediately notify, by telephone, the DCF area office, during business hours, or Careline, after hours and on holidays, and (2) DCF shall immediately notify law enforcement upon receiving the report.

Therapeutic foster parents must also contact the therapeutic foster care (TFC) agency that provides their support of the incident.

**Non-  
Immediate  
Law  
Enforce-  
ment  
Notification  
within 24  
hours**

The decision not to contact law enforcement immediately to file a missing person report shall be based on the following guidelines and incorporate the appropriate steps described below. All missing from care notifications must be made no later than 24 hours from the time reported to DCF.

1) If the child does not meet the above criteria for immediate police notification intervention, facility staff, foster parent(s) and/or the TFC agency staff shall contact the area office during business hours or Careline after hours and on holidays. The area office or Careline, together with the foster parent(s) and provider staff, shall assess the nature of the absence to determine whether police notification and intervention is necessary.

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continued

Therapeutic foster parents shall first contact their TFC agency to notify staff of the incident and determine who will contact the area office or Careline to participate in the joint assessment with DCF.

Factors to be considered during the joint assessment include the child's:

- danger to self, others or the community
- physical health and medical history
- chronological age
- developmental age and stage
- behavioral and mental health status, including prior trauma history and especially sexual abuse or exploitation
- risk of trafficking, and
- social and emotional functioning.

If the outcome of the assessment is that law enforcement notification and intervention are necessary, DCF shall contact law enforcement and report the child as missing.

2) If the outcome of the joint assessment does not necessitate immediate law enforcement notification or intervention, the area office or Careline staff shall work with the facility staff, foster parents and TFC agency staff to develop a plan to ascertain the child's whereabouts. This plan will include steps mutually agreed upon by DCF, facility staff, foster parents and TFC agency staff. The plan will identify the persons responsible for conducting each step of the plan.

3) When the child's whereabouts are unknown, DCF, facility staff, foster parents and TFC agency staff shall continue searching and shall formally reassess within three hours or prior to the area office closing or the next Careline shift change during the child's absence, whichever is sooner.

If police intervention is still not needed based on the reassessment results, DCF, facility staff, foster parents and TFC agency staff shall (1) update the plan to continue the search for the child including additional mutually agreed upon action steps and (2) schedule another formal reassessment within three hours or prior to the area office closing or the next Careline shift change during the child's continued absence, whichever is sooner.

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The search and reassessment process should not exceed six hours before contacting law enforcement and reporting the child as missing.

4) When DCF staff know the child's whereabouts, area office staff during business hours or Careline staff after hours and during holidays shall work with facility staff, foster parents and TFC agency staff to ensure the child's immediate return. A child's refusal to return immediately should not be a sole basis for police intervention.

Area office or Careline staff must work with the child to determine how to maintain the current placement or to determine whether another placement is needed. Regional Resource Group (RRG) staff or on-call physicians should be utilized when necessary. The TFC agency shall also work with the child and DCF to assist with maintaining the current placement or determining and facilitating an appropriate alternative placement.

**Incident Information**

The Area Office of Careline staff responding to the call regarding a child missing from care must ask the following:

- What was the child wearing?
- What is the child's height, weight, hair color and eye color?
- Did you notify the police? If so, what is the case number?
- Is the child a danger to self or others?
- Why did the child run away?
- What triggered this behavior?
- How did the child run away?
- Did the child leave on foot or did the child exit via another method (e.g., bike, car)?
- Do you know the child's location? What has been done to locate the child?
- Were the placement setting, grounds and neighborhood searched in an effort to locate the child?
- Have you checked the locations that the child frequents?
- Have you checked local transportation terminals and bus stops?

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### Incident Information, continued

- Name, phone number and address of all persons on the child's contact list.
- Name and phone number of parents and any other family member involved with the child. Names of any friends who may know the child's whereabouts. Have they been contacted?
- Does the child have a cell phone?
- Have other children at the same placement setting been spoken to regarding the child's runaway behavior?
- Was it with other children from the facility?
- How many times has the child run away within the last six months? How long has he or she typically stayed away? Is there a place the child typically runs to?
- What is the child's trauma history?
- Does the child have a history of prior sexual exploitation? If so, what information from the past (e.g., previous missing from care episodes, individuals involved) may inform locating the child?
- Is it likely that the runaway event may have been triggered by a trauma reminder?
- Does the child have any money or access to money? If yes, how much?
- Is the child taking any prescribed medications?
- Does the child have a social media account to which he or she may have posted information as to his or her whereabouts?

### Action Steps

These are the steps DCF personnel shall take to physically locate the child.

**Careline Process:** When Careline is contacted after hours and notified that a child is missing from care, the Careline social worker shall:

Step	Action
1	Review the child's case in CT-KIND
2	Complete the temporary living condition report
3	Send an email notification to the area office and enter after hours CT KIND narrative
4	Notify the covering Careline supervisor

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**Action Steps,**  
continued

Step	Action
5	Create and distribute an exceptional circumstance form
6	Notify NCMEC and law enforcement if the child is missing/runaway or abducted.
7	<p>The Careline supervisor shall research CT-KIND, if the information is not already presented, regarding the frequency of the missing from care incidents and any patterns of behavior and determine the need for assignment to an on-call social worker to respond. When determining to assign an on-call social worker, the supervisor should consider the following criteria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is the child under 13 years old?</li> <li>• Does the child present a danger to themselves or others?</li> <li>• Does the child have a history of engaging in unsafe behaviors?</li> <li>• Does the child have a history of frequently missing from care?</li> </ul>

The on-call social worker shall:

Step	Action
1	Contact the placement and have a discussion with the foster parent or placement staff to determine how often the child is missing from care, where the child has gone or been found in the past, whether police have been involved in the past, and who the child's contacts are.
2	Make attempts to locate the child based on the information provided, accompanied by police if appropriate and necessary.
3	Contact the legal guardian and other family connections to locate the child.

**Area Office Process:** The Area office shall take the following action steps upon receiving notice from the Careline or from a child's placement that the child is missing. Oftentimes, when notification occurs between 8:00 AM and 5:00 PM, the initial call will be received from the school or other program that the child attends during the day.

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**Missing From Care Practice Guide****21-15PG****Action  
Steps,  
continued**

The social worker shall:

Step	Action
1	Ensure that the child's absence is confirmed, and that the child is not simply absent from a class, or marked absent, but present elsewhere in the building or on the grounds.
2	Contact the foster parent or facility staff to see if they are aware of the child's whereabouts.
3	File a report with NCMEC within 24 hours if the child is not located and is determined to be missing/runaway or abducted.
4	Update the CT-KIND placement icon with the missing from care status.
5	Call/text the child if the child has a cell phone.
6	Contact any transportation provider to ascertain any information they can provide.
7	Contact the Juvenile Justice Social Worker or CSSD Probation Officer if the child is involved with juvenile parole or probation.
8	Contact biological family, other relatives and friends (contacts must be documented within 24 hours).
9	Contact boyfriends/girlfriends, if known.
10	Check the child's social media accounts, if available.

All of the above steps must be repeated regularly and repeatedly throughout the day.

**Informa-  
tion  
Gathering  
when the  
Child Makes  
Contact**

When a DCF staff member successfully contacts the child or if the child contacts facility staff, foster parent(s), parent(s)/caregiver(s) or others working with them, the individual contacted should seek the following information:

- child's location at time of contact and/or where child is staying
- individuals who may be with the child
- the health and safety of the child
- if the child is parenting, the health, safety and location of the infant/child
- whether the child is attending school and/or is employed and where

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**Missing From Care Practice Guide****21-15PG****Information  
Gathering  
when the  
Child Makes  
Contact,  
continued**

- contacts the child has made with family, other relatives, friends, etc., and
- how the child is providing for and meeting needs (inquire specifically if the child is trading sexual favors to meet their needs).

**Return to  
Placement  
Setting**

When a child returns to the placement, these guidelines shall be followed.

Step	Action
1	The facility staff, foster parent(s) or TFC agency staff shall immediately notify area office staff during business hours or Careline after hours and holidays to assess the child's needs and discuss planning.
2	As appropriate, foster homes and congregate care facilities may be access MCIS and UCC's to assist with assessing the child's immediate status.
3	The caregiver or agency shall work with DCF to assess and support the needs of the child.
4	The social worker shall contact law enforcement, NCMEC and individuals or agencies involved with the child, when required, within 24 hours of the child returning to care.

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### Return to Placement Setting, continued

Step	Action
5	<p>DCF staff must ensure that a debriefing interview with the child occurs within two calendar days (excluding weekends and holidays) of returning to out-of-home care to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evaluate the child for health and safety concerns and assist with appropriate care and safe placement (if needed) in collaboration with RRG.</li> <li>• Determine the child's experiences while absent from care, including screening the child to determine if the child is a possible trafficking victim (sex or labor) (<i>see "HART Consult" below</i>).</li> <li>• Determine the primary factors that contributed to the child's running away or otherwise being absent from care, and to the extent possible and appropriate, responding to those factors in current and subsequent placements.</li> <li>• Discuss the child's interest in re-establishing connections with his or her siblings and other relatives, when appropriate. This includes discussing skills and strategies to safely reconnect with any identified family members, provide guidance and services to assist the child.</li> <li>• Use the DCF-21-15D, "Returning Child De-Briefing" form.</li> </ul>
6	<p>The planning phase shall include developing or updating a safety plan for the child, if appropriate, by the child's social worker. The purpose of the safety plan is to ensure that the child has positive strategies and coping skills that, instead of running away, can be used during times of distress. The facility staff, foster parent(s) or TFC agency staff, the child and the DCF social worker shall participate in planning and understand and support the plan.</p>

### Suspected Abuse When Missing

If it is known or suspected that the child may have experienced physical abuse, sexual abuse or exploitation, community violence or another type of traumatic event while missing from care, either DCF or provider staff shall use the DCF-21-15D, "Returning Child De-Briefing" form to identify any new trauma exposure and the child's traumatic stress symptoms immediately.

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**Missing From Care Practice Guide****21-15PG****Suspected Abuse When Missing, continued**

The assessment shall include identification of any trauma-related needs of the child, potential exploitation through trafficking, and whether or not the child feels safe now (upon return), both physically and psychologically, in the current placement.

**Medical Assessments**

When the child returns to care, the child may be sent to an Emergency Department **only** when facility staff, TFC agency staff or foster parent(s) determines that there is a need for immediate medical attention (e.g., substance abuse, sexual abuse, risk of self-harm, human trafficking). This expectation is regardless of the child's legal status.

Medical assessments, as well as arrangements for routine tests and screenings (e.g., urine tests for pregnancy or substance use), can begin the next business day and can usually be completed by other medical providers such as a primary care physician. The need for general mental health assessment, trauma-specific assessment or general mental health/trauma-specific treatment should be routinely assessed within a reasonable time following the child's return.

A child is not to be sent to the Emergency Department or denied admission to a foster home or congregate care facility solely due to questions or concerns about medical orders or prescriptions. Any questions that a congregate provider, foster parent or TFC agency might have about the child's return to placement are to be referred to the area office for resolution during business hours whenever possible.

The area office and DCF medical staff shall work on any identified prescription or medical order concerns as early in the day as possible. After hours and during holidays, any questions concerning medical orders or expired prescriptions need to be referred to the Careline. Careline shall then contact the DCF on-call physician, who shall work with Careline to ensure that there are appropriate medical orders and prescriptions for the critical medications that need to be administered.

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**Missing From Care Practice Guide****21-15PG****HART  
Consult**

The assigned child protective services team must request a Human Anti-trafficking Response Team (HART) consult when there is any indication the child was sexually abused or the child is missing for more than 72 hours. During the HART consultation, the HART Liaison shall use the DCF screening instrument to assess child trafficking.

**Cross reference:** DCF Policy 21-14, "Human Trafficking"; DCF 21-14 PG, Human Trafficking Practice Guide

**Quality  
Assurance**

Each region, on a weekly basis, shall send a reminder to social work staff who have children missing from care on their caseloads to update the Missing from Care Database in CT-KIND and document all efforts to locate the child.

Area office quality improvement (QI) staff shall review the Missing from Care report each Monday and cross reference CT-KIND to see if child remains missing or has returned.

QI staff shall email the social worker to update the system if child has returned and/or to update efforts to locate in CT-KIND.

DCF staff shall check NCMEC monthly to determine if any child who has returned is removed from the database.

**Document-  
ation**

Documentation of all activities regarding a child missing from care is essential. DCF, congregate care providers and TFC agencies shall be expected to document the following:

- all efforts, discussions and planning in their respective client record narratives within the established time frames for completing narrative entries
- the plan developed and updated to search for the child, including the action steps and justification for not contacting the police
- any information gathered while child is missing from care, and
- any relevant circumstances related to the recovery of the child.

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**Missing From Care Practice Guide****21-15PG****Document-  
ation,**  
continued

The DCF narrative completed by Careline staff (when Careline responds after hours) shall be cut and pasted into an email and sent to the area office chain of command (i.e., social worker, social work supervisor, program supervisor).

All contacts with the on-call physician should be documented in the client record. Careline staff shall document such contacts that occur after hours and during holidays.

Significant Event Report forms must be completed and submitted within 12 hours of the incident to DCF Risk Management and in accordance with the Exceptional Circumstance policy.

**Cross reference:** DCF Policy 22-1-2, " Notification of Exceptional Circumstances"