

## DSS Policy and Procedure Guide

Division 03: Child Welfare

Chapter 04: Ongoing Case Management/Practice

Item 001: Identification, Engagement & Support for At-Risk, Missing, and Trafficking Vulnerable Youth in Child Welfare Services

Suggested changes send to: [DSS PSOA](#) Mailbox

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References: Division 31 Regulations [31-320.51](#) and [31-320.711](#); Welfare and Institutions 300 Codes; [WIC§ 827.14](#); California Penal Codes; All County Letter (ACL) [ACL 12-12](#); [ACL 16-08](#); [ACL 16-15](#); [ACL16-49](#); [ACL 16-74](#); [ACL 16-85](#); [ACL 19-26](#); [20-142](#); [ACL 22-100](#); [ACL 23-32](#); [ACL 24-18](#); [ACL 25-06](#); [ACIN I-59-18](#); [ACIN I-28-19](#); [ACL 25-67](#);

**Revisions in red**

Replaces Issue: **January 20, 2026**

[Definitions/Procedure/Screening/Interviewing Tips/Notification Process When Missing or Absent from Placement/Notification Process for child/youth impacted by Human Trafficking/Documentation/When a Missing Child/Youth or NMD is Located/](#)

### Preamble

Child Welfare Policy and Procedure Guides (PPG) are meant to be used as tools to relay best practice and staff expectations. As a Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI) Agency, our policies are designed around our shared principles: every child deserves excellent parenting and meaningful relationships; policy and practice informed by research; and putting those with lived experience at the center of policy change. It is understood that specific case scenarios may not always align themselves with the stated practices and that at all times what is of paramount importance is the Safety and Well-being of the children we are charged to protect.

### Policy

The Department of Social Services (DSS), Child Welfare Services (CWS) is to identify, document and determine services related to child sex trafficking prevention. In addition, CWS is to provide notice and comply with notification timelines when a CWS involved child/youth or non-minor dependent (NMD) is missing from care and in collaboration with the Court, law enforcement and tribal government will diligently search for and discover the whereabouts of a child/youth missing from care and provide services to ensure their safety, well-being, permanence and stability. CWS-involved youth include both children under 18 as well as NMDs.

### Purpose

This PPG provides guidelines to CWS staff to identify, document, implement outreach, ensure service provision, assessment of, and case planning for missing, at-risk, and trafficking vulnerable CWS-involved children and youth and to comply with legal notification requirements of those

children and youth who chronically are on an unauthorized absence from placement, missing or abducted from out of home care.

## **Definitions**

**CWS-involved:** Refers to a child, youth, or NMD who has either a petition filed in juvenile dependency court or an active or open case (i.e. voluntary services and those receiving services through the Kinship Guardianship Assistance Payment (KinGAP) and the Adoption Assistance Program (AAP)).

**Harm Reduction:** Is an evidence-based approach that centers around the idea that people may engage in risky behaviors, and aims to minimize the negative health, social, and economic consequences associated with those behaviors, rather than solely focusing on their complete cessation.

**Sex Trafficking Victim:** Is an individual subject to the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purposes of a commercial sex act.

**Provision (as it relates to sex trafficking):** Is the provision of food, shelter or payment to a child/youth/NMD in exchange for the performance of any sexual act.

**Labor Trafficking:** Is a severe form of labor exploitation that uses force, fraud or coercion to compel a person to work or perform services.

**Human Trafficking:** Is the unlawful act of transporting or coercing people in order to benefit from their work or service, typically in the form of forced labor or sexual exploitation.

**Human Trafficking Multi-Disciplinary Team (MDT):** Is a group of individuals representative of the local law enforcement agency, CWS, Probation, and community partners.

**Human Trafficking Multi-Disciplinary Teaming:** Is a meeting held monthly to review identified youth impacted by trafficking who have an open case with CWS or Probation. Any Social Worker (SW) currently working with a youth impacted by human trafficking will be invited to attend this state mandated meeting.

## **Procedure**

### **SW Responsibilities**

CWS staff must ensure that all children and youth involved in CWS are screened for indicators of Commercial Sexual Exploitation (CSEC) and have a current photograph uploaded in the statewide automated system. A new photograph must be taken and uploaded as soon as possible or within 30 days of placement and at least annually thereafter, or more frequently if there is a significant change in the child/youth's appearance due to growth or development. When appropriate, the child/youth's resource parent may be asked to assist in taking updated photographs.

When a child or youth is identified as an Indian child, active efforts must be made in accordance with [All County Letter \(ACL\) 24-18](#). Active efforts are distinguished from reasonable efforts in that CWS staff must consider the prevailing social and cultural conditions and way of life of the child/youth's tribe. Active efforts are to be tailored to the specific needs of the child/youth. Example of active efforts include reaching out to the child/youth's family, extended family, the Tribe, and Native American services. Active efforts may also mean utilizing services not traditionally referred to by staff.

Tribal involvement is essential and must be maintained throughout the process [[ACL 25-67](#)]. This includes collaborating with the tribe to locate the child or youth and providing regular updates regarding their status. The tribe may possess critical information that can aid in locating the child or youth. Once the child or youth is located, placement decisions must follow the tribe's placement preferences.

### **Emergency Response (ER)**

When a referral is received indicating a child or youth has been commercially sexually exploited the referral shall be tracked by using the Special Project Code S-CSEC Referral [[ACL 16-74](#)] regardless of the disposition. If an in-person investigation is required, the ER SW shall assess the situation and have in-person contact with the child or youth who is alleged to be exploited and at least one adult who has information regarding the allegations [[ACL 16-85](#)].

If an ER SW realizes, after responding to a referral that results in an opening of a CWS case, that the family has one or more human trafficking victims, the ER SW can email the [CWS CSEC](#) mailbox for help.

Once a case has transferred from ER to the ongoing SW, the ongoing SW will complete the following:

- Screen the child/youth using the Human Trafficking (HT) screening tool for behaviors that may indicate commercial sexual exploitation.
- If applicable, refer the child/youth to the Human Trafficking Unit
- Recommend and collaborate with the assigned SW to provide appropriate services to the child/youth if applicable.

### **Ongoing Case Management**

Children/youth in the Child Welfare system are often targeted by exploiters. If it is suspected or becomes known that a child/youth is at risk or has been a victim of human trafficking, the assigned SW will interview, assess, and refer accordingly. In addition, the SW is to make the appropriate referral to the Hotline, as needed.

## Screening

SWs must identify children/youth/NMD receiving child welfare services who are or are at risk of becoming victims of commercial sexual exploitation (CSE) and determine appropriate services for those identified as victims or at risk of CSE [[ACL 16-85](#)]. These include children/youths who are:

- In Foster Care and under age 18 (or up to age 21 if they are receiving Title IV-E foster care assistance)
- Have not been removed from the home but for whom CWS has an open case (including candidates for foster care)
- Have run away from foster care, provided they have not yet reached age 21 when Title IV-assistance ends or have not had their dependency case dismissed.

SWs are to screen the child/youth/NMD for behaviors that may indicate CSE. Ensure documentation is accurately reflected in the statewide automated system [[ACL 16-15](#)]. Ensure the correct CSEC data grid is documented as follows:

- CSEC At Risk
- CSEC Victim in Open Case not in Foster Care
- CSEC Victim Before Foster Care
- CSEC Victim During Foster Care
- CSEC Victim While Absent from Placement
- CSEC Victim with Closed Case, Rcv ILP Svcs

Within 24 hours of identifying that the child is a victim of CSE report the information to the local law enforcement agency.

Advise the Human Trafficking unit by sending an email to the CWS CSEC mailbox to assist with linkages to services as well as referral of the child/youth to the Human Trafficking MDT.

## Interviewing Tips

When interviewing a child/youth who may be a victim of human trafficking, present with a non-judgmental and respectful manner. Ensure the child/youth's basic needs are met prior to the interview, understanding it is not contingent on their participation in the interview.

For children/youth determined to have been impacted by Human Trafficking:

- Email the [CWS CSEC](#) mailbox to coordinate services.
- Assess their safety from the exploiter. Keep this in mind for placement options if the child/youth is removed.
- Ensure that the child/youth's medical needs are met. If needed, contact one of the Department's [Public Health Nurses](#) (PHNs) to help.
- Ensure that the child/youth's mental health needs are met.

Recognize that the child/youth may run many times back to their life of being exploited (refer to the Stages of Change tool).

### **Notification Process When Missing or Absent from Placement**

When a Child/Youth Becomes Missing or are on Unauthorized Absence from Placement staff are to ensure that a report is made to law enforcement within two hours of child/youth's unauthorized absence from care. Whoever is the first to discover the CWS involved or dependent as missing (i.e., the care provider, Child Welfare staff, etc.) should contact law enforcement. The assigned SW shall obtain the police report number.

Immediately (within two hours and no later than 24 hours) the following must be notified and shall be asked if they have any knowledge of the child/youth or NMD's whereabouts [[ACL 25-06](#) and [25-67](#)]:

- Child/Youth or NMD's parents, guardians or Indian custodians (unless parental notification has been limited or terminated by the Court)
- The child/youth or NMD's attorney
- Attorneys for the parents, legal guardians, or Indian custodians (unless notification of the parents, guardians or Indian custodians has been terminated by the Court.)
- Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA)
- The Court of Jurisdiction
- The Human Trafficking Advocate
- The Tribe or Tribal Representative
- The child/youth or NMD's dependent siblings who are over 10 years of age
- The local law enforcement agency which includes tribal law enforcement agency for the child/youth or NMD's tribe if applicable. The law enforcement agency in the area where the parents, legal guardians or Indian Custodian reside should also be notified if the placement is located outside the jurisdictional county.

**REMINDER:** In Fresno County Dependency Court, the attorneys for the parents, legal guardians, or Indian custodians are typically relieved from representation when the guardianship or parental rights are terminated; this is noted in the minute order from the hearing date from which the release occurred. In addition, parents are also relieved when the youth reach the age of majority (eighteen), unless they are receiving Family Reunification Services.

### **Notification Process for Missing Child/Youth impacted by Human Trafficking:**

When a child/youth/NMD receiving child welfare services who is missing and is believed to be the victim of or is at-risk of being a victim of CSE, or labor trafficking, staff are to ensure that a report is made to the local law enforcement agency within two hours of receiving the information. In addition, staff will call the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) at 1-800-843-5678 (1-800-THE-LOST) or by making an online report at [NCMEC Online Report](#) and provide as much of the following information as possible:

- Child/Youth/NMD's full name
- Child/Youth/NMD's date of birth

- Date child/youth/NMD went missing (to the best of your knowledge)
- City and state from where child/youth went missing
- Parent and/or Guardian (include their contact information, date of birth and language spoken)
- SW and Social Work Supervisor (SWS) information including agency name, and telephone
- Tribal affiliation and tribal representative (name and contact information)
- Local law enforcement report number, agency name and telephone, date the time of the report was made. When available, provide the assigned law enforcement officer's full contact information, including their name, phone number, unit or precinct, and any other relevant details.
- Physical descriptive information (e.g. height, weight, hair and eye color, clothing worn, tattoos, body piercings, etc.)
- The most current photograph of the child/youth or NMD
- Any risks or endangerments to the child/youth or NMD (i.e. pregnancy status, prescription medication, issues related to self-harm, suicidal tendencies, vulnerability to being sex trafficked and other health or risk factors, to the extent such information is released as permitted by applicable laws)
- Circumstances surrounding the incident
- Description of any person who may be with the child/youth or NMD
- In an event in which the SW is not available, always copy the mailbox CWSCSEC@fresnocountyca.gov as a backup contact when communicating by email.

Note: A court order is not necessary to provide information or photographs to NCMEC [[WIC§ 827.14](#)].

In addition, staff must maintain regular communication with NCMEC and law enforcement; in case of an Indian child, this includes tribal law enforcement agencies. An email communication may be completed with NCMEC thru their cyber tipline at <https://report.cybertip.org/>

Ongoing Communication shall include the following:

- The location of the child or youth, or previous recent location
- Names of people recently in contact with the child or youth
- New social media handles of the child or youth or recently uploaded information on existing handles
- Any new photos obtained from people in contact with the child or youth or from social media

Complete and file a Body Attachment with Juvenile Court within 48 hours of learning of the youth missing.

Advise Eligibility staff via the ETA Foster Care Placement mailbox of the youth missing/change in placement and submit a [SOC 158A](#) Foster Child's Data Record and AFDC-FC Certification form. Following PPG 03-04-016 *Administration of Foster Care Payments*, the SW is to send an email notification to Eligibility within 24 hours when an absence from placement occurs and thereafter followed by the SOC 158 (staff may also refer to PPG 45-03-006 *Temporary Absence*) to ensure notification and avoid overpayments. The closing SOC 158A must be submitted no later than the 5<sup>th</sup> day of the absence from placement.

In accordance with PPG 03-11-001, *Incident Reporting and Investigation*, report the youth missing as a Reportable Incident.

### **Documentation**

When documenting the child/youth/NMD for behaviors that may indicate CSE, ensure documentation is accurately reflected in the statewide automated system [[ACL 16-49](#)]. Ensure the correct CSEC data grid that applies is entered. The documentation choices are as follows:

- At Risk
- Victim in Open Case not in Foster Care
- Victim Before Foster Care
- Victim During Foster Care
- Victim While Absent from Placement
- Victim with Closed Case, Rcv ILP Svcs

### Absence from placement

Ensure documentation regarding the absence from placement is accurately reflected in the statewide automated system. [ACL 25-67](#) outlines new requirements and protocols related to children/youths who go missing from care. If the child/youth/NMD is located however not in placement (i.e. CWS office, homeless shelter, Hotel/Motel, etc.) document the child/youth/NMD's location per [ACL 23-32](#).

**NOTE:** A new data grid row must be created each time a CSE child/youth is on an unauthorized absence from placement.

Ensure attempts to locate at least every 30 days [[Division 31 Regulation 31-320.711](#)]

Ensure the Case Plan is current and includes information that child/youth or NMD is whereabouts unknown”.

Ensure Court requirements are met including maintaining an active Body Attachment. Since the Court cannot proceed on cases involving a missing dependent, court reports will include the following:

- Request to continue the hearing until the child/youth is located;
- Evidence of proper notice;
- Documentation of search efforts;
- Justification and request for any court orders that may be needed for case planning purposes when the child/youth is located.
- For NMDs, recommend in the court report whether or not the NMD's case should be dismissed. If the NMD is located prior to their 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, they can choose to re-enter foster care.

SW efforts to locate the child/youth or NMD includes, but is not limited to, the following:

- Contacting significant people in the child/youth or NMD's life, such as parents and family, Tribal representative, Indian Custodians, attorneys, CASA, therapist, friends, care providers, service providers, teachers and other school staff to find out if they know where the child/youth or NMD is located. If not, ask if they are willing to help locate the child/youth
- **If the previous placement has been ended, engage the prior careprovider about their willingness to welcome the child/youth back in their care to maintain connections and foster a sense of belonging and minimize any additional trauma. Discuss potential supportive services, safety plan, etc. with the CFT.**
- Engage relatives and mentors and explore opportunities to support the relationship through visitations or potential placement
- Follow up on any lead(s) received about the child/youth or NMD's whereabouts.
- Physically check the places (i.e., residences, school, mall, etc.) where the child/youth or NMD is likely to be.
- Search public locator databases [e.g. California Missing Child Clearinghouse (1-800-222-FIND or [missing.persons@doj.ca.gov](mailto:missing.persons@doj.ca.gov)), NCMEC (<https://www.missingkids.org/homeh>, etc.)].
- Complete a referral to the Family Finding Unit to assist in searching additional databases and social media websites, etc.

Harm reduction techniques [[ACL 25-67](#)] should also be used when attempting to locate child/youth while they are missing from care such as:

- Contacting the youth via text, phone, email and/or social media
- If contact is made, remain neutral and focused on their well-being
- Refrain from language that is punitive or condescending
- Allow youth to have voice and choice in their return, explore what youth feel is in their best interest
- Create a plan for return
- Assess the situation and contact law enforcement if there is suspicion that child/youth is in immediate danger

Document the following in the statewide automated system:

- When the child/youth or NMD went missing
- When it was reported to law enforcement that the child/youth or NMD went missing/ran and the report number.
- When it was reported to NCMEC; add the NCMEC report number in the case alerts section
- The people or entities (i.e. Court, CASA, etc.) entitled to know that the child/youth or NMD is missing, and when they were advised of the child/youth or NMD missing.
- The plans to return the child/youth or NMD to placement.
- Narrate in the contact notebook at least once every month the efforts to locate the missing child/youth/NMD.
- For NMDs assess whether their case should remain open if missing from care after a significant period of time. **The court may terminate dependency for NMDs whose whereabouts remain unknown when supported by documented efforts to support a finding**

that reasonable efforts were made to locate the youth and inform them of their Extended Foster Care (EFC) options.

**NOTE:** NMDs returning from being absent from care may have foster care benefits extended as long as eligibility conditions for EFC are met. This includes a foster care placement order in effect on the youth's 18<sup>th</sup> birthday and continued court dependency [[ACL 12-12](#)].

### When a Missing Child/Youth or NMD is Located

When determining appropriate placement options for the child/youth, ask the child/youth if there are any prior resource families they would like to be placed with. If yes, check with the resource family about their willingness to have the child/youth placed back in their home. For an Indian child/youth, ensure consultation and direction regarding placement preference.

- Inform the child/youth's parents (for NMDs, only notify the parents if the family is receiving Family Reunification services), attorney, tribal representative, CASA, and/or any other involved parties of the youth being located.
- Perform other duties such as transport, placement, etc., as needed.
- Offer medical clearance or seek medical care for youth returning from their absence.
- Collaborate with community partners such as other departmental task areas, community resources and law enforcement.
- Update the statewide automated system to document the status of any search activity of dependents absent from placement that they have completed or participated in.
- Recall the Body Attachment with Juvenile Court.
- Contact the Fresno Sheriff's Department at 559-600-8402 to cancel the Body Attachment (this is a 24-hour number). When contacting law enforcement, staff will report any known information shared by the youth of their location or who they were with (including nicknames) while absent without approval.
- Call NCMEC at 1-800-843-5678 (1-800-THE-LOST) to advise them that the child/youth has been located.
- Advise Eligibility staff via the ETA Foster Care Placement mailbox of the child/youth returning/change in placement.
- Advise the Human Trafficking staff by sending an email to the CWS CSEC mailbox that the youth has been located when a child/youth is identified as being at risk of CSEC or documented as being CSEC.

No later than three business days after returning to care, the assigned SW will privately interview the youth to assess the following (utilize the [Youth-Safety Tool](#) and if referred to an outside resource, they will use the Commercial Sexual Exploitation-Identification Tool (CSE-IT)).

- Assess the immediate needs of the child/youth, including medical care, mental health services, re-enrolling in school, possible law enforcement report due to victimization, etc.
- Address and identify the primary factor(s) contributing to the child/youth leaving or missing, and how they may affect placement.

- The child/youth's or NMD's experiences while missing, including where the child/youth may have stayed.
- Whether the child/youth was a possible victim of CSE.
- Inform the Child and Family Team (CFT) of the child/youth's return (and all parties entitled to notice as indicated on pages 4 and 5, [Notification Process when Missing or Absent from Placement](#)) and schedule a meeting.
  - Explore options to leaving the resource family, including developing a safety plan and/or putting supports in place. This can be accomplished through talking with the youth at the teaming meeting.
  - Discuss harm reduction strategies (refer to [All County Information Notice \(ACIN\) I-59-18](#) and [I-28-19](#) as well as ACLs [20-142](#) and [25-67](#)). Think “safer” versus “Safest Plan” and what would be an appropriate method for the child/youth.
  - Update the Integrated Practice Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths (IP-CANS) within 30 days of determining that a change condition exists.

NOTE: Unless otherwise required by law, the information disclosed by the child/youth should not be used to implicate them in a criminal matter or for any purpose other than tailoring services for the child/youth and to meet reporting requirements. For example, if the child/youth was commercially sexually exploited while on runaway, contacting law enforcement would be to report that the child/youth was a victim of CSE, as opposed to reporting a criminal charge of prostitution. DSS staff are not to refer to children/youth as participating in prostitution [[Senate Bill 1322](#)] when talking with or interviewing the youth or when discussing the child/youth with service providers or in case planning meetings such as CFT meetings