

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
Child and Family Services Agency



Business Process: Missing, Abducted, and Absent Children

I. POLICY

CFSA has established these instructions for CFSA employees and contractors when children with open ongoing cases in both foster care and receiving in-home services with CFSA are missing, absent from their residence, or have been abducted.

II. DEFINITIONS

Abducted Child – a child in CFSA custody, or who is part of an open Entry Services referral, or who has an open in-home case whose whereabouts are unknown and it is known or suspected that the child has been taken without permission, consent or in violation of a valid court order regarding the child’s custody status from his or her placement (or home) or other location by a person or persons either known or unknown to the child.

Absent Child – a child who is absent from their place of residence for less than 72 hours whose whereabouts are either known or unknown, but the child is in contact and at no immediate risk of harm. In some cases, a child may be absent for short periods repeatedly and regularly. The risk indicators below should be used to assess risk.

Missing Child – a child under age 18 or a foster child under age 21 who is absent from their place of residence without the knowledge and/or consent of the caregiver, resource provider, or CFSA, and there has been no contact with the child, whose whereabouts are unknown.

High Risk Child – a child who is missing or, abducted, or absent and whose safety is compromised for one or more of the following reasons: The child:

- Is age 14 years old or younger.
- Has one or more serious health conditions that require treatment or ongoing care (including prescription medications).
- Is pregnant and potentially placing the unborn child at risk.
- Is parenting and the infant/child is believed to be with them, and the infant/child is potentially at risk.
- Has an emotional problem that requires treatment, without which the child may be a danger to self or others.
- Has a developmental or intellectual disability that impairs self-care.
- Has a serious documented alcohol and/or substance abuse problem and could be a danger to self or others.
- Is absent under circumstances inconsistent with their established patterns of behavior, and this absence cannot be readily explained.
- Is believed to be a victim of commercial sexual exploitation/sex trafficking. See the [Sex Trafficking Identification and Response administrative issuance](#) for more information.

III. PROCEDURES

A positive outcome in this situation depends on strong collaboration among the child's social worker and the many stakeholders who work to locate the child. It is important for the social worker to keep family members and resource providers informed about the child's status. The social worker, supervisor, and members of the Diligent Search Unit (DSU) should carefully coordinate CFSA's outreach to minimize the trauma and impact on clients and families.

A. Reporting Requirements for Resource Providers and Caregivers

1. The social worker is to advise caregivers and resource parents of these reporting requirements and support them through the process.
2. In instances where a child's whereabouts are known or unknown but the child is in contact, the resource provider (foster or group home) or caregiver is to try to bring the child home through telephone calls, text messages, and (when appropriate) conversations with the person housing the child.
3. In the event that a child is believed to be missing or abducted, or absent and at high risk, the resource provider or caregiver takes the following steps:
 - a. Reach out to the child's neighbors, school, friends, and other people who may know where the child is to seek information about the child's whereabouts.
 - b. Immediately (within 1 hour) file a police report with the local law enforcement agency in the jurisdiction where the child is placed or was last seen.
 - Group home providers in the District of Columbia shall also make an electronic report to the Telephone Reporting Unit (TRU) system at <http://311.dc.gov/> within 1 hour of learning that a child is missing or abducted, or absent and at high risk.
 - c. Immediately (within 1 hour) report the missing or abducted, or absent and at high risk child to the CFSA Hotline (202-671-SAFE) and provide the Hotline with the number of the police report.
 - In instances in which resource providers or caregivers do not get a police report number they should get the name of the police officer who received the call and the reason the report was not accepted and provide that information to the social worker, who shall document it in the Agency's electronic case management system.
 - d. All group home providers must also complete an Unusual Incident report within 24 hours of the missing incident, abduction, or absence for children at high risk and send the form to the assigned social worker, supervisory social worker, and program monitor.
4. The CFSA Hotline worker will immediately notify the social worker.
5. If the child is not deemed at high risk, but the resource provider or caregiver has not had contact with the child, then the resource provider or caregiver files a police report with local law enforcement via 911.
6. If the child is located or returns home, the resource provider or caregiver immediately notifies the local law enforcement agency, CFSA Hotline, social worker, and other relevant parties who may have been notified that the child was missing or abducted, or absent.

B. Reporting Requirements for the Agency

1. Within 24 hours of learning that a child is missing, abducted, or absent, or immediately for high risk children, the social worker takes the following steps:
 - a. Contacts the resource provider or caregiver to confirm the report and to verify whether the child has returned.
 - i. If the child has returned, the social worker follows steps in *Procedure E*.
 - ii. If the child has not returned but their whereabouts are known, the social worker is to assess the child's safety and try to bring them back through visits, phone calls, text messages, and dialogue with the person housing the child. The social worker documents all efforts in the electronic case management system.
 - iii. If the child has not returned, the social worker verifies that the resource provider or caregiver has filed a police report and documents the number of the police report in the electronic case management system. The social worker **must** also file a report with the local law enforcement agency and National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) *and* include where reasonably possible:
 - a) A photo of the child or youth;
 - b) A description of the child's or youth's physical features, such as height, weight, sex, ethnicity, race, hair color, and eye color; and
 - c) Any 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.
 - b. Makes reasonable efforts to locate the child within 24 hours by contacting:
 - i. Former resource providers with whom the child has had a close or long-term relationship
 - ii. Relatives, including the child's parents and siblings
 - iii. Neighbors and landlord at the child's last known address
 - iv. School personnel
 - v. Probation or parole officer
 - vi. Anyone else who may have information about the child's whereabouts
 - c. Notifies the following entities or individuals, as applicable, that the child is missing or abducted, or absent:
 - i. CFSA Hotline (if the resource provider or caregiver has not done so already)
 - ii. Supervisory social worker
 - iii. The child's parents or legal guardians and significant relatives (e.g., relatives who are involved in case planning, and with whom the child has a meaningful relationship). The social worker shall advise them to contact CFSA with any information regarding the child's whereabouts.
 - iv. Assistant Attorney General (AAG)
 - v. Guardian *ad litem* (GAL)
 - vi. Other service providers and members of the child's case planning team
2. The social worker follows up on all leads (for example by email, text, telephone, and/or in person).

3. If the child is in the legal custody of CFSA and efforts to locate them within 24 hours are unsuccessful, the social worker shall immediately request assistance from the Diligent Search Unit . To initiate this request, the social worker completes a request for a custody order through the Abscondence Screen in electronic case management system and completes the following additional tasks:
 - a. Follows up within 24 hours with the Diligent Search Unit to review the request for a custody order and ensure it is accurate and complete.
 - b. Signs the *Request for the Issuance of a Custody Order Form* generated by the DSU investigator and then forwards the form to the supervisory social worker for review and signature. Return the form to the DSU investigator within 1 business day of receipt.
 - c. If a warrant has been issued for the child, the social worker notifies and provides the Diligent Search Unit with a copy of the arrest warrant and the child's Family Court Social Services Division file information.
 - d. Notifies the Placement Reconciliation Unit to initiate a bed hold on the placement or submit a replacement request if the child is not expected to return to their previous placement.
 - When it is in the child's best interest to hold their placement longer than 3 days, the social worker submits a written request to extend the bed hold through the social worker's chain of command and finally approved by the program administrator.

Note: Custody orders **should not** be requested for children in care who are between 18 and 21 years old. For situations where a child over age 18 is missing or abducted, or absent and at high risk, the social worker shall consult with the Office of the Attorney General for guidance on next steps.

4. For a high-risk child, the social worker shall initiate a Child Locator Staffing to occur no later than 3 business days from the time the child was determined to be absent from placement.
 - a. A Child Locator Staffing is held when a child is initially identified as at high risk, and is to include:
 - i. Child's family, if the social worker deems clinically appropriate
 - ii. Social worker or supervisory social worker
 - iii. DSU investigator
 - iv. Child's resource provider
 - v. Assigned AAG and GAL
 - vi. Placement Services Administration (PSA)
 - vii. Other relevant parties

Note: Whenever possible and practicable, the Child Locator Staffing should be integrated into an already scheduled staffing. For example, the Child Locator Staffing may be combined with the internal commercial sex trafficking committee (CSEC) meeting for cases involving sex trafficking, or the placement disruption/stabilization staffing, special corrective action RED teams, or case planning meetings, or other meetings as appropriate.

- b. The Child Locator Staffing centers on why the child has been identified as being at high risk.
- c. Resources and immediate supports for the family while the child is missing or abducted or absent, shall be identified, as well as services for the child and family once the child returns.
- d. The social worker shall develop a written plan to locate the child. The group shall designate responsibility for each action step in the plan during the meeting.

- e. A plan developed at the Child Locator Staffing supersedes any other plan for locating the child.
5. The social worker shall promptly document in the electronic case management system all ongoing attempts to locate the missing, abducted, or absent child.

C. Requirements for Supervisory Social Workers

Upon learning from the social worker that a child is missing or abducted, or absent and at high risk, the supervisory social worker completes the following tasks:

1. Confirms that the social worker has completed requirements listed in *Procedure B* above.
2. Assists the social worker in developing and implementing a plan that includes specific strategies to locate the missing or abducted, or absent and at high risk child and ensure their safety.
3. Reviews and signs the *Request for the Issuance of Custody Order Form* and ensure the social worker submits it to the Diligent Search Unit within 1 business day from the time of signature. **Note:** *Custody orders should not be requested for children in care who are between 18 and 21 years old.*
4. Reviews the plan with the social worker during supervision and ensure progress toward locating the child.
5. Informs all Child Locator Staffing members of any revisions to the plan to locate the child.

D. Role of the Diligent Search Unit and Coordination with the Social Worker

1. Upon receiving the *Request for the Issuance of a Custody Order Form* from the social worker, the Diligent Search Unit submits the form to the Juvenile Clerk's office for processing.
2. Once the judge issues a custody order and forwards it to the Diligent Search Unit supervisor or designee, they assign the case to an DSU investigator.
 - The Diligent Search Unit will not conduct a community search for the child until they have a custody order in hand, but they will conduct preliminary searches using online resources and based on information in the case record.
3. The assigned DSU investigator contacts the social worker and the child's GAL/counsel within 24 hours of receiving the signed custody order to engage them for relevant information.
4. The DSU investigator engages various parties who may have helpful information, but they closely coordinate with the social worker to minimize interviewing redundancies and avoid re-traumatizing the child's family, friends, and collaterals. Individuals the DSU investigator and social worker may engage include, but are not limited to:
 - a. All known family members of the missing or abducted, or absent and at high risk child
 - b. Teachers, counselors, and other personnel at the school (including vocational schools) the child last attended as well as any previous school where the child maintains relationships with any personnel.
 - d. The local law enforcement agency, emergency shelters, and homeless youth programs (to verify that the child is not in their custody or care or has had contact with the child), when appropriate.
 - The DSU investigator shall also review the Washington Area Law Enforcement System and National Crime Information Center database for leads.

- e. Most recent resource provider and other resource providers with whom the child has had or has a close or long-term relationship.
 - f. Neighbors and the landlord at the child's last known address.
 - g. Friends and classmates of the child, including known boyfriends, girlfriends, or anyone in the community with whom the child may have or had a significant relationship.
 - h. Juvenile and adult detention centers or the child's parole/probation officer.
 - i. Law enforcement in other states if the child is believed to be in another jurisdiction.
5. The DSU investigator is to provide weekly updates to the social worker on efforts to locate the child.
 6. The DSU investigator shall update the electronic case management system Contact Screen within 48 hours with all efforts made to locate the child.
 7. If the child is missing or absent for over a month with whereabouts unknown, the DSU investigator and social worker jointly contact the NCMEC at 1-800-843-5678 (<http://www.missingkids.com/home>) for assistance.

Note: A child who is believed to be a victim of commercial sexual exploitation/sex trafficking shall immediately be reported to local law enforcement and NCMEC. See the [Sex Trafficking Identification and Response administrative issuance](#) for more information.

8. If the DSU investigator locates the child, they complete the following tasks:
 - a. Immediately notifies the social worker and/or supervisor and returns the child to CFSA's Healthy Horizons Assessment Center (HHAC).
 - The social worker meets the DSU investigator at the HHAC to have the child medically screened and placed.
 - b. Forwards (via email) the *Request for the Withdrawal of Custody Order Form* to the Juvenile Clerk's Office for review and processing.
9. If the DSU investigator locates but does not return the child to CFSA, they alert the social worker to schedule a return staffing within 1 business day (see procedure E (3) below).
10. Following the return staffing, the DSU investigator shall forward (via email) the *Request for the Withdrawal of Custody Order Form* to the Juvenile Clerk's Office, copying the AAG and GAL, for review and processing.
11. The DSU investigator contacts MPD to close out the police report and asks MPD to remove the child's photo, name, and contact information from any of MPD's social media missing person alerts.
12. The DSU investigator shall enter a contact note in the electronic case management system indicating that the child has been located, the custody order has been withdrawn, and the Diligent Search Unit case is closed.

E. Social Worker's Tasks When a Missing, Abducted, or Absent Child is Located

1. When a child is located, the social worker shall ensure the child is safe while attending to the child's immediate physical needs, such as food, a shower, a change of clothes, and an opportunity to rest in a safe place. The social worker determines whether the child has been hurt or harmed and addresses any immediate medical or mental health needs.

2. The social worker completes the following tasks upon the child's return:
 - a. Immediately assesses the child's safety
 - b. Ensures the child is screened at the HHAC (if child has been absent for more than 72 hours, or if otherwise clinically appropriate or indicated)
 - i. For after-hours CFSA cases, CPS-I assists with screening and placement.
 - ii. For private-provider cases, the social worker on call for the partner agency conducts the screening and placement.
 - c. Within 24 hours, notifies parties who have not already heard the news from someone else (such as the DSU investigator):
 - i. Child's parents, resource provider, and other relatives, as appropriate
 - ii. DSU investigator
 - iii. Local law enforcement agency
 - iv. AAG
 - v. GAL
 - vi. Other parties who may have been notified that the child was missing or abducted, or absent
3. The social worker convenes a return staffing for children who return after an absence of 72 hours or more and are chronic absentees or high risk, and for children who are located but who do not return to CFSA. The following participants are to be invited to the return staffing:
 - a. Social worker
 - b. Child, as appropriate
 - c. DSU investigator
 - d. Child's resource provider or caregiver
 - e. Assigned AAG and GAL
 - f. Placement Resource Development Specialist
 - g. Trauma coach/ clinical services staff
 - h. Assigned nurse care manager

Note: *The supervisory social worker schedules the return staffing within 1 business day of locating the child. In cases involving sex trafficking, this staffing replaces the CSEC meeting. If the child is in foster care and not returning to the same placement, the return staffing replaces the Disruption Staffing.*
4. The return staffing shall follow the consultation and information sharing framework and serve as a formal hand-off between the DSU investigator and social worker.
 - a. At the meeting, participants develop a plan for ensuring the child's safety, preventing future absences, and next steps.
 - b. Participants evaluate the child's current placement and determine the most appropriate placement for the child.
5. Once the child's immediate needs have been addressed and the child has had a chance to stabilize in placement, the social worker shall engage the child to determine:
 - a. Why the child was missing or absent

- b. What the child did when missing or absent, where they went, and if possible who they were with
 - c. Alternative options to going missing or absent, which includes providing information and helping the child to seek support and advice rather than leaving
 - d. What if any action is now required to help prevent a recurrence—for example, a commercial sexual exploitation/sex trafficking assessment (See the [Sex Trafficking Identification and Response administrative issuance](#) for more information), evaluation of the child's current placement, or any additional supports and interventions
6. The social worker shall use information from the child to identify any recurrent themes or patterns, evaluate the child's needs and vulnerabilities, inform case planning activities, and update applicable assessments.
7. The social worker shall document all tasks completed upon the child's return in the electronic case management system.