 <b>VERMONT</b> DEPARTMENT FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES Family Services Policy Manual		<h1>155</h1>
Chapter:	Coordinating with Others	
Subject:	Runaway, Abducted, and Missing Children & Youth	Page 1 of 8
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## Purpose

To outline the steps taken when a child or youth involved with the Family Services Division runs away, is abducted, or otherwise missing.

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## Related Policies

Family Services [Policy 51](#): Screening Reports of Child Abuse and Neglect

Family Services [Policy 52](#): Child Safety Interventions – Investigations and Assessments

Family Services [Policy 60](#): Juvenile Proceedings Act – CHINS (C) and (D) Assessments

## Definitions

**Missing Child or Youth:** A child or youth in DCF custody whose whereabouts are unknown to DCF or to the child’s parents or caretakers.

**Runaway Child or Youth:** A child or youth in DCF custody who is voluntarily missing from care for more than three (3) hours. A child may be considered a runaway sooner than three hours if any of the following are true:

- The child has stated that he or she is running away;
- The child or another party contacts the parents, caretakers, or social worker and indicates the child is not returning to their placement;

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- The child misses a clearly stated appointment or curfew and the caretaker or social worker has reason to believe the child does not intend to return;
- Some or all of the child's possessions are missing;
- The child is under the age of 13; or
- The child has a history of runaway behavior.

**Abducted Child or Youth:** A child or youth in DCF custody whose whereabouts are unknown and it is known or suspected that the child has been taken from his or her placement or other location by a person or persons either known or unknown to the child, in violation of a valid court order regarding the child's custody status.

**Human Trafficking of Minors:** See Sex Trafficking of Minors.

**Sex Trafficking of Minors:** A range of crimes committed against children and adolescents, including but not limited to:

- the sexual exploitation of a minor;
- recruiting, enticing, harboring, transporting, providing, or obtaining by any means for the purpose of sexual exploitation;
- exploiting a minor through survival sex (exchanging sex or sexual acts for money or something of value, such as shelter, food, or drugs);
- using a minor in child pornography;
- exploiting a minor through sex tourism, mail order bride trade, and early marriage; or,
- exploiting a minor by having her/him perform in sexual venues (e.g., peep shows or strip clubs).


## Introduction

Children and youth who run away from foster care and other placements are particularly vulnerable to sex trafficking and its dangerous health and mental health consequences. Children and youth are not developmentally, legally, or socially able to consent or make the "choice" to become involved in the commercial sex industry nor provide sex or sexual acts in exchange for money, drugs, food, clothes, housing, or meeting their basic needs. Risk factors for sex trafficking include a history of abuse, neglect and trauma; low self-esteem and minimal social support; and runaway and homeless youth.

## Policy

### Missing Children and Youth

A photograph of each child in custody shall be taken at least yearly and kept

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electronically and in the child’s file. For children under the age of six, a photograph shall be taken at least every six months.

The social worker is responsible to take all actions detailed in this policy to locate a child missing from his or her placement, and to document all efforts in case notes.

**Efforts to be Completed by the End of the Business Day**

The social worker shall immediately notify the appropriate law enforcement agency (the agency with jurisdiction in the town from which the child ran away or went missing) and provide the child’s photograph to law enforcement. If the child is known or suspected to be a victim of trafficking, the social worker shall share this information with the law enforcement lead investigator. District staff will consult with the ICPC deputy compact administrator on all cases where trafficking is known or suspected to have occurred.


The social worker shall ensure a General Broadcast Communication (GBC) is issued and the child has been entered into the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) database. Additionally, district staff will report all missing children and youth to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) at 1-800-THE-LOST (1-800-843-5678).

The social worker should discuss the use of an Amber Alert in cases where the child has been abducted. A written, notarized report may also be requested by law enforcement. Centralized Intake and Emergency Services (CIES) is responsible for these tasks after hours, on weekends, and holidays.

If a child is missing, the social worker shall notify the child’s parents or caretakers as soon as possible, but before the end of the day. If the child’s parents or caretakers are suspected of facilitating or having knowledge of the runaway – or harboring or trafficking the child – social workers shall consult with a supervisor and law enforcement before notifying the child’s parents or caretakers. If the child is receiving a residential treatment level of care, the social worker should consult with the child’s clinical team before notifying the parents or caretakers. CIES is responsible for this task after hours, on weekends, and holidays.

The social worker will attempt to ascertain the whereabouts of the child, in conjunction with law enforcement, through contact with family, friends, and other community partners and providers (e.g., school personnel, foster parents, residential staff, or other service providers). Any information gathered should be provided to law enforcement.

The social worker will determine if there are any unusual circumstances that would place the child at a higher level of risk. If any of the following circumstances are true, the

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social worker will contact law enforcement immediately to indicate there is a higher level of risk to the child. Unusual circumstances refer to a missing child who:

- is under 13 years of age;
- is believed to be out of an area familiar to him or her, and is at increased risk due to age or developmental level;
- is intellectually or developmentally delayed or has mental health diagnosis that would increase risk to the child;
- is substance dependent or requires prescribed medications;
- was absent for more than 24 hours before being reported to law enforcement;
- is in a potentially life threatening situation;
- is believed to be with others who could endanger his or her welfare;
- is suspected or known to be a victim of sex trafficking;
- is currently at risk of self-harm or suicidal ideation;
- is absent under circumstances inconsistent with his or her established patterns of behavior and this absence cannot be readily explained; or
- disappeared under circumstances that would lead a reasonable person to conclude that the child should be considered at higher risk.


If it is suspected that the youth ran with their peers or other youth in DCF custody, coordination should occur between district offices and social workers.

If the social worker reasonably suspects the youth is at a specific location, the social worker should notify the law enforcement agency with jurisdiction and requests that the youth be picked up. If the jurisdiction is outside the State of Vermont, the social worker will notify and seek consultation from the Deputy Interstate Compact Administrator for ICPC/ICJ.

District offices are responsible for data entry to document when youth are missing and when they return. Staff shall complete the Incident Form ([FS-585T](#)) by the end of the business day of determining a child or youth is either missing, abducted, or on runaway status. District directors will determine whether staff enter information directly into SSMIS or complete the form and give it to their administrative support staff for entry. CIES is **not** responsible for SSMIS data entry after hours, on weekends, and holidays.

Staff shall email a runaway/missing alert and photo of the child to all Family Services Division employees using the [Missing Child/Youth Notification Form \(FS-155\)](#) using the following subject line:

**[secure] Missing Child from \_\_\_\_\_ (District Office)**

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Protected health information **shall not** be shared in this division-wide notification. Health information may be shared in limited circumstances – when there is a serious and imminent threat to the health and safety of the youth. In situations where there is a serious and imminent threat to the youth’s health and safety while missing or on run, health information can only be shared with individuals who are reasonably able to prevent or lessen the threat. Examples of information that cannot be shared widely but may be shared with local law enforcement and the team of individuals searching for the youth include:

- Emergency medical conditions;
- Substance dependence or needed medication; and/or
- Suicidal ideation or risk of self-harm.

#### Ongoing Efforts to Locate the Child


The social worker shall maintain weekly contact with law enforcement and update them with any new information. At least weekly, the social worker shall continue to make efforts to locate the child in conjunction with law enforcement. This may include, but is not limited to, the following:

- Contacting the child’s friends and family to request information about the child’s whereabouts and persons with whom the child may be associating;
- Contacting school personnel from the school the child last attended or at other schools the child previously attended if it is believed the child maintains a close relationship with persons at that school;
- Contacting the child’s adult probation officer if applicable;
- Contacting any other individuals who are believed to have knowledge of the child’s whereabouts; and/or
- Utilizing social media to search for the missing child and determine a possible location based on any updates he or she may have posted.

If the youth remains on runaway for more than seven days, the social worker will update the [FS-580: Placement Form](#) unless an agreement to the contrary exists with the substitute care provider.

The social worker and a supervisor shall formally review all efforts to locate the youth within seven days of the youth’s runaway, and every 14 days thereafter. The social worker, supervisor, resource coordinator, and client placement specialist shall discuss plans for the child’s placement upon return to DCF care.

If the social worker, supervisor, and law enforcement agree that a press release is necessary, this will be discussed with the Family Services Deputy Commissioner or

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designee. If a press release is going to be issued, the DCF Commissioner’s Office shall be notified immediately.

If it is suspected that a parent abducted the child, staff should contact the Child Benefits Unit to discuss the appropriateness of accessing the Federal Parent Locator System (Family Services [Policy 88](#)). If the parent has a history of domestic violence or intimate partner violence, the social worker should consult with the Domestic Violence Unit.

If appropriate, a nationwide Protective Service Alert should be issued.

#### **Stabilizing and Supporting the Child Upon Return**

Law enforcement should be notified immediately when the child has been located. Parents or caretakers should be notified that the child has been located as soon as possible, but by the end of the day.

Division staff will ensure the child’s basic needs are met immediately upon their return. Basic needs include: safety and protection for the child, safe housing, food, personal hygiene, clothing, medical care, and mental health supports.

The social worker shall interview the child in-person within seven business days of their return to care, and take a photograph of the child at that time. Exceptions to the in-person interview may be made by a supervisor and documented in case notes. Extenuating circumstances, such as medical needs/care or geographical distance, will also be documented in case notes. The interview may be conducted in conjunction with law enforcement, and shall be when the circumstances of the child’s absence are not solely related to running away. If the child is suspected or known to be a victim of trafficking, division staff should discuss with law enforcement the appropriate timing of investigation and/or consultation in order to support the victim and provide a trauma-informed response.

The interview shall be conducted in a non-judgmental, non-threatening, comfortable, and child-friendly location when possible. The following topics should be used as thinking prompts; social workers should use professional judgement regarding how to ask questions and guide the conversation with the child or youth. Topics social workers should cover include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Why did the child leave their previous placement?
- Did the child feel unsafe in their previous placement?
- Did anyone encourage the child to leave?
- Where did the child go?
- What is the first thing the child did after they left?

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- What else did the child do while they were gone?
- How did the child have their basic needs met (e.g., housing, food, clothing)?
- Did the child perform any sort of sexual act to meet any of their basic needs?
- Who was the child with, if anyone, while they were gone?
- Did anyone loan or give the child money?
- Did anyone provide the child with expensive gifts or favors?
- Did anyone pressure the child into doing something they did not want to do?
- Did anyone take a photo or video of the child that they were uncomfortable with?
- Was the child the victim of a crime (including physical or sexual assault) while they were gone? Any affirmative answers should be referred to law enforcement and other service referrals should be considered.
- Did the child engage in any risky behaviors (e.g., substance use, self-harm, sexual activity, or any sexual acts in exchange for basic needs or under the influence of exploitation or coercion) while they were gone?
- Did the child engage in any behaviors that might put them at risk of sexually transmitted infections?
- What supports or services would the child like to have to help with any experiences they had while they were away?
- What were the best and worst things about being away?
- Does the child plan to run away again? If so, why?
- What can the social worker do to help prevent the child from not running away again?

When the social worker knows or suspects that the youth engaged in risky behaviors such as sexual activity or substance use, they will schedule an appointment with the primary care physician or secure a referral from the primary care physician for a medical visit closer to the placement. Social workers should assess the appropriateness of a SANE (Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner) exam, health screening, and/or trauma screening. Social workers should enlist the help of victim specialists or make victim services referrals as appropriate.

If information is learned that causes division staff to believe a child or youth may have been a victim of sex trafficking while missing or on run, a report of child abuse must be made to CIES (1-800-649-5285). Children and youth under the age of 18 **cannot** legally consent to providing sex or sexual acts in exchange for money, drugs, food, clothes, housing, or meeting their basic needs. Consultation with the ICPC deputy compact administrator is required for all trafficking cases.

#### Missing Children Not in DCF Custody

There are times when the division receives information about a runaway child who is

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not in the custody of DCF, but may be involved with DCF as a child in a family that is open for investigation, a delinquent on probation, or a child in a family with an open family case. In those instances, social workers shall consult with the casework supervisor around appropriate actions to take, which may include contact with the parent(s) and law enforcement (with the parent's knowledge).

## Additional Resources

Family Services Sex Trafficking Information Sheet

<http://dcf.vermont.gov/sites/dcf/files/Prevention/docs/Sex-Trafficking.pdf>

National Center for Missing and Exploited Children

1-800-THE-LOST

1-800-843-5678

[www.missingkids.com](http://www.missingkids.com)

National Runaway Safeline

1-800-RUNAWAY

<http://www.1800runaway.org/>

Amber Alert

<https://vab.org/amber-alert-program/>

National Human Trafficking Resource Center

1-888-373-7888

<https://traffickingresourcecenter.org/>

The Polaris Project

<https://polarisproject.org/human-trafficking>

Vermont Human Trafficking Task Force

<http://www.ccvv.state.vt.us/nomoreslaves>

Give Way To Freedom

<http://www.givewaytofreedom.org>