



Tennessee Department of Children's Services
Protocol for Search Procedures

Supplemental to DCS Policy: [31.4, Search Procedures](#)

General Search Information

1. Employees are required to conduct search procedures as outlined by DCS policy [31.4, Search Procedures](#) and this protocol. Failure to do so may result in disciplinary action.
2. Employees who fail to perform searches do so at their own risk and understand this decision could place their personal safety at risk, as well as the personal safety of those around them.
3. It is **preferred** that two individuals, one Department of Children's Services (DCS) employee and a witness (can be another DCS employee), be present during **any** search procedure, both during business hours and any after-hours duties (i.e. on-call).
4. Witnesses are at the discretion of the DCS or Contract Agency employee but should be a presumably honest party, without a known or perceived conflict of interest, that can testify in court proceedings regarding the search procedure and the result of said search.
 - a) Those NOT permitted to act as witnesses are as follows: DCS attorneys, private attorneys, other children/youth, the parents, guardians, or family of custodial children/youth, and any other party deemed to have, or is perceived to have, a conflict of interest in the matter.
5. DCS employees and Contract Agency employees who fail to use a witness during a search procedure do so at their own risk and understand that failure to do so could result in risks to their personal safety, the personal safety of those around them, and/or allegations being made against them. All allegations will be investigated according to DCS policy and state law.
 - a) If an appropriate witness is unavailable, staff may enlist the assistance of local Law Enforcement, where possible.
 - b) DCS and Contract Agency employees will inform the child/youth/individual being searched of the reason for any search procedure prior to it occurring. When possible, DCS will also inform a parent or guardian of a child/youth search prior to that child/youth being searched (this does not apply to visual searches).

Original Effective Date: 2/9/2026
Current Effective Date: 2/9/2026
Supersedes: None
Supplemental to: 31.4
RDA SW22

Protocol for Search Procedures

6. All employees and staff engaging in search procedures will take into consideration any potential trauma history of the person being searched, how said search could impact that individual, and use the least intrusive search method that will achieve the desired results.
7. All searches will be performed in a trauma-informed manner and in a private location that respects the personal privacy and confidentiality of the individual being searched.
8. All searches should be completed in a manner that is respectful to the child/youth/individual being searched, as well as their property/belongings, and maintains dignity and privacy to the fullest extent possible.
9. If a child/youth/individual declines a search request, and there is a perceived or reasonable suspicion of a threat or danger, Law Enforcement (LE) may be contacted for assistance.
10. Body cavity searches are prohibited and are not to be performed under any circumstances.

Search Specifications

DCS conducts searches for the purpose of ensuring safety and reserves the right to perform inspections of an individual's person and/or belongings to locate contraband that may prove harmful to DCS personnel, Contract Agency staff, volunteers, and the children, families, and visitors the agency serves.

Types of Searches

The types of allowable searches and an explanation of each search type, are listed below. For information as to whom searches apply and the employees permitted to complete searches, see the quick reference table in number five (5) of this section.

1. Visual Search: A contactless, person-driven search, this type of search is a visual inspection of an individual's appearance. The person searched may be requested to turn out their pockets or open their bags/belongings for visual inspection by DCS and/or Contract Agency employees. The use of standard scanning equipment, such as metal detectors or wands, designed to detect metal or dense objects may be utilized. Only trained employees may use scanning equipment, and the employee will ensure no physical contact occurs during the search process.
 - a) Frequency: On-going at all times.
2. Item Search: This search is an inspection of the items and/or belongings on an individual's person and in their possession. All items and/or belongings will be opened by the DCS or Contract agency employee and inspected for weapons and/or contraband.
 - a) Frequency: As needed and routinely with custodial children/youth in the following instances:

Original Effective Date: 2/9/2026
Current Effective Date: 2/9/2026
Supersedes: None
Supplemental to: 31.4
RDA SW22

Protocol for Search Procedures

- ◆ Upon entry or re-entry into DCS custody;
 - ◆ At all stops during transport or change of vehicle;
 - Searches conducted prior to transporting a child/youth are to be documented on [CS-0350, Transportation Report](#).
 - Efforts must be made, both during and after business hours, prior to transporting a custodial child/youth to ensure their personal property is stored and/or located outside their reach, unless the property has been thoroughly searched and deemed free of weapons/contraband.
 - Any personal belongings being transported with a child/youth returning from a trial home visit or returning from runaway are searched.
 - ◆ During any change of placement;
 - ◆ Before and after any visitation, supervised or unsupervised;
 - ◆ Each time a child/youth leaves the direct supervision of the responsible DCS or Contract Agency employee.
 - ◆ At any point there are concerns a child/youth may possess weapons/contraband or there is concern for the safety of the child/youth or those around them.
3. Pat Downs: This search involves physical contact between the DCS or Contract Agency employee with the child/youth being searched and is a pat down inspection of the child/youth's body/person to determine the presence of any items that could prove harmful to themselves or others. Private areas (i.e., areas which are covered by undergarments) are not to be touched while executing this search. A staff member of the same gender should perform the search.
- a) Frequency: As needed.
4. Clothing Search: An inspection of the child/youth's clothing, this search involves the DCS or Contract Agency employee requesting the child/youth to remove their clothing for examination. This is not a strip search, and the child/youth will be provided a private location in which to remove their clothing. The clothing will then be handed to the DCS or Contract Agency employee, waiting outside the private location, for inspection. Children/youth are not to be viewed naked under any circumstances.

Protocol for Search Procedures

a) Frequency: Only when a child/youth engages in suspicious activity, which could indicate possible concealed contraband, or when there is a need to take precautions for safety, such as if there is a concern the child may pose a risk to themselves or others.

NOTE: At no time during the performance of searches will there be physical contact between the DCS employee performing the search and the volunteer, visitor, DCS employee, or Contract Agency staff member being searched by the DCS employee. Searches of these individuals will always be contactless. Should there be a safety concern that warrants a search involving physical contact or more invasive procedures, Law Enforcement (LE) should be called.

5. Quick Reference Table: The table below provides information for which employees are permitted and not permitted to conduct various types of searches.

Employee Group Types:

Youth Development Center = YDC

Contract Agency = CA

Department of Children’s Services = DCS

Types of Searches	Applicable To:					
	Children/Youth 11 and younger	Children/Youth 12 and up	DCS Staff	Contract Agency Staff	Visitors	Volunteers
Visual	All Employee Types	All Employee Types	All Employee Types	All Employee Types	All Employee Types	All Employee Types
Item	All Employee Types	All Employee Types	All Employee Types	All Employee Types	All Employee Types	All Employee Types
Pat Down	*All Employee Types	*All Employee Types	YDC only	YDC only	YDC only	YDC only
Clothing	Prohibited	DCS & YDC only	Prohibited	Prohibited	Prohibited	Prohibited
Unclothed	YDC only	YDC only	Prohibited	Prohibited	Prohibited	Prohibited
Body Cavity	Prohibited					

* A pat down search may also be utilized for children/youth aged 11 (eleven) or younger when there is a concern the child/youth may possess contraband or pose a safety risk to themselves or others. For children/youth awaiting placement in a transitional home setting, a pat down search is to be completed upon the child/youth’s arrival to the transitional house. If a youth who identifies as transgender or intersex requires a pat down search, the staff will provide the youth with form [CS-1219, Search Request for Transgender and Intersex Youth](#).

Protocol for Search Procedures

Searches of Custodial Children/Youth in a Youth Development or Detention Center

Children/youth placed in a Youth Development Center (YDC) or Contract Agency Detention Center are subject to the same search types and regulations as referenced above in this protocol. However, additional information specific to these facilities is listed below.

1. Upon initial placement, the Contract Agency facility employee notifies the child/youth/parents/guardians of any searches required to be completed during the intake process, through provision and explanation of the child/youth's Rights and Responsibilities.
 - a) The Contract Agency facility employee is responsible for documenting this notification in the initial monthly summary.
2. The YDC or Detention Center Case Manager will discuss the possibility of random searches of the child/youth and their private property, room, or area and provide the child/youth/parents/guardians an explanation of and a copy of the [**Youth Handbook for Tennessee Youth Development Centers**](#).
 - a) The YDC or Detention Center Case Manager is responsible for documenting this notification in the Electronic Record System.
3. Unclothed Search:

This type of search occurs only in the YDC or Detention Center setting and is a visual inspection (e.g., looking in the mouth, ears, having youth spread buttocks, etc.) of the child/youth's unclothed body. The unclothed search is only permissible during the following situations:

 - a) When a child/youth *initially* enters a YDC or Contract Agency Detention Center.
 - ◆ An initial, unclothed search is considered a routine part of the intake process at a YDC/Detention Center and only requires Incident Reporting when weapons/contraband are found.
 - b) When a child/youth has traveled outside the facility and was without the direct supervision of a staff member for any amount of time.
 - c) There is reasonable suspicion that a child/youth is concealing an item that may be used as a weapon or may have other contraband that could endanger his/her well-being or the well-being of others.

Protocol for Search Procedures

- ◆ The use of an unclothed search for reasonable suspicion must be approved by the YDC Superintendent or Contract Agency Director of the facility and thoroughly documented in an Incident Report (IR).
- d) All unclothed searches that occur *after* the initial intake search, require the completion of an Incident Report (IR), regardless of if weapons/contraband are found.
- e) If a youth who identifies as transgender or intersex requires an unclothed search, the staff will provide the youth with form [CS-1219, Search Request for Transgender and Intersex Youth](#).

Foster Parent Involvement in Searches

1. Foster parents are to only act as observers to any search procedure.
2. It is preferred that two (2) DCS or Contract Agency employees conduct any necessary searches in which foster parents are present, if possible (i.e. foster parents could be perceived to have a conflict of interest if they are a potential adoptive placement or related to the child/family).
3. If a custodial child/youth has a history of concealing contraband, safety issues, or if there is a justified legal reason, the Child and Family Team may complete [CS-1044, Child/Youth Safety Plan](#) during a Child and Family Team Meeting to address alternative search procedures.

Documentation of Search Procedures for Custodial Children/Youth

1. Child/youth searches in which Law Enforcement is contacted require the completion of an Incident Report (IR).
2. An Incident Report must also be completed for all searches involving custodial children/youth in which weapons/contraband are found.
3. Incident Reports should include the following documentation:
 - a) The employees involved.
 - b) Other involved persons and their title/role.
 - c) Reason for the search, including reasonable cause for the search and assessed risk of harm to the child/youth or others that triggered the search.
 - d) Location of the search (i.e. building, facility, parking lot, etc.).

Protocol for Search Procedures

- e) Problems/issues encountered during the search.
4. The DCS or Contract Agency employee will document weapons/contraband found during the search by completing [CS-1099, Search and Contraband Chain of Custody/Possession](#).
 - a) The child/youth should verify the list of items confiscated and listed on the form and sign/date.
 - b) Should the child/youth refuse to sign, the employee and witness, if applicable, will note the refusal on [CS-1099, Search and Contraband Chain of Custody/Possession](#) and also sign/date the form. The form will then be uploaded to the Electronic Record System.
5. The following will be documented for any search procedure that results in the completion of an IR:
 - a) Employees involved.
 - b) Other involved persons and their title/role.
 - c) Reason for the search, including reasonable cause for the search and assessed risk of harm to the child/youth or others that triggered the need for the search.
 - d) Location of the search (i.e. building, facility, parking lot, etc.).
 - e) Problems/issues encountered during the search.
 - f) Items confiscated, if any, and means of disposition.

Documentation of Search Procedures for DCS/Contract Agency Employees, Volunteers, and Visitors

1. If the visitor or volunteer, on which contraband is found, is associated with an open DCS case, the incident will be documented in the Electronic Record System under the child/youth's case.
2. Written notification for Contract Agency employees found to be in possession of weapons/contraband will be provided to the Contract Agency Director/leadership for follow-up. If it is determined the contraband posed a risk to any child/youth, a Child Protective Services (CPS) referral will be made in accordance with state law.
3. DCS employees and volunteers found to have weapons/contraband on the premises of any DCS property will be reported to their immediate supervisor, who will notify DCS leadership in writing up the chain of command for further follow-up. DCS volunteers are subject to being dismissed

Protocol for Search Procedures

from their volunteer status while DCS employees are subject to disciplinary action, up to and including termination of employment, as per DCS policy [4.9, Employee Disciplinary Actions and Mediation Process](#).

Disposal of Confiscated Contraband

1. Law Enforcement will be contacted when illegal items, weapons, or other forms of contraband are found during a search of a visitor, volunteer, or DCS or Contract Agency employee.
 - a) For DCS employees/staff, an Internal Affairs referral will be made for further investigation when contraband is found (see DCS policy [1.16, Internal Affairs Investigations](#) for more information).
2. Confiscated contraband is not to be returned to the child/youth. Non-illegal contraband will be returned to the child/youth's parents/guardians or otherwise rightful owner.
3. Any illegal contraband must be surrendered to Law Enforcement.
4. Contract Agencies use their agency's protocols when disposing of confiscated contraband.
5. In the YDC environment, confiscated contraband must be handled in accordance with DCS policy [27.21, Contraband Collection and Disposition](#).

Administrative Review of Search Procedures

1. An administrative review is completed on all searches conducted by DCS and Contract Agency providers that result in the completion of an Incident Report. This review will occur during monthly/quarterly aggregate Incident Report (IR) reviews. Team Leaders/Supervisors ensure that documentation of a search of a child/youth is entered in case recordings in the Electronic Case File.
2. Case specific reviews are conducted based on the location of the completed search procedure, as noted below.
 - a) YDC: The Superintendent is responsible for reviewing and signing off on any completed Incident Reports for any search that results in finding weapons/contraband or any unclothed search that occurs after the initial intake.
 - b) Contract Agencies: The agency identifies a designee to conduct administrative reviews.
 - ◆ DCS Foster Homes: The Team Leader and/or Team Coordinator for the Placement Division/Foster Care Support conduct any needed administrative reviews.

Protocol for Search Procedures

- ◆ For searches conducted in any other location, such as in transitional homes, DCS offices, within the community, etc. by DCS frontline staff, the Team Leader and/or Team Coordinator will conduct needed administrative reviews.

Training Requirements for DCS and Contract Agency Employees

1. All DCS employees that may be responsible for conducting search procedures, or may be requested to assist in performing a search procedure, must complete Computer-Based Training (CBT) or face-to-face training on the different search types and techniques, as well as the appropriate usage of each.
2. Contract Agency facilities will provide search procedure training to employees during the staff training process and record documentation of said training in the employee's personnel file.
3. YDC employees will receive training during preservice and every other year thereafter. Completion of the training is kept in the employee's training file.

Glossary:

- ◆ Non-Routine Search:
 - Searches that are out of the ordinary and not standard procedure. There is "reasonable suspicion" that a person possesses contraband that may warrant such a search.
- ◆ Reasonable Suspicion:
 - Situations or actions by a child/youth which are sufficient to cause a reasonable belief by staff, taking into account his or her training and experience, to believe that the child/youth to be detained for a search was, or is about to be, involved in criminal or prohibited activity.

Forms:

[CS-0350, Transportation Report](#)

[CS-0670, Foster Parent Oath to Abide](#)

[CS-1044, Child/Youth Safety Plan](#)

[CS-1099, Search and Contraband Chain of Custody/Possession](#)

[CS- 1219, Search Request for Transgender and Intersex Youth](#)

Collateral Documents:

Original Effective Date: 2/9/2026
Current Effective Date: 2/9/2026
Supersedes: None
Supplemental to: 31.4
RDA SW22

Protocol for Search Procedures

[31.4, Search Procedures](#)

[4.9, Employee Disciplinary Actions and Mediation Process](#)

[1.16, Internal Affairs Investigations](#)

[27.21 Contraband Collection and Disposition](#)

[Youth Handbook for a Tennessee Youth Development Center](#)