



Tennessee Department of Children's Services

Protocol for Reporting Runaways, Absconders, and Escapees

Supplemental to Policies: [4.4, Performance and Case Supervision Practice Guidelines and Criteria](#), [14.4, CPS: Locating the Child and Family](#), [14.6, Child Protective Services Case Tasks and Responsibilities](#), [14.18, Family Support Services Program](#), [31.2, Responsibilities Regarding Runaways, Absconders and Escapees](#)

Youth expose themselves to significant risks when running away. Preventing runaway behavior is critical to ensuring the safety of youth in our care.

Immediate Steps for Non-Custodial (Juvenile Justice) Cases:

1. Upon notification that a youth has run away, the Juvenile Service Worker (JSW)/Juvenile Probation Officer (JPO) conducts a thorough investigation of the youth's last known whereabouts to determine if the youth has, in fact, run away or if other circumstances are involved. (i.e. at a friend or relative's home, etc.). The investigation includes, but is not limited to:
 - a) Contacting youth's friends, parents, family members, other caregivers, school personnel, police, and other possible persons or agencies the family may have contact with;
 - b) Checking social media sites for information.

Note: If the JSW/Team Leader (TL) wants assistance from the Absconder Unit (AU) to find the missing youth, send DCS form [CS-0705, Notification Checklist for Absconder/Runaways/Escapes \(Part A\)](#) to the AU.

2. Following the initial investigation, if the youth has not been located, the JSW/JPO requests the parent/legal custodian contact local Law Enforcement (LE) immediately to report the youth as a "missing" person with a nationwide pickup radius and is not eligible for bond. Law enforcement enters the youth into the **National Crime Information Center (NCIC)** database. If the judge has issued a criminal warrant, the youth is entered as a "wanted" person not as a "missing" person.

Original Effective Date: 9/23

Current Effective Date: 4/25

Supersedes: 12/23

Supplemental to: 4.4, 14.4, 14.6, 31.2, 14.18

RDA SW22

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The parent/ legal custodian is also encouraged to file a report with the **National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC)** by going to the website:

<http://cmfc.missingkids.org/home> or calling: **1-800-843-5678**.

3. The JSW/JPO obtains the NCIC number from the parents. If the parent/legal custodian refuses to contact the police, the JSW/JPO notifies LE of the youth's runaway status and documents the notification in the electronic case file in the Electronic Records System. The JSW/JPO requests assistance from the AU if needed.

Note: If the youth is at a known location and refusing to return home, under 24 (twenty-four) hours, the JSW/JPO schedules a Child and Family Team Meeting (CFTM) to discuss circumstances resolutions, and treatment plans to address the issue. If the child/youth returns home, a minor violation is documented per DCS Policy [**13.6, Response System for Violations and Positive Behavior**](#).

4. If the youth is missing for over 24 (twenty-four) hours, the JSW/JPO discusses the case with the TL to determine if a violation petition should be filed with the court. Upon approval by a TL, a petition is filed. A copy of violation report accompanies the petition. If the court denies the petition the FSW contacts the TL/TC for guidance; the Regional General Counsel is also contacted to assist with a resolution.
5. The JSW/JPO:
 - a) Updates the Supervision Level in the Delinquency Tab in the Electronic Records System to Runaway Status.
 - b) Makes one (1) unannounced home visit weekly for the first thirty (30) days. After the first thirty (30) days, the JSW/JPO makes one (1) unannounced home visit monthly.
 - c) Contacts the youth's parent/legal custodian by telephone at least two (2) times per month. If they do not live together each parent/legal custodian is contacted.
 - d) Conducts a full diligent search immediately if the family has moved without notice to DCS.
 - e) Submits a release request to the court for youth on runaway status for ninety (90) days and resubmits request every ninety (90) days until the youth returns or is released from supervision.

Note: Whenever JSW/JPO, TL, or TC receives a tip regarding a youth's whereabouts, LE is notified for assistance with apprehension.

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6. The TL or TC meets with the JSW/JPO every thirty (30) days to discuss strategies likely to result in the apprehension of the runaway youth. These conferences are documented in the Electronic Records System by the TL or TC within five (5) business days.

Immediate Steps for Non-Custodial (CPS/FSS/FCIP) Cases:

1. When a youth involved in an open non-custodial DCS case is missing, the assigned Absconder Unit worker:
 - a) Ensures the youth's parent/ legal custodian is notified:
 - b) Gathers pertinent information from the youth's parent(s)/legal custodian(s) and other household members regarding:
 - ◆ When and where the youth was last seen?
 - ◆ The youth's last known state of mind?
 - ◆ Any unusual events prior to the youth's disappearance:
 - ◆ Whether any of the youth's possessions are missing from his/her placement or home.
 - ◆ Did the youth have any tattoos, or identifying body marks?
 - ◆ Did the youth have any weapons?
 - c) Following the initial investigation, if the youth has not been located, the CPS/FSS/FCIP worker requests the parent/legal custodian contact local Law Enforcement (LE) immediately to report the youth as a "missing" person with a nationwide pickup radius. Law enforcement enters the youth into the **National Crime Information Center (NCIC)** database.
 - d) The parent/legal custodian is also encouraged to file a report with the **National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC)** by going to the website: <http://cmfc.missingkids.org/home> or calling: **1-800-843-5678**.
 - e) The CPS/FSS/FCIP worker obtains the NCIC number from the parents. If the parent/legal custodian refuses to contact the police, the CPS/FSS/FCIP worker notifies LE of the youth's runaway status and documents the notification in the electronic case file in the Electronic Records System. The CPS/FSS/FCIP worker requests assistance from the AU if needed.
 - f) Notifies TL and TC of the youth's absence from the home.

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2. Non-Custodial cases may remain open the entire life of the case as outlined in DCS Policies, [14.6, Child Protective Services Case Tasks and Responsibilities](#), and [14.18, Family Support Services Program](#).
 - a) The DCS worker makes concerted efforts to help locate the youth throughout the life of the case. These efforts include, but are not limited to, the efforts outlined in DCS Policy [14.4, CPS: Locating the Child and Family](#).
 - b) If the youth is unable to be located during the life of the case, the case may be closed with the approval of the Regional Director or designee.
 - ◆ If the youth has not been located and there is court involvement, the DCS worker notifies the court of the case closure prior to closing the case and communicates that, once the youth is located, a new case can be opened for DCS to provide services to the youth and family.
 - ◆ DCS may keep the case open if the youth has not been located and there is a request from community partners for the case to remain open or an order from the juvenile court, with the approval of the Regional Director/CPS Director or designee.

Immediate Steps for Custodial Cases:

Initial Reporter

As soon as it is discovered a youth has run away from a placement, including Trial Home Visit, the FSW/JSW, foster parent, or contract agency staff completes the following steps **immediately** in the order listed below:

- a) Contact local LE to report the youth is missing. LE takes a report and enters the youth into the **National Crime Information Center (NCIC)** database with a nationwide pickup and not eligible for bond.
- b) The reporting person ensures that the youth is entered into the data base as a **"Missing Person"** and if there is a criminal warrant signed by a judge as a **"Wanted Person"**. Ask LE for the NCIC missing person's number before they leave the scene.
- c) The reporter (contract agency/foster parent) next calls the FSW/JSW to report that the youth has absconded and provides the NCIC number.
- d) If the youth ran from a contract agency, staff files an incident report in the Electronic Records System per DCS Policy, [1.4, Incident Reporting](#). If the youth ran from a DCS

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foster/kinship home or during a Trial Home Visit, the FSW/JSW is responsible for entering an incident report as soon as possible.

Note: If the internet is not accessible form [CS-0496, Incident Report](#) is completed. See DCS Policy, [1.4, Incident Reporting](#) for notification requirements on who to send the report to. A copy is sent to the AU. As soon as the internet is accessible, the report is entered in the Electronic Records System.

Next Steps

The FSW/JSW completes the steps below:

1. Immediately verify that the incident was reported to LE and that the youth was placed into NCIC database as indicated above; if not reports incident to LE and follows procedures above.
2. If an endangered child alert is required for a serious medical issue, ensure medical records are current and all medical information has been obtained from the Contract Agency/Foster Parent. See: [Protocol: Amber Alert/Endangered Child Alert \(ECA\) Procedures](#).
3. Email the AU at EI_DCS.AbsconderUnit@tn.gov to report the youth has run away and within 24 (twenty-four) hours:
 - a) DCS Form [CS-0705, Notification Checklist for Absconders/Runaways/Escapees \(Part A\)](#), including social media user names;
 - b) A current photograph of the youth, a color photo is preferred; and
 - c) Proof of LE notification by providing the NCIC number.
4. Within 24 (twenty-four) hours the FSW/JSW files a report with the **National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC)** by going to the website: <http://cmfc.missingkids.org/home> or calling: 1-800-843-5678 (as directed by **P.L. 117348** Trafficking Victims Prevention and Protection Reauthorization Act of 2022). The AU provides follow up with the FSW/JSW within three (3) business days to ensure this step has been completed.

The FSW/JSW submits a report to NCMEC to include, where reasonably possible:

- a) A photo of the missing or abducted 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

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- c) 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.

Note: The FSW/JSW maintains regular communication with law enforcement and NCMEC in an effort to provide safe recovery, including sharing information pertaining to the child's or youth's recovery and circumstances related to recovery.

- 5. The following documents are sent the assigned investigator as soon as they are available:

- a) The petition, attachment/arrest order;
- b) The custody order; and
- c) The NCMEC poster, when available.

Note: Ensure copies of [CS-0705, Notification Checklist for Absconders/Runaways/Escapees \(Part A\)](#) are also sent to the persons listed on the form.

Note: If local LE refuses to enter a youth into the NCIC, the FSW/JSW requests that the AU contact LE to have the youth entered into NCIC. If local LE continues to refuse, AU staff reports the refusal to the **TBI Missing Children Clearing House at 1-800-TBIFIND (1-800-824-3463 Statewide)**.

- 6. Telephone the parent(s)/legal custodian to report the youth has run away as soon as possible.
- 7. Call or email the Regional Absconder Representative (RAR), TL and/or TC, and provide a preliminary report regarding the missing youth, as soon as possible. If the TL or TC is not available, contact the Regional Director/designee.
- 8. **The next business day** a petition is filed in the county where the youth ran. If the court will not allow a petition filed, then it is filed with the committing court. An arrest order/attachment is requested, and copies of both are obtained. If the committing court denies the petition the FSW/JSW contacts the TL/TC and the Regional General Counsel (RGC) for guidance to assist with a resolution.
- 9. During the custody intake process, [CS-0749, Penalty for Harboring Notice](#) is reviewed and signed with the parent/legal custodian. If the youth does run away, the FSW/JSW visits the home of the parent/legal custodian to review the harboring notice within the **first business day** after the youth runs away to discuss the importance of apprehending the youth expressing safety concerns. Tactfully discuss the laws and penalties for harboring a runaway youth. If youth is

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located at the parent/legal custodian's home and does not willingly return to custody, the FSW immediately notifies LE to have the youth taken into custody.

10. If an FSW/JSW, TL, or TC receives a tip on the whereabouts of a youth contact LE and the AU for assistance in investigating the tip. Staff who attempt to locate and return a runaway youth take safety precautions at all times and never place themselves at risk of harm.

Note: The FSW documents all activity in the youth's electronic case file in the Electronic Records System.

11. The FSW shares any information learned regarding the whereabouts of the youth with the AU Investigator.
12. Continue to make contacts below:
 - a) Makes one (1) unannounced home visit weekly for the first thirty (30) days. After the first thirty (30) days, the FSW makes one (1) unannounced home visit monthly.
 - b) Contact the /youth's parents/legal custodian by telephone at least two (2) times per month. Each parent is contacted if they do not live together.
 - c) Conduct a full diligent search immediately if the family has moved without notice to DCS.
13. The TL or TC meets with the FSW/JSW once per month to complete a case consultation, during which strategies likely to result in the apprehension of the runaway youth are discussed. These conferences are documented in the Electronic Records System by the TL or TC within five (5) business days. The AU is available to assist in identifying strategies.

Note: All JJ cases remain on active status until the youth is located or the case is closed.

14. The AU schedules monthly meetings with the Regional Absconder Representative and regional staff to review the cases for all youth on the run.

Additional Steps for Custodial Youth Placed at a Youth Development Center (YDC)

1. Any employee who observes or suspects an escape has occurred notifies the Central Operating Center (COC) and the Security Manager immediately. An emergency head count is conducted immediately to identify and confirm the number of escapees.
2. Upon confirmation of an escape, the YDC contingency plan is activated. The Superintendent, Juvenile Justice (JJ) Executive Director and Internal Affairs Division are notified immediately (during and after regular working hours).
3. The Security Manager/Designee coordinates a search for the escapee(s) and ensures that:

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- a) A sufficient number of on-duty personnel are assigned to the search operation while maintaining sufficient number of employee coverage to supervise the center's youth population.
 - b) Off duty personnel can be assigned for the search, if necessary, and employees in every job classification may be utilized in searches for escapes.
 - c) Information identifying the number and description of the escapee(s) is communicated to all employees involved in the search.
4. At the discretion of the Superintendent/designee, the following may occur:
- a) Information may be communicated to individuals in the surrounding community who are likely to encounter the escapee(s); and
 - b) Search procedures may be discontinued when it seems likely that the escapees are no longer in the vicinity of the YDC.
5. The Security Manager or designee notifies local LE and provides the child/youth's commitment order, photograph, form [CS-0060, Facility Face Sheet](#) and a description of the youth to assist with the apprehension of the child/youth.
6. The Security Manager/Designee completes form [CS-0311, Facility Incident Report](#) and enters the information into the Electronic Records System to document that escape and search procedures were performed. Documentation of interaction between YDC staff and LE is included in the report. If the internet is not accessible, complete form [CS-0496, Incident Report](#) and send to all required persons, see DCS Policy [1.4, Incident Reporting](#), for additional information. A copy of the incident report is sent to the Juvenile Justice (JJ) Executive Director within 24 (twenty-four) hours.
7. Within 24 (twenty-four) hours, the Residential Case Manager (RCM) or designee notifies:
- a) The youth's parents/legal custodian(s);
 - b) JSW and TL;
 - c) The afterhours on-call person; and
 - d) The AU and LE in the child/youth's home community is notified as soon as possible.

Responsibilities of Absconder Unit

1. When the AU is notified that a youth has run away, the case is assigned to an AU Investigator.

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2. Upon receipt of a case the investigator gathers facts, documents, and information to open an investigation.
3. The AU contacts (a call is preferable) the placement/foster home to interview persons who have relevant information, to find out how long the youth was missing before authorities were alerted, if anything happened that may have triggered the youth to run and gather other pertinent facts.
4. The FSW/JSW is contacted and reminded to file a report on the [National Center for Missing and Exploited Children \(NCMEC\)](#) website, to share possible locations the youth may go, submit documents noted above in the Next Steps section, and to schedule time to make a home visit.
5. The Investigator contacts those who may have information on the location of the youth such as parents, family members, school personnel, LE and check social media sites.