

Chapter:	Coordinating with Others	
Subject:	Runaway, Abducted and Missing Youth	Page 1 of 5
Approved:	Cynthia K. Walcott, Deputy Commissioner	Effective: 4/21/2006
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## Purpose

To clarify the steps taken when a child involved with the Department for Children and Families runs away or is otherwise missing.

## Definitions

**Missing Child:** A child in the custody of the Commissioner of The Department for Children and Families (DCF) whose whereabouts are unknown to DCF or to the child’s caretaker(s).

**Runaway Child:** A child in DCF custody who is voluntarily missing from care for more than 3 hours\*.

\*A child may be considered a runaway sooner than by the above definition 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 caretaker or social worker and indicates the child is not returning to their placement
- 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
- The child has a history of runaway behavior

**Abducted child:** A child 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.

## Policy

### Missing Children and Youth

A photograph of each child in custody shall be taken yearly and kept electronically and in the child's file. For children under the age of six, a photograph shall be taken every six months.

The social worker is responsible to take the following actions to locate a child missing from his or her placement, **and to document all of those actions in case notes.**

**Social worker's initial tasks, to be completed by the end of the business day when a child in custody is believed to be missing:**

- Notifies the appropriate law enforcement agency (the agency with jurisdiction in the town from which the child ran away or went missing) immediately and ensures a General Broadcast Communication (GBC) is issued and the child has been entered into the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) database. Provides the child's photograph to law enforcement. Discusses 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. The Emergency Services Program (ESP) is responsible for this task after hours, on weekends, and holidays.
- Notifies child's parent by the end of the day or sooner if possible. ESP is responsible for this task after hours, on weekends, and holidays.
- Attempts to ascertain whereabouts of the youth, in conjunction with law enforcement, through contact with family, friends, and other providers (i.e. school personnel, foster parents, residential staff, or other service providers). Any information gathered should be provided to law enforcement.
- Determines if there are any unusual circumstances that would place the child at a higher level of risk. If any of these circumstances are true, contacts 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 developmentally delayed or has mental health diagnosis that would increase risk to the child
  - Is substance dependent or requires prescribed medications.

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- 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 absent under circumstances inconsistent with his or her established patterns of behavior and this absence cannot be readily explained
- Disappeared under circumstances that would lead a reasonable person to conclude that the child should be considered at higher risk
- If there is reasonable cause to believe that the youth is at a specific location, notifies the law enforcement agency with jurisdiction in that town and requests that the youth be picked up. If the jurisdiction is outside the state of Vermont, also notifies the Interstate Compact Unit.
- If child is believed to be outside the state of Vermont, consults with the Interstate Compact Unit.
- Completes the Incident Form (FS-585T) by the end of the business day of determining that the youth is either missing, abducted, or on runaway status. ESP is responsible for this task after hours, on weekends, and holidays.
- Emails a runaway/missing alert and photo to all Family Services district offices and ESP.

**Social worker's ongoing tasks required in an effort to locate the child:**

- Maintain weekly contact with law enforcement and update them with any new information
- Maintain sustained weekly efforts to locate the child. This may include but not be limited to the following, and should be done in conjunction with law enforcement:
  - Contact the child's friends and family to request information about the child's whereabouts and persons with whom the child may be associating.
  - Contact 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.
  - Contact the child's adult probation officer if this is applicable.
  - Contact any other individuals who are believed to have knowledge of the child's whereabouts.
- If the youth remains on runaway for more than seven days, updates Placement Form (FS-580) unless an agreement to the contrary exists with the substitute care provider.
- Formally reviews efforts to locate youth with supervisor within seven days of the youth's runaway, and every fourteen days thereafter.
- Reviews plans for child's placement upon return to care with supervisor, resource coordinator, and placement specialist.

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- If caseworker, supervisor, and police agree that a press release is necessary, this will be discussed with the Deputy Commissioner (or designee). If a press release is going to be issued, the Commissioner's office shall be notified immediately.
- If it is suspected that a parent abducted the child, contact the Child Benefits Unit to discuss the appropriateness of accessing the Federal Parent Locator System (see policy no. 88). If this parent has a history of domestic violence, consultation with the DCF Domestic Violence Unit is recommended.
- Consults with Child Safety Unit and, if appropriate, issues a nationwide Protective Service Alert.

**Social worker's tasks when the youth is located (all of which shall be documented in case notes):**

- Notifies law enforcement immediately that the child has been located.
- Notifies parent(s)/guardian that the child has been located as soon as possible but by the end of the day.
- Interviews the child in person within seven business days of their return to care, and takes a photograph of the child at that time. Exceptions to the in-person interview may be made by the casework supervisor. (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.) Topics the caseworker shall cover, which may be phrased as the caseworker sees fit, include but are not limited to the following:
  - Why did the child leave 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?
  - What else did the child do while they were gone?
  - Who was the child with, if anyone, while they were gone?
  - What were the best and worst things about being away?
  - Was the child the victim of a crime while they were gone? (Such as: physically or sexually assaulted. Any affirmative answers should be referred to law enforcement and other service referrals should be considered.)
  - Did the child engage in any risky behaviors while they were gone? (Such as: substance use, prostitution, self harm, etc.)
  - What supports or services would the child like to have to help with any experiences they had while they were away?
  - Does the child plan to run away again? If so, why?
  - What can the caseworker do to help prevent the child from not running away again?

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- When the caseworker 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.
- Updates Incident Form.

**Supervisor's Tasks:**

- Ensure continued focus on locating the youth in accordance with policy.
- Document seven-day review and subsequent fourteen-day reviews on the FS-261 or in Contact Notes.

**Children who run away who are not in the custody of the Department for Children and Families**

There are times when the Department receives information about a runaway child who is 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).

**National Resources to use when a youth is missing or believed to be abducted**

- National Runaway Switchboard (crisis hotline for youth)  
1-800- RUNAWAY  
[www.nrscrisisline.org/](http://www.nrscrisisline.org/)
- National Center for Missing and Exploited Children  
1-703-274-3900  
Hotline – 1-800-843-5678  
[www.missingkids.com](http://www.missingkids.com)
- Amber Alert  
[www.dps.state.vt.us/vtsp/amber](http://www.dps.state.vt.us/vtsp/amber)

Some information in this policy has been adapted from the Child Welfare League of America's book, *Children Missing From Care, CWLA Best Practice Guidelines*, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children's "Model Missing Children's Policy," and the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services Procedure 329 titled "Locating and Returning Missing, Runaway, and Abducted Children."