



Policy Number:	SSA/CW #26-11
Policy Title:	Children in the Care or Custody of the Department of Human Services Who are Missing
Release Date:	August 17, 2026
Effective Date:	September 1, 2026
Approved By:	Dr. Alger M. Studstill, Jr.  Executive Director Social Services Administration
Revision Date(s):	N/A
Supersedes:	SSA/CW #23-01 Children and Young Adults in State Care or Under State Supervision Who are Missing
Originating Office:	Office of Child and Family Well-Being Out-of-Home Care: dmissingreports_dhs@maryland.gov
Summary of Change:	Updates mandatory reporting requirements for children who run away from placement or are missing while in out-of-home care, are under a shelter care order, or under an emergency shelter authorization. Children who run away or are missing are no longer reported under the "Critical Incident Notification Policy."
Required Actions:	LDSS must immediately report children who are missing or who run away from placement to the police, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, and SSA. LDSS must make consistent efforts to locate a child who is missing from placement and must document such efforts until the child is located or the child's case closes.
Key Words:	Out-of-home care, missing child, runaway, human trafficking.

Related Federal Law	42 U.S.C. § 671 (a)(9) ; and 42 U.S.C. § 671(a)(34) (A) ; and 42 U.S.C. § 671(a)(35)(A)and (B) ; and 18 U.S.C. § 2258A ,
Related State Laws	Md. Code Ann., Family Law Article § 5-701 Md. Code Ann., Family Law Article §§9-401 through 403 ; Md.Code Ann. Courts and Judicial Proceedings § 3-801 and § 3-821 . Md. Code, Ann. Public Safety Article §3-601(a)(1)
COMAR	COMAR 07.02.07.04.C COMAR 07.02.11.03. COMAR 07.02.11.04.B. COMAR 07.02.11.18.
State Plan Implications?	Yes

Purpose and Summary

This policy directs how the Social Services Administration (SSA) and Local Departments of Social Services (LDSS) must respond when a child runs away from, or is missing from a placement without authorization or when the child's whereabouts are unknown. LDSS are required to designate a Missing and Runaway Youth Lead who will participate in all meetings regarding a child who is missing with SSA and to learn best practices.

This policy applies to children for whom the state agency is responsible for placement, care, or supervision. This includes children under a shelter care order or children for whom the LDSS has assumed custody under an emergency shelter authorization, as well as young adults who have exited care and continue to receive Chafee services.

Children are considered missing if they leave, run away, or otherwise go missing from their placement, or from an off-site location, such as school or an appointment. This policy does not apply if a child fails to abide by a curfew set by the care provider but is at a known location or has affirmatively expressed an intent to return.

SSA developed policies, procedures, and resources, including training for caseworkers, to enable LDSS to identify and provide appropriate services for any child or young adult for whom an LDSS has responsibility for placement, care, or supervision. These were created in consultation with State and local law enforcement, juvenile justice, health care providers, education agencies, and organizations with experience in dealing with at-risk youth. These efforts specifically address cases where the agency

has reason to believe a child is, or is at risk of being, a sex trafficking victim. This includes children for whom the LDSS has an open case but has not yet been removed from the home. [See SSA CW # 23-02 Trafficking Response in Child Welfare.](#)

Related Laws and Regulations

The [State Plan for foster care and adoption assistance, 42 U.S.C. §§ 671\(a\)\(9\), 42 U.S.C. § 671\(a\)\(34\)\(A\), and 42 U.S.C. § 671\(a\)\(35\)\(A\) and \(B\)](#), requires States to implement protocols for ensuring the safety of youth in out-of-home (OOH) care, including reporting missing children or children who may be trafficked to law enforcement and making attempts to locate such children. This policy also includes procedures required by [42 U.S.C. § 671 \(a\)\(9\)\(C\)\(i\)\(I\)](#) to identify, document, and determine appropriate services with respect to any child or youth over whom the State agency has responsibility for placement, care, or supervision and the State has reasonable cause to believe is, or is at risk of being, a sex trafficking victim (including children for whom the agency has an open case file but who have not been removed from the home, children who have run away from out-of-home care and who have not attained 21 years of age).

[Md. Ann. Code, Family Law Article § 5-701](#) and [Md. Ann. Code, Courts and Judicial Proceedings § 3-801](#) provides definitions used in this policy that define human trafficking. [Md. Ann. Code § 3-821](#) authorizes the court to issue orders controlling the conduct of an individual under certain conditions. [Md. Ann. Code, Family Law Article § 9-401 through § 403](#) describe law enforcement's role in receiving missing persons reports. [COMAR 07.02.11.18](#) sets out the steps the LDSS must take when a child in an OOH placement has run away or whose whereabouts are unknown.

Definitions

Chafee services – Any independent living services for youth aged 14 to 23 that are paid for by the John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood (Chafee program) funds. Children are eligible for Chafee services up to 23 if they were in care at age 18 or if they exited care after the age of 16 to adoption or guardianship.

Child – An individual younger than 18 years old, or between 18 and 21 years old if the court retains jurisdiction over the child and the individual meets eligibility requirements for OOH placement as outlined in [COMAR 07.02.11.04. B.](#)

Child Juvenile & Adult Management System (CJAMS) – The approved online case management system for all Maryland child and adult

welfare cases.

Emergency shelter authorization – The legal authority that permits an LDSS to immediately assume temporary protective custody of a child and place them into emergency OOH care without prior court approval when:

1. Placement is required to protect the child from serious, immediate danger;
2. There is no parent, guardian, custodian, relative, or other person able to provide supervision; and
3. Continued placement in the child's home is contrary to the welfare of the child, and removal is reasonable under the circumstances.

Labor trafficking – Is knowingly:

1. Taking, placing, harboring, persuading, inducing, or enticing a child by force, fraud, or coercion to provide services or labor; or
2. Receiving a benefit or thing of value from the provision of services or labor by a child that was induced by force, fraud, or coercion.

Local department – Is a LDSS in a county, Baltimore City, or the Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services.

Media worthy event – An allegation of maltreatment reported to the LDSS that has generated or is likely to generate public attention, creating the potential for media coverage by news outlets, social media, and other forms of public communication.

Missing Youth Lead – A staff person designated by each LDSS to serve as the LDSS point of contact for cases involving children who have run away or remained missing for more than 30 days. Inform SSA of the staff member who is the Missing Youth Lead, including their contact information, in the [List of LDSS Missing Youth Leads](#).

Out-of-home care – A placement of a child into foster care, kinship care, group care, or residential treatment care.

Runaway – A child in an OOH placement who absents himself or herself from home or a place of legal residence without the permission of a parent, caregiver, or placement provider. This includes children that refuse to return to their placement.

Sex trafficking – The recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, obtaining, patronizing, or soliciting of a child for the purpose of a commercial sex act.

Shelter care – A temporary placement of a child outside of the home at any time before disposition. When the child is first taken into custody, shelter care is authorized by the local department of social services. This authorization must be reviewed and approved by the court the next court day.

Whereabouts unknown or missing – If the child is not in the physical custody of the LDSS, or person or institution with whom the child has been placed, the child's whereabouts are unknown, and the LDSS does not consider the child to have run away. This designation specifically applies when the child's absence is involuntary and not the result of them exercising independent agency to leave.

Procedures And Timeframes

1. Reporting a Child Missing from Placement

When a child in the care, custody, or supervision of the LDSS has run away or is missing, the caseworker must immediately, and no later than 24 hours after the LDSS learns the child is missing, complete the following actions:

- 1.1. File a missing persons report with the police in the jurisdiction where the child went missing or ran away from, and obtain a police report number;
 - 1.1.1. If the law enforcement agency refuses to accept a report, the worker shall document the name and badge number of the individual they spoke with, obtain any type of reference number to the call, and document this information in CJAMS.
 - 1.1.2. If the worker believes that a report should have been accepted, then the worker shall immediately staff the situation with a supervisor and the Assistant Director to determine if escalation to a law enforcement supervisor is warranted.
- 1.2. Request that the police enter the child's name in the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) database; and
 - 1.2.1. Document this request in CJAMS, along with any other information obtained from the police;
- 1.3. File a missing child report with the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) on their website at <https://cmfc.missingkids.org/reportit/Account/LogOn>, or by calling 1-800-THE LOST.
 - 1.3.1. See subsection 2 below for the content of the report to be filed with law enforcement and NCMEC;
- 1.4. Update the child's living arrangement to "runaway" in CJAMS; and;

- 1.5. Consult with the supervisor to determine if the details of a missing or runaway child could be considered media-worthy and if so, notify DHS Leadership within two hours of learning the child is missing. (See [SSA/CW# 25-06 "Critical Incident Notification Policy."](#))

2. Content of Reports

The caseworker must include, where reasonably possible, the following information in a report to law enforcement and the NCMEC:

- 2.1. The child's full name;
- 2.2. A recent photo of the child;
- 2.3. The child's date of birth;
- 2.4. A description of the child's physical features and what the child was wearing when last seen;
- 2.5. The child's gender (assigned at birth and gender identity), height, weight, ethnicity, race, and hair and eye color;
- 2.6. Endangerment information, such as the child's pregnancy status, prescription medications, risk of suicide, vulnerability to being sex trafficked, and other health, mental health or risk factors;
- 2.7. The date the child went missing;
- 2.8. The city and state from where the child went missing;
- 2.9. The name, address, and contact information of the child's parent, and the guardian's information
- 2.10. Kinship care or OOH placement provider and contact information;
- 2.11. LDSS name, caseworker's and supervisor's name, telephone number, and email address as well as information for after-hours; and
- 2.12. To NCMEC, provide the law enforcement information, including the LDSS name, telephone, and police report number.

3. Police Response

The police cannot legally insist on a waiting period before taking a report of a missing child ([Md. Code Ann., Pub. Safety Art. §3-601\(a\)\(1\)](#)).

- 3.1. If the police will not take a report concerning a child over 18, the caseworker must document at least one attempt to have the police take a report and their response in CJAMS.
 - 3.1.1. If the youth has significant special needs or risk factors, multiple attempts should be made at the discretion of the LDSS. Document each attempt and the police response in CJAMS.
- 3.2. If the police refuse to accept a report, particularly for a child over 18 with special needs, the caseworker should emphasize to the police the need to have a report taken due to the child's

physical, mental, or intellectual disabilities or illness.

- 3.2.1. If the worker believes that a report should have been accepted, then the worker shall immediately staff the situation with a supervisor and the Assistant Director to determine if escalation to a law enforcement supervisor is warranted.

4. Initial Notification of Partners

- 4.1. Within 24 hours of learning that a child is missing or has run away, the LDSS must notify:
 - 4.1.1. The attorneys representing the child, the parents, and the LDSS; and
 - 4.1.2. The child's parents or guardians unless the LDSS determines it is contrary to the child's best interest.
 - 4.1.2.1. The LDSS must document the reasons for not notifying the parents or guardians in CJAMS.
- 4.2. If parental rights have been terminated, the LDSS may notify the parents or guardian whose rights were terminated if they have maintained contact with the child and can provide information about the child's whereabouts.
- 4.3. As practically and clinically appropriate, the caseworker may consult other individuals (e.g., the resource parent, other adults with whom the child has resided, the child's friends, employers, school staff, and neighborhood acquaintances) to obtain information about the child to share with authorities. This includes information regarding where the child might be, places frequented by the child, and relevant information that is publicly available on social media.
 - 4.3.1. The LDSS may monitor publicly available information on social media. The LDSS must not publicly post or chat on social media.

5. Notifying SSA

The LDSS must take the following actions within 24 hours of being notified of the child's absence:

- 5.1. Electronically complete the [Missing from DSS Report](#), which will be automatically submitted to SSA when completed; and
- 5.2. Upload a copy of the Missing from Placement Report responses into CJAMS; and
- 5.3. Questions about completing this notification should be emailed to dlmissingreports_dhs@maryland.gov.

6. Efforts to Locate the Child

At least weekly, the LDSS must make efforts to contact and locate the child until the child is located or the court closes the CINA case.

Efforts should include:

- 6.1. Conversations with close contacts such as family and friends, for any new information about contact with the child;
- 6.2. Checking with the child's school;
- 6.3. Monitoring the child's social media accounts (if public);
- 6.4. Calling and texting the child's cell phone and sending them emails;
 - 6.4.1. If the child is responding, make efforts to meet the youth face-to-face, to assess their well-being and safety, and discuss how they can return to a licensed setting and maintain contact with the LDSS and child's attorney.
- 6.5. Visiting areas that the child may frequent, including possible residences or placement sites; place of employment and other community resources (e.g., shelters, community centers);
- 6.6. Contacting NCMEC to provide any additional information required and to receive any information related to the child's location; and
- 6.7. Searching the [Immigration and Customs Enforcement database](#) for detainees or deportees age 18 and older, if applicable.

7. Ongoing Communication with Other Partners

On a weekly basis, the LDSS must communicate with the following partners, as appropriate:

- 7.1. Law enforcement to share any leads regarding the child's whereabouts;
- 7.2. Law enforcement in other state(s) if the caseworker receives information that the child may be residing in another state and the agency in the state where the child was placed;
- 7.3. The parents or guardians, updating them as appropriate;
- 7.4. The child's attorney, updating them about the efforts to locate the child and, if known, the child's whereabouts;
- 7.5. The resource provider, to maintain contact and pursue any information as to the child's whereabouts, while the placement remains open; and
- 7.6. If at any time the circumstances of the runaway or missing child change and may be considered media-worthy, follow protocol for critical incidents in [SSA/CW# 25-06 Critical Incident Notification Policy](#).

8. Continued Placement

- 8.1. The LDSS may continue to pay a placement provider for up to 30 days from the date the child left the place of residence, if the provider is willing to hold the placement. Unless negotiated with the placement provider, after 30 days, the LDSS must end-date the child's placement in CJAMS.

9. LDSS Missing Youth Lead

The LDSS Missing Youth Lead(s) serves as the local subject matter expert (SME) on missing children practices and provides ongoing consultation and technical assistance to local department staff. Responsibilities include:

- 9.1. Attend the staffing for a child missing for 30 calendar days, and provide guidance on additional resources and actions to take.
- 9.2. Participate in any training on missing and runaway youth that is provided.
- 9.3. Facilitating or coordinating training opportunities for local staff and sharing knowledge gained through external training.
- 9.4. Supporting local staff with effective use of NCMEC resources.
- 9.5. Serving as the primary local resource to support staff in developing creative and individualized strategies for locating missing children and youth.
- 9.6. Building and maintaining collaborative relationships with local law enforcement and other community partners to strengthen coordination and response efforts.

10. Staffing Procedure for Missing or Runaway Children

If a child has been missing or on runaway status for 30 calendar days the LDSS must hold an internal staffing with the child's caseworker, the supervisor, the program manager, director or director's designee, and the LDSS Missing Youth Lead, as well as the SSA Youth Services Coordinator.

- 10.1. The internal [Efforts to Locate Youth Missing for 30 Days Form](#) must be completed during the staffing and submitted to SSA by email at dlmissingreports_dhs@maryland.gov.
 - 10.1.1. LDSS may invite additional attendees to the staffing such as the parent or legal guardian, the child's and the LDSS attorney, educational representative, resource parent or kinship caregiver, therapist or counselor, or Regional Human Trafficking Navigator.

- 10.2. The LDSS must hold this staffing and complete the “Efforts to Locate the Youth Missing for 30 Days Form” within 5 business days of the youth being missing for 30 calendar days.
 - 10.2.1. If the youth continues to be on missing or runaway status the LDSS must hold an internal staffing every 60 days thereafter.
- 10.3. SSA may make recommendations for the LDSS’ action plan to locate the child.

11. When a Child is Located

- 11.1. If the child is sheltered or in the custody of the LDSS the LDSS must complete the following tasks:
 - 11.1.1. The LDSS shall ensure the child has transportation to the LDSS regardless of the child’s location or who notifies the LDSS of the child’s whereabouts
 - 11.1.1.1. The LDSS can arrange and pay for the transportation of the child; however, the ultimate responsibility of transportation rests with the LDSS.
 - 11.1.1.2. Local law enforcement is not responsible for the transportation of a child unless there are safety concerns and if that is the case then there shall be a discussion held with LDSS leadership and Law Enforcement leadership to coordinate resources.
 - 11.1.2. Change the child’s living arrangement in CJAMS to no longer reflect the runaway status; and
 - 11.1.3. Arrange to have the child medically examined as soon as reasonably possible and, preferably, within 24 hours of return;
 - 11.1.3.1. If the youth refuses to cooperate with a medical exam, follow the documentation protocol in [SSA CW #25-08 Health Care Services Oversight and Monitoring](#).
- 11.2. If the child is under an Order Controlling Conduct, or an Order of Protective Supervision:
 - 11.2.1. Issue a new emergency shelter care authorization and obtain placement for the child;
 - 11.2.2. Notify the court, attorneys, and, unless TPR has occurred, the child’s parents that the child has been located;
 - 11.2.3. Notify law enforcement of the child’s return and circumstances related to the return, and request that the child’s name be removed from the NCIC database; and

11.2.4. Notify NCMEC that the child has been located.

12. Meeting With the Child Upon Their Return

The LDSS must meet with the child upon their return to discuss the details of the child's absence from placement and to assess services the child may need.

12.1. Within 2 business days of the child's return, the caseworker must conduct a face-to-face visit with the child and complete a [SAFE-C OHP](#), including a discussion of:

12.1.1. Why the child ran away and what might deter the child from running away again;

12.1.2. Where and with whom the child was residing, and how the child's needs were being met;

12.1.3. The child's experiences while missing and services needed; and

12.1.4. The caseworker should closely observe the child for any evidence of physical abuse, substance abuse, new tattoos or branding, and any other cosmetic changes to the child.

12.1.5. The caseworker should pay close attention to any unexplained purchases such as new clothes, a cell phone, sex paraphernalia, large amounts of cash, or any other possessions or conduct indicative of human trafficking.

12.1.6. To minimize the risk of the child running away again or otherwise leaving the placement, the caseworker must discuss with the child how to prevent a recurrence and, when appropriate, the child's parent or caregiver, including a resource provider, should be involved in that conversation.

12.2. The LDSS must also screen the child for Human Trafficking during the first meeting with the child after they return, as per [SSA CW # 23-02 Trafficking Response in Child Welfare](#). The caseworker must use the [Quick Youth Indicators for Trafficking \(QYIT\) tool](#) to conduct the screening. If the child answers "yes" to any QYIT item or the child discloses being trafficked, the LDSS must ;

12.2.1. Report human trafficking to the local LDSS Child Protective Services (CPS) screening unit or to the Maryland Child and Adult Protective Services Hotline at 1-800-917-7383

12.2.2. Report trafficking and alleged traffickers to state and federal authorities (if known); and

12.2.3. Refer the child to the Governor's Office of Crime

Prevention and Policy's, [Regional Navigator Program](#) for services.

- 12.3. The caseworker must document the conversation held with the child while administering the SAFE-C OHP and the QYIT in detail in CJAMS including how the worker addressed the factors that led to the child running away or going missing, what occurred while missing, and detail any services the caseworker put in place, or will put in place, for the child.

13. Child Over Age 18 is Not Located

If a child is not located prior to their 18th birthday, the LDSS may request case closure at the next court hearing after their 18th birthday. If a child is found prior to their 21st birthday, they are eligible for [Enhanced VPA](#) and [Independent Living Aftercare Services](#).

DOCUMENTATION

The LDSS must document unsuccessful contact attempts with the youth as “attempted” contacts, not “completed” contacts for the monthly face-to-face. Such attempts must include a summary of actions taken to contact the child, such as texting, calling, and visiting areas the child frequents, etc. Any collateral contact with law enforcement, relatives, parents, etc., can be documented as a completed contact.

Table A: Documentation Requirements For Children In OOH Care Who Are Missing Or Runaway

Documentation Timeframe	Action To Take	Where to Document in CJAMS
Within 24 hours of learning the child ran away or is missing	Update the child's living arrangement to “runaway”	The living arrangement screen.
	Notify law enforcement that the child ran away or is missing and obtain a copy of the police report	New contact note. Upload a copy of the police report, including the complaint number to the documents tab
	Notify NCMEC ,	Upload the NCMEC entry to the documents tab
	Notify the parents or legal guardians, and attorneys	New contact note to document notification

Documentation Timeframe	Action To Take	Where to Document in CJAMS
	representing the child, the parents, and the LDSS.	or why the parent/ legal guardian was not notified.
Within 24 hours of being notified the child ran away or is missing	Complete the “ Missing from DSS Report ”	Upload into the documents tab
Weekly, while the child is still missing	Document efforts to locate, contact with partners and relevant updates.	New contact note with details of how the LDSS tried to locate the child.
A child is missing for 30 calendar days	Hold internal LDSS staffing and complete Efforts to Locate Youth Missing for 30 Days Form	Email form to: dlmissingreports_dhs@maryland.gov And upload to CJAMS documents.
AFTER THE CHILD HAS BEEN LOCATED		
Within 24 hours of the child being located	Notify the court, attorneys, NCMEC, and the police (if the police did not locate the child).	New contact note.
	Notify the child's parents or guardian that the child has been located.	New contact note.
	Arrange a medical exam	Upload documentation into the Health tab
	Update the child's living arrangement	Update living arrangement screen
Within 2 days of the child being located	The LDSS must have face-to-face contact with the child and complete:	Complete both assessments in the assessments tab.

Documentation Timeframe	Action To Take	Where to Document in CJAMS
	1. SAFE-C OHP 2. QYIT.	
Within 24 hours of the QYIT being completed IF any response is "Yes":	1. Report the human trafficking to the LDSS CPS Unit or the Maryland Child and Adult Protective Services Hotline. 2. Report the human trafficking to law enforcement 3. Refer the child to the Governor's Office of Crime Prevention and Policy's, Regional Navigator Program for services.	1. New contact note for the CPS or APS report. 2. Add a second contact note with the police report and case number.

FORMS AND ATTACHMENTS

[Quick Youth Indicators for Trafficking \(QYIT\) tool](#)
[Children Missing from DSS Report](#) (Google Form Submission)
[Efforts to Locate Youth Missing for 30 Days](#)
[List of LDSS Missing Youth Leads](#)
[Attachment A \(PDF\)](#)

RELATED INFORMATION

[National Center for Missing and Exploited Children \(NCMEC\)](#)
[NCMEC Caseworker Guide to Report Missing Children](#)
[Missing-Child, Emergency-Response, Quick-Reference Guide for Families](#)
[Missing Child Tip Sheet](#)

Policies Referenced in this Policy

[SSA/CW #12-27 SAFE-C OHP](#)
[SSA/CW #23-02 Trafficking Response in Child Welfare](#)
[SSA/CW #25-06 Critical Incident Notification Policy](#)
[SSA/CW #25-08 Health Care Services Oversight and Monitoring](#)