

CHILDREN & FAMILY SERVICES  
HANDBOOK

SECTION: 31-481  
PAGE NO.: 1  
ISSUED/REVISED: 12-01-2025

MISSING FROM CARE  
PROTOCOL

SECTION: 31-481  
PAGE NO.: 1  
EFFECTIVE: 04-18-2017

## I. OVERVIEW

Foster children/youth and Non-Minor Dependents (NMDs) who are missing or absent from care/placement are at risk of sexual exploitation, labor trafficking, and other adverse outcomes. Over the years, the state of California has built upon mandates primarily established in the federal [Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act, Public Law \(PL\) 113-183](#), to ensure child welfare agencies support the quick return of foster youth and NMDs who have exited out-of-home placements. Children & Family Services (CFS) Social Workers are responsible for specific reporting requirements, documentation, ongoing search efforts, and trauma-informed assessments following a youth or NMD's return to care, all of which are critical to addressing child welfare goals of safety, permanency, and well-being.

## II. DEFINITIONS

- A. Missing/Absent from Care.** Pursuant to Welfare and Institutions Code §16501.35(c)(1), a child/youth who has an order of foster care placement is considered "missing from care" if: 1) their location is unknown to the child welfare agency; or 2) when the child welfare agency has located the foster youth in a location that is not a court-approved placement. **Note:** for the Non-Minor Dependent (NMD) population, "missing from care" status only applies if there is reasonable suspicion the NMD did not voluntarily leave their placement, and may be at risk of harm or foul play.
- B. Child Abduction.** The unauthorized taking of a child/youth from their legal custodian. A family abduction occurs when a child/youth is taken or concealed by a parent or family member, typically to deprive another individual of custody or visitation rights. A nonfamily abduction occurs when a child/youth is taken by someone who is a stranger, or someone they have some familiarity with but no blood relation to (i.e., a neighbor).
- C. National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC).** NCMEC is a nonprofit organization that offers technical assistance and case management support to law enforcement, child welfare agencies, and families to locate children who have run away, experienced a non-family abduction, or been wrongfully taken or retained by a family member. NCMEC can provide resources to locate a child/youth who has gone missing from their foster care placement, with a focus on reducing sexual exploitation and victimization.
- D. Sex Trafficking.** Under the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) of 2000, codified in Title 22 USC § 7102 and Title 18 USC § 1591, Sex Trafficking refers to the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, obtaining, patronizing, or soliciting of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act, in which the

person induced to perform such an act is under the age of 18, regardless of whether force, fraud, or coercion is involved.

- E. Commercially Sexually Exploited Children (CSEC)/Commercially Sexually Exploited Youth (CSEY).** Welfare and Institutions Code §300(b)(2) expounds on the definition of sex trafficking by clarifying that any minor who has been involved in commercial sexual activity, whether as a suspected victim, recruiter, or exploiter, must be reported as a victim of child abuse, whose parent or guardian failed to, or was unable to protect them.
- F. Labor Trafficking.** Labor Trafficking is recognized pursuant to Title 22 USC § 7102, as the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purposes of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery. When the victim is under 18, it is considered child labor trafficking, as long as coercion, fraud, or abuse of vulnerability is involved.
- G. Active Efforts.** When an Indian child or youth is missing from care, it is the child welfare agency's responsibility to notify and work collaboratively with the Indian youth's Tribal representatives. Engaging in "Active Efforts" meets the evidentiary standards of the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) to maintain or reunify an Indian child with their family, beginning at the onset of the child welfare investigation and throughout the life of the case.

### III. PROTOCOL FOR YOUTH MISSING FROM CARE/PLACEMENT

#### A. Immediate Notification Requirements

CFS Social Workers must immediately, but no later than 24 hours from the time of receipt of the information, notify specified entities and persons when a dependency-involved youth or NMD has run away or is otherwise missing from their approved resource home or placement facility. Notices must include the contact information for the social worker and their supervisor. The following entities and persons must be notified within the required timeframe:

**1. The local law enforcement agency, and in the case of an Indian youth, any tribal law enforcement agency for the youth's Tribe.**

Contacting local law enforcement may be done in collaboration with the youth's resource caregiver, as appropriate. Social Workers should also notify the law enforcement agency in the county where the parent(s), legal guardian(s), or Indian custodian reside.

**Note:** although a NMD may be missing from an approved placement, an assessment of their total circumstances makes the determination of whether they left placement voluntarily or are in a location that may pose a risk. If there is a reasonable suspicion that the NMD is at risk of substantial harm, law enforcement should be contacted so a Missing Person's Report can be filed. All other

noticing requirements as applicable should be inclusive of NMDs.

2. **The child's/youth's or NMD's parents, legal guardians, or Indian custodians**, unless parental or guardian notification has been limited or terminated by the Juvenile Court.
3. **The attorneys for the parents, legal guardians, or Indian custodians** unless notification of the parents, guardians, or Indian custodians has been limited or terminated by the Juvenile Court.
4. **The child's/youth's or NMD's attorney**, pursuant to [WIC section 317\(c\)](#) or [WIC section 634](#).
5. **The child's/youth's or NMD's Court-Appointed Child Advocate**, if one has been appointed.
6. **The court of jurisdiction**. Notification to the Juvenile Court will involve the completion of an Ex Parte Application requesting the Juvenile Court order a protective custody warrant for the foster youth's detention because they are missing from placement. Standard court report submission procedures must be followed. Note: Protective Custody warrants do not apply to NMDs.
7. **The child's/youth's or NMD's Tribe or Tribal Representative**, if the child/youth or NMD is, or may be, an Indian child.
8. **Any known sibling of the child/youth or NMD who is ten (10) years of age or older and adjudged to be a dependent youth of the Juvenile Court**, if such notice would not be contrary to their safety and well-being. Notice to any siblings should be provided in a trauma-informed manner.
9. **The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), when the youth is discovered to be missing from care AND is reasonably believed to be the victim of or at-risk of being the victim of commercial sexual exploitation**. Refer to *III.B.* for further guidance on NCMEC information sharing. Reporting to NCMEC is required for dependency-involved youth who have experienced or are at-risk of CSE, but this does not prohibit child welfare staff from contacting NCMEC on behalf of foster youth missing from care who have not been sexually exploited or are at risk of exploitation.

## **B. Information Sharing with NCMEC**

1. **Making the Report to NCMEC**. Child welfare agencies are permitted to disclose identifying information to NCMEC for the purpose of locating missing foster youth. Notifying NCMEC is required for dependency-involved youth reasonably believed to be a victim or at-risk of commercial sexual exploitation. Reports must be made no later than 24

hours from the time it is known a youth is missing. Reports can be made via the [NCMEC Online Report](#) or 1-800-THE-LOST® (1-800-843-5678).

Information the Social Worker can expect NCMEC to request to aid in their recovery efforts includes, but is not limited to:

- A description of the youth's physical features and attributes (i.e., hair color, eye color, height, weight, ethnicity, race, complexion, and identifiers such as eyeglasses, braces, body piercings, etc.)
- General health information and any endangerment information, such as medical or mental health conditions, prescription medications, youth's pregnancy status, suicidal tendencies, vulnerability to being sex trafficked or exploited, and other risk factors, to the extent such information is released in compliance with other applicable laws
- Information about whether the youth is or may be an Indian child, including the name of the youth's Tribe
- A photo of the missing youth
- Circumstances surrounding the missing event

Similar information will be asked when the Social Worker provides a report to law enforcement. Refer to the [NCMEC Case Worker Guide to Reporting Missing Children](#) for further direction on information NCMEC considers important to collect when a foster youth is reported missing.

Note: although NMDs in Extended Foster Care are no longer considered children under federal law, NCMEC may be able to accept reports for missing young adults between 18 and 20 years of age under certain circumstances. Please contact the CFS CSEC Services Team at [cfcsec@ehsd.cccounty.us](mailto:cfcsec@ehsd.cccounty.us) to determine if a NMD on your caseload who meets "missing from care" status is eligible for NCMEC resources.

- 2. Ongoing Communication with NCMEC.** To support the safe recovery of missing foster youth, Social Workers are mandated to maintain regular communication with NCMEC to inquire about updates, and share any new information they obtain (communication should also be maintained with applicable law enforcement agencies, including tribal law enforcement). Information to be shared with NCMEC if developments become known to the Social Worker may include, but are not limited to:

- The location of the youth, or a previous recent location
- Names of individuals recently in contact with the youth
- Any new social media accounts/handles of the youth or recently uploaded information on existing accounts/handles

- Any new photos obtained from individuals in contact with the youth or from social media

### **C. Active Efforts When an Indian Child/Youth is Missing from Care**

The provision of active efforts in child welfare practice supports timelier reunification, and services and resources that are reflective of a family's cultural values and practices. When a youth is missing from care, it is the responsibility of CFS to work collaboratively with the Indian youth's tribe. In addition to providing notice to the Tribe no later than 24 hours after receiving information that the foster child/youth has gone missing from placement, the Social Worker should collaborate with the tribal representative on efforts to locate the child/youth, regularly update the Tribe on the child's/youth's status, and continue to inform and invite the Tribe to any planned Child and Family Team (CFT) or Youth Transition Meetings (YTMs). When the child/youth is located, the Social Worker must ensure available placement options are consistent with ICWA mandates.

All active efforts must be documented thoroughly and accurately in CWS/CMS, and in court reports. Refer to [DM 31-608 Indian Child Welfare Act \(ICWA\)](#).

### **D. Search Efforts**

Efforts to expeditiously locate a youth/NMD who is missing from care should be immediate and ongoing. Such efforts include, but are not limited to:

- Call and text the youth/NMD's cell phone if they have one, as well as their email address if available.
- Contact and continue to seek information from biological or step parents, guardians, Indian custodians, Tribal representatives, relatives, extended family members, current and former caregivers, other CFS staff, teachers, therapists, youth advocates, mentors, attorneys, other natural supports, and anyone the youth/NMD considers important to them (i.e. friends) who may have information about their whereabouts. Ensure these parties have the Social Worker's contact information so they can report back if any updates are obtained.
- Complete the [Missing from Care Referral Form](#) and submit it to the CFS CSEC Services Team at [cjscsec@ehsd.cccounty.us](mailto:cjscsec@ehsd.cccounty.us) for processing. CFS contracts with a recovery services organization who specialize in search and recovery efforts, and utilize a holistic, trauma-informed approach to encourage foster youth to return to care when they are located. Referrals can be made for foster youth even if they are not CSE or at risk of CSE.

- Note: the contracted Case Specialist who is assigned to the referral will partner closely with the youth/NMD's CFS Social Worker. The Social Worker is expected to communicate timely with the Case Specialist, and to also continue to maintain accountability for attempting to locate a youth/NMD whose whereabouts are unknown.
- Physically check locations and relevant addresses the youth could potentially be. If the youth has a history of exiting placement, they may have gone to a location they were previously found.
- Ask other children/youth in the placement that the youth exited if they have heard from or know where the youth may be.
- Follow up on leads received regarding the youth's whereabouts.
- Contact emergency shelters, local hospitals, and programs for unhoused youth.
- Complete a police report request (form available in CWS/CMS) to determine if any local law enforcement departments have had contact with the youth/NMD.
- Search public locator databases.
- Consult with the CFS CSEC Services Team, who can facilitate connections with local agencies who participate in Multi-Disciplinary Teams focused on survivor well-being and protective factors.

## E. Documentation Requirements

### 1. Child Welfare System/Case Management System (CWS/CMS).

- **Placement Change Notification.** To ensure the safety of children/youth and NMDs, it is critical that placement and/or location information is always accounted for in CWS/CMS. Per existing practice, Social Workers must document any placement changes on the [Clerical Specialist \(Tech\) Form \(CWS 16\)](#) and provide the completed form to a Children's Services Clerical Specialist, who will enter the updated information in the Placement Management Section. For foster youth who are absent/missing from care, this includes circumstances where:
  - (1) The youth's whereabouts are unknown
  - (2) The youth's whereabouts are known (e.g., the youth exited their placement but has been in communication with their Social Worker)
  - (3) The youth went absent from care or left their placement without permission prior to the Jurisdictional Hearing and

before the first out-of-home placement was created within the Placement Episode

**(4) The youth has been abducted**

For step-by-step guidance on documentation requirements to indicate a youth/NMD is missing from care or has been abducted, refer to [Documenting Placements in CWS/CMS Protocol](#) and [Quick Guide: Documenting Runaways/Missing from Care in CWS/CMS](#).

- **Contact Notebook Requirements.** Documentation in the contact notes in CWS/CMS should include confirmation that the required notices were completed within 24 hours, NCMEC was contacted (if appropriate), and all ongoing efforts to locate a missing youth. Refer to *Section D.* for search effort responsibilities.
- 2. Contact the CFS Placement Change Hotline,** per existing placement change procedures, to advise that the youth has exited their placement. Refer to the [Placement Change Hotline Process Desk Guide](#) for support. Additionally, if a Bed Hold is initiated during the temporary absence, the Social Worker should ensure appropriate communication occurs between their Social Work Supervisor, Division Manager, and the Shelter Care Unit, including any follow-up communication with Shelter Care should the youth not return to the placement facility within the specified timeframe. Refer to [DM 31-475 Bed Holds](#).
- 3. Court Reports**  
Similar to contact note requirements, all efforts to locate a foster youth or NMD should be included in each status review report due to the Juvenile Court during the period of time the youth/NMD is absent from care.

#### IV. ENGAGEMENT

When the Social Worker is able to make contact with a youth/NMD who is missing from care, utilizing a harm reduction, whole-person care approach to engage with the youth/NMD will support a return to care. Harm reduction is aimed at reducing high-risk behaviors over time, rather than trying to force a youth/NMD back into placement, which may not be successful. The approach requires patience, consistency, and recognition that lasting change takes time, and may involve set-backs. Harm reduction strategies may include, but are not limited to:

- Develop a safety plan with the youth/NMD they can utilize while away from placement, including people and services the youth/NMD can contact if they

feel unsafe or need immediate support. Incorporate solution-focused questions to enable the youth to be the lead in creating their safety plan.

- Contact the CFS CSEC Services Team to obtain an emergency backpack that can be provided to the youth/NMD. The backpacks are filled with culturally responsive, SOGIE-affirming personal, self-care, and harm reduction items.
- Continue to communicate with the youth/NMD via phone, text, or email. Coordinate communication with the youth's CFT members, including the youth's Tribe in the case of an Indian youth, and/or network of support to ensure the youth does not become overwhelmed by too many contact attempts.
- Continue to assess placement options with Shelter Care. Inquire with the youth about whom they would like to live with. If a particular placement/individual is not a viable option, consider how to incorporate certain aspects of the preferred placement into other potential placement options, or how to provide those supports through other community providers or relationships (i.e., visitation).

A youth's dependency status must be maintained even if: 1) their whereabouts are known but they do not wish to cooperate with the Bureau and return to placement; or 2) their whereabouts have been unknown for an extended period of time. The decision to terminate jurisdiction is at the discretion of the Juvenile Court.

Per WIC § 391, the Juvenile Court may terminate dependency jurisdiction over a NMD if the Court finds after reasonable and documented efforts that the NMD cannot be located. If an eligible nonminor wishes to re-enter Extended Foster Care, follow the procedures outlined in [DM 31-6501 Extended Foster Care: Re-Entry](#).

## V. RETURN TO CARE/PLACEMENT

**A. Safety and Well-Being.** When a youth/NMD returns to care, immediate steps must be taken to support their health, safety, and well-being. The Social Worker should complete a trauma-informed, thorough review of the youth/NMD's experiences while absent from care so appropriate care and referrals to supportive services can be identified. Items to be addressed include, but are not limited to:

- Basic needs provision (i.e., food, clothing)
- Mental health needs, and any medical care needs
- Assess for indicators of sexual exploitation
- Assess for indicators of labor trafficking
- Experience while missing from care (i.e. where did the youth/NMD stay and with whom, did they experience any injuries or illnesses, how did they take care of themselves, any high-risk behaviors, sexual activity, etc.)
  - The purpose of inquiring about sexual activity is to determine if there is a need for follow-up care due to disclosure of sexual assault

or exploitation. Refer to [DM 31-925 Reproductive and Sexual Health Education and Rights for Foster Youth](#).

- Make efforts to reinstate any visitation orders previously in place
- Notify all required parties (refer to *Section III.A.*)
  - In compliance with Judicial processes, the Social Worker must recall the Protective Custody Warrant and notify the Court
  - Law enforcement and NCMEC should be contacted as soon as possible so that their efforts to locate the youth or NMD can be suspended
- Contact Shelter Care so an appropriate placement can be identified. In consultation with the youth/NMD, Supervisor, Division Manager, and CFT members, determine if returning to the previous out-of-home placement or a new placement is in the youth's best interests.
- Create an updated safety plan, utilizing harm reduction approaches, to encourage the youth/NMD to remain in care. Input from the CFT should be considered in developing the safety plan.
- Ensure all return to care efforts and activities are documented in CWS/CMS, and shared as appropriate in court reports.

## VI. Assessment of Factors that Led to Absence from Care.

Social Workers are required to engage with youth and NMDs to determine the primary factors that contributed to leaving placement. For additional support, Social Workers can partner with the recovery services provider, and for CSE youth/NMDs, consult with the CFS CSEC Services Team. Conversations can also occur in team-based settings (i.e., CFT meetings and YTM). Ensure contacts with the youth/NMD, and any activities, services, supports put in place are documented in CWS/CMS, and appropriate updates are provided in future court reports. Questions the Social Worker should explore with the youth/NMD include, but are not limited to:

- What led to the youth/NMD leaving their placement voluntarily?
- Did the youth/NMD feel the placement met their needs? Why or why not?
- Was there an incident or precipitating event that led to the youth/NMD leaving their placement?
- Was there anything that could have made it easier for the youth/NMD to want to remain in their placement?
- What services and supports can be put in place to strengthen and maintain the placement?
- How can the youth's strengths be built upon and their short-term and long-term needs be addressed so they feel safe, cared for, and comfortable in placement?

## VII. Victim/Survivor of CSE While Absent from Placement

Youth and NMDs who go missing from placement are at an increased risk of sexual exploitation. If sexual exploitation indicators are identified, or a youth is identified to be at risk of CSE per [DM 31-083 Commercially Sexually Exploited Children and Youth](#), and it is determined a CSEC Services Referral has not previously been submitted, a referral must be made as soon as possible to the CFS CSEC Services Team. Social Workers will work in partnership with the CFS CSEC Program Coordinator, and an assigned Case Specialist from the contracted service provider. If the youth's situation is urgent, or further consultation is needed, available options include:

- Contact the CFS CSEC Program Coordinator at [cpscsec@ehsd.cccounty.us](mailto:cpscsec@ehsd.cccounty.us).
- Schedule a CSEC/Human Trafficking Multi-Disciplinary Team meeting to collaborate with CSEC community partners/resources. Complete the [Human Trafficking Multidisciplinary Team \(MDT\) Case Nomination Form \(CSEC 05\)](#) and send it to the Family Justice Center coordinator listed on the referral form.
- Schedule a CFT meeting.
- For urgent or immediate clinical consultation, contact the Community Violence Solutions (CVS) 24-Hour Crisis Line at 1-800-670-7273.

Note: commercial sexual exploitation child welfare requirements include identifying children/youth who are, or are at risk of sexual exploitation; documenting this population in CWS/CMS to support federal data collection and reporting; determining appropriate CSE services, and being trained in identifying, documenting; and determining appropriate services for CSE children/youth. Awareness of CSE regularly intersects with the provision of harm reduction and engagement strategies for youth/NMDs who are missing from care. Refer to [CSEC CWS/CMS Quick Guide \(CSEC 01\)](#) [CSEC Resource Guide \(CSEC 02\)](#) for documentation support.

## VIII. RESOURCES

[CFT Referral Form \(available in CWS/CMS\)](#)  
[CSEC CWS/CMS Quick Guide \(CSEC 01\)](#) [CSEC Resource Guide \(CSEC 02\)](#)  
[Human Trafficking Terminology \(CSEC 03\)](#) [CSEC Services Referral Form \(CSEC 04\)](#)  
[Human Trafficking Multidisciplinary Team \(MDT\) Case Nomination Form \(CSEC 05\)](#)  
[Employment and Human Services Department CSEC Page](#)  
[Contra Costa Alliance to End Abuse Contra Costa Human Trafficking Coalition](#)  
[CSEC-Related Advocacy Organizations](#)  
[Interagency Protocol for Serving Commercially Sexually Exploited Children in Contra Costa County](#)  
[Love Never Fails Referral Form](#)  
[Practice Guide: Placement Change Hotline Process Eligibility Worker, Social Worker,](#)

[and Clerical Instructions](#)  
[Documenting Placements in CWS/CMS Protocol](#)  
[Quick Guide: Documenting Runaways/Missing from Care in CWS/CMS](#)  
[NCMEC Case Worker Guide to Reporting Missing Children](#)  
[NCMEC Online Report](#)

## IX. REFERENCES

[ACL 25-67 Youth Who Are Missing And/Or Run Away From Care And Protocol Development](#)  
[ACL 25-06 Commercially Sexually Exploited Children Program Fiscal Year 2024-25 Allocation Methodology And New National Center For Missing And Exploited Children And Law Enforcement Reporting Requirements](#)  
[ACL 20-105 Assembly Bill 2207: Resource Guide of Model Policies, Protocols and Procedures to Identify, Document, Determine Appropriate Services, and Locate a Youth Who is At-Risk for, or a Victim of, Commercial Sexual Exploitation](#)  
[ACL 16-85 Statewide Policies and Procedures to Prevent Child Sex Trafficking](#)  
[ACL 16-15 Youth Who Are Missing From Foster Care](#)  
[ACL 16-08 Federal Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act](#)  
[ACL 14-62 Commercially Sexually Exploited Children \(CSEC\) Program](#)  
[ACIN I-14-19 Recommended Practices For Serving Commercially Sexually Exploited Children \(CSEC\) Missing From Care](#)  
[ACIN I-59-18 Introduction to the Harm Reduction Strategies Series Regarding Commercially Sexually Exploited Children](#)  
[DM 31-083 Commercially Sexually Exploited Children and Youth](#)  
[DM 31-190 Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths \(CANS\)](#)  
[DM 31-200 Child and Family Team Meetings Policy](#)  
[DM 31-332 Quality Contacts](#)  
[DM 31-608 Indian Child Welfare Act \(ICWA\)](#)  
[DM 31-907 Structured Decision Making \(SDM\)](#)  
[DM 31-925 Reproductive and Sexual Health Education and Rights for Foster Youth](#)  
[Assembly Bill \(AB\) No. 2108](#)  
[Penal Code 11165.1, Section 236.1](#)  
[Penal Code 11166](#)  
[Public Law 117-348](#)  
[Welfare and Institutions Code 827.14](#)  
[Welfare and Institutions Code 16501.35](#)  
[Welfare and Institutions Code 18960-18964](#)