

# MISSING FROM CARE AND/OR RUNAWAY YOUTH

## OVERVIEW

Children missing from care and/or runaway youth and non-minor dependents (NMD) are vulnerable to multiple risks and may experience, or engage in, harmful behaviors. It is the policy of El Dorado County Child Welfare Services (CWS) in accordance with Federal and State regulations to work with community partners to assist in locating missing/runaway children and NMDs in open cases to create safety for the children and youth in our care. ACL 16-15 requires counties to have protocols to promptly locate children and NMDs missing from foster care and to assess their safety, well-being, and experiences while absent, including potential trafficking or exploitation. Social workers will employ non-punitive engagement, documentation of efforts and reassessment of service and placements to address the underlying reasons for the youth's absence. The county has developed and implemented protocols for locating and responding to youth who are missing and/or running away from care in accordance with ACL 25-67.

## DEFINITIONS

**Missing Child:** The WIC section 16501.35(c)(1) defines missing from foster care as “when the whereabouts of a child subject to an order of foster care placement are unknown to the county child welfare agency or probation department, or when the county child welfare agency or probation department has located a child subject to an order of foster care placement in a location not approved by the court that may pose a risk to the child, taking into account the age, intelligence, mental functioning, and physical condition of the child.”

If a dependent child runs away, but his/her whereabouts are known to the social worker (SW), (e.g., left the approved placement and is with a friend or family member, refusing to return to his/her placement) the child is to be considered missing from foster care.

As authorized within WIC §'s 300 and 305, if a child runs away prior to a Detention hearing and the case remains open, the instructions within this guideline apply.

Consistent with ACL 12-12, the county will use intensive, individualized services to preserve placements and address behavioral or safety concerns through support and engagement, rather than placement disruption or punitive responses.

**Missing NMD:** In the case of a nonminor dependent (NMD), this definition shall only apply if based on the totality of the circumstances, the county child welfare agency or probation department suspects that the nonminor dependent did not voluntarily leave foster care or is at risk of substantial harm (WIC section 16501.35(c)(2)).

## TIPS, NOTES AND LINKS

### State Letters:

[ACL 25-67](#)

[ACL 16-85](#)

[ACL 16-15](#)

[ACL 12-12](#)

[ACIN I-28-19](#)

[ACIN I-29-18](#)

[ACIN I-13-17](#)

### Regulations:

[WIC 224.1](#)

[WIC 827.14](#)

[WIC 16501.35](#)

[PEN section  
11166\(j\)\(3\)](#)

### NCMEC Links:

[NCMEC Online Report](#)

[NCMEC Information](#)

[NCMEC “Sound Policy  
and Practice  
Recommendations”](#)

[NCMEC “Case Worker  
Guide to Reporting  
Missing Children”](#)

For NMDs, the determination is whether they are missing or in a location that could pose a risk to them. As young adults, this assessment is based on the totality of the circumstances and whether the NMD left foster care voluntarily or is at-risk of substantial harm.

**Non-Dependent Children:** When a non-dependent child participating in voluntary placement, voluntary family maintenance (VFM), or Non-Dependent Legal Guardianship (NDLG) runs away, the assigned SW will immediately assess safety, ensure the parent or legal guardian and caregiver are notified, and confirm that a missing person report is made when appropriate. The SW will provide the parent/legal guardian with information and resources that may be used to locate the child, including help in filing a Missing Person's Report with law enforcement and contact information for the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. Because the child is not court-dependent, the worker cannot compel the child's return but must support the parent or guardian in locating the child, maintaining engagement, and addressing safety concerns using non-punitive, harm reduction practices. The SW will document all actions taken, reassess whether voluntary services remain sufficient to ensure the child's safety and consult with a supervisor if risks escalate and court intervention may be necessary.

## PROCEDURES

### 1. Prevention/ Intervention

Honest discussion is important and should include legitimate reasons why the youth should stay in their placement, as well as the understanding and acknowledgment that a youth may decide to leave regardless. These discussions should include how a youth can maintain their own safety while missing from care.

- a. SWs are encouraged to assess the need for runaway/AWOL intervention for a dependent child or NMD, with consideration to the child's age and case circumstances, through:
  - i. Exploration of thoughts or desires of running.
  - ii. Assessment of high-risk triggers or precipitating events (e.g., substance use, bullying, recent sexual orientation or gender identity disclosure, physical/emotional safety jeopardized, prior history, recent placement, etc.).
  - iii. Discussion of alternatives, available support, possible interventions and/or harm reduction informed safety plans that can be put in place, etc.
    1. Harm reduction informed safety plans around running away should include:
      - a. Identified alternatives to child/youth leaving care,
      - b. Emergency contact information,
      - c. Social media contact information,
      - d. Name and contact information for people the youth agreed to check-in with while away from care, and
      - e. Safe ways to meet basic needs and receive services while away from care.
        - i. If local resources for basic needs are limited, consider providing the youth with an emergency bag including items such as hygiene products, reproductive and sexual health products, a first aid kit, bus passes, and contact information to assist in returning to care.
    - iv. Education on the dangers and consequences of being on the street (i.e., homelessness)
    - v. Convening a staffing or Child and Family Team (CFT) meeting, as appropriate
    - vi. Discussion with parent/caregiver about child/youth's thoughts or history of running, supports, and/or intervention plans
    - vii. Consultation with County Counsel regarding court-related options

### 2. Notification Requirements

- a. As soon as the SW receives information that the minor or NMD is missing from foster care but no longer than 24 hours, the SW will notify the following people:

- i. The child's or NMD's parents, Indian custodians, or legal guardians unless notification of the parents, guardians or Indian custodians has been limited or terminated by the court.
  - ii. The attorneys for the child's or NMD's parents, Indian custodians, or legal guardians unless notification of the parents, guardians or Indian custodians has been limited or terminated by the court.
  - iii. The child's or NMD's attorney
  - iv. The child's or NMD's Court-Appointed Special Advocate (CASA), if one has been appointed
  - v. The court of jurisdiction through the filing of an AWOL warrant
  - vi. The child's or NMD's Tribe or Tribal Representative, if the child or nonminor dependent is, or may be, an Indian child.
    1. When an Indian child is missing from foster care follow ACL 16-15 locating protocols while continuing to meet ICWA requirements under ACL 18-109, including prompt tribal notification, documented active efforts (ACL 21-22), culturally appropriate engagement, and adherence to placement preferences.
  - vii. Any known sibling of the child or NMD who is 10 years of age or older and adjudged to be a dependent of the juvenile court, if such notice would not be contrary to the safety and well-being of that sibling. Notice to siblings shall be provided in a trauma-informed manner.
  - viii. The local law enforcement agency and in the case of an Indian child any tribal law enforcement agency for the child's Tribe. It is recommended that if the child is placed outside of the jurisdictional county, that law enforcement should be notified in the jurisdictional county, where the parent(s), legal guardian(s) or Indian custodian reside.
- b. These notices will include contact information for the case carrying SW and their supervisor.
- c. When the missing child/youth is reasonably believed to be the victim of or is at-risk of being the victim of Commercial Sexual Exploitation (CSE) a report should also be made to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) and law enforcement informed of the risk.
- i. Notify the CSEC Coordinator, who may schedule a CSEC staffing and or Multi-Disciplinary Team meeting as required by our Inter-agency CSEC Protocol.
  - ii. Contact NCMEC by phone or an online report.
    1. Phone: 1-800-THE-LOST (1-800-843-5678)
    2. [NCMEC Online Report](#)
  - iii. Notice to law enforcement and NCMEC will include:
    1. A photo of the missing or abducted child or youth
    2. A description of the child's or youth's physical features, such as height, weight, sex, ethnicity, race, hair color, and eye color
    3. Endangerment information, such as the child's or youth's pregnancy status, prescription medications, suicidal tendencies, vulnerability to being sex trafficked, and other health or risk factors, to the extent such information is released in compliance with other applicable laws.
    4. Information about whether the child or youth is or may be an Indian child, as defined in [WIC 224.1](#), including the name of the child's Tribe.
- d. The SW will maintain regular communication with CSEC Coordinator, NCMEC and law enforcement to provide safe recovery of the missing child/youth. This information may include but is not limited to:
- i. The location of the child/youth, or a previous recent location
  - ii. Names of people recently in contact with the child/youth
  - iii. New social media handles of the child/youth or recently uploaded information on existing handles
  - iv. Any new photos obtained from people in contact with the child/youth or from social media
  - v. Any information related to the child/youth's recovery and circumstances related to the recovery.

**3. CWS/CMS Documentation**

- a. If the placement is willing to take the child/youth back, the caregiver placement can be kept open for up to 14 Days. After 14 days of the child/NMD leaving care, enter an end date for the caregiver placement, but DO NOT end the "Placement Episode".
  - i. If the caregiver placement is not willing to take the child/youth back, end date the placement immediately.
- b. All contact attempts and location efforts will be documented in CWS/CMS within 24 hours to keep records as accurate as possible.
- c. For instructions on how to document that a child/youth or NMD is missing from care, refer to [ACL 25-67](#) Attachment A.

**4. NMD Consideration**

- a. A NMD may be runaway/missing from care and still meeting the NMD requirements. The case will remain open until the NMD requests the case be closed or the NMD does not meet requirements. In the meantime, the NMD will continue to receive all benefits and services, and the SW will continue outreach and engagement.
- b. If once the case is closed the NMD decides to re-engage services at any point the regular process for re-entry will be followed (see ACL 12-12).

**5. Location Efforts**

- a. Immediate efforts will be made by the assigned SW to locate a missing child/youth. Additionally, as information is provided, but no less frequently than once monthly, the SW will attempt to locate the child/NMD. These efforts may include, but are not limited to:
  - i. Contacting significant people in the child/NMD's life (e.g., parents, siblings, relatives, friends, former caregivers, former and current schools and service providers, etc.)
  - ii. Request the caregiver and/or parent make similar inquiries, as appropriate, and report back information obtained
  - iii. Ask Family Finding Placement worker to conduct family finding activities to determine other relatives with whom the child/youth may be staying
  - iv. Physically checking places where the child/NMD is likely to be
  - v. Following up on leads received regarding possible whereabouts
  - vi. Conducting visits to relevant addresses, or requesting law enforcement conduct a welfare check
  - vii. Search social media websites and search public locator databases
- b. All efforts to locate the child/youth will be documented in a CWS/CMS case contact and in each status, review filed with the Court during the child/youth's absence.

**6. When the child/youth is located**

- a. When the child/youth is located, it is the responsibility of the caseworker to arrange for the return of the youth to care and assist in stabilization
- b. If the child/youth does not want to return to the placement, the SW will engage in the following harm reduction activities:
  - i. Attempt often to contact the youth via text, phone, email and/or social media. Coordinate communication with the child/youth's CFT members, including the child/youth's Tribe in the case of an Indian child/youth, and/or network of support to ensure the youth does not become overwhelmed by too many attempts to communicate
  - ii. Remain neutral and focused on their well-being. Be honest, express concern, but refrain from language that is punitive or condescending. Allow child/youth to have voice and choice in their return, exploring what the youth feel is in their best interest
  - iii. Discuss the possibility of convening a CFT meeting with the child/youth identifying who they want to participate in the meeting

- iv. Create a plan for return, broken down by safe and achievable steps, with the child/youth leading the plan when ready. Also consider input by the CFT in developing this plan.
- v. Should there be suspicion that the child/youth is in immediate danger, contact law enforcement.
- vi. NMDs refusal to return to initial placement does not end foster care jurisdiction or services; rather it requires enhanced engagement, exploration of voluntary placement alternatives, and respect for the NMD's legal right to choose continued participation in extended foster care.
  - 1. A placement disruption without documented service efforts may be viewed as a lack of reasonable efforts

7. **When the child/youth returns to placement**

- a. The assigned SW will notify all parties noticed above and the CFT that the child/youth has returned to placement.
- b. The assigned SW will make a face-to-face contact with the child/youth as soon as possible and no more than three business days after the child/youth returns to placement.
  - i. Determine the factors that lead to the child/youth being absent from placement and what actions can be taken to address those factors going forward
  - ii. Determine the child/youth's experiences while absent from care, including whether child/youth is a victim of sex trafficking.
    - 1. If the child/youth experienced CSE, follow the [CSEC guideline](#).
  - iii. All information gathered will be recorded in CWS/CMS case contacts by the SW.
- c. The SW will be mindful of allowing the youth time and space to decompress and stabilize following their time away.
- d. A debriefing interview will ideally be conducted by an adult of the youth's choosing within three days of their return. Whenever possible the interview will be in a safe, neutral space. This interview will be conversational, using open-ended questions and listening carefully to the child/youth.
- e. SW will work with CFT to update the child/youth's CANS as necessary.
- f. SW will work with the child/youth, placement, and CFT to provide the child/youth appropriate services to address the issues that led to the child/youth leaving the placement and any trauma experienced by the child/youth during their time away.