

CHILDREN MISSING FROM CARE
PROCEEDINGS OF THE EXPERT PANEL MEETING

MARCH 8–9, 2004

CHILD WELFARE LEAGUE OF AMERICA
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Overview of the Project

The Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) received a one-year grant for FY 2004, pursuant to the legislative authority of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act, to improve the safety and well-being of children in out-of-home care. In collaboration with the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), CWLA will provide comprehensive guidance to child welfare and law enforcement agencies on monitoring the status of children in the custody of child welfare agencies and responding when one of these children is missing. CWLA and NCMEC will develop and disseminate coordinated guidelines to enhance agencies' capacity to monitor the whereabouts and safety of children in foster care and to effectively respond when a foster child is missing.

The Children Missing from Care Project is a response to the heightened awareness of the risk of harm faced by children who “go missing” from the agency’s care, whether due to the children’s overt action (i.e., running away), the actions of others (i.e., abduction), or the inattentiveness of the custodial agency. A coordinated response by child welfare and law enforcement is our best hope for reducing these risks.

The proposed initiative will accomplish this goal through four objectives:

1. Clarify the definitions of terms related to children missing from care and identify data elements that researchers should collect and aggregate.
2. Explore the scope of the problem, identifying patterns and trends and delineating the individual, institutional, and environmental factors that affect it.
3. Develop practice guidelines for child welfare professionals and for law enforcement professionals.
4. Disseminate guidance to child welfare and law enforcement agencies through articles, conference presentations, and the NCMEC and CWLA websites.

Purpose of the Meeting

CWLA, in partnership with NCMEC, is developing national practice guidelines for the prevention of, response to, and recovery of children missing from foster care. The expert panel meeting was a critical component of the CWLA/NCMEC collaboration and an initial step toward developing comprehensive, expert-driven guidelines.

The project codirectors assembled a collective of national experts in child welfare, law enforcement, research, policy, and the judiciary who had special expertise in issues related to children missing from care. Project staff provided the latest draft of an issue brief they had written to the expert panelists in preparation for the meeting, and the panelists discussed it. During the one and a half day meeting, participants helped refine the issue brief and provide a foundation for two sets of guidelines: one directed at child welfare professionals and one directed at law enforcement personnel.

As CWLA and NCMEC proceed with writing the guidelines, they will ask the expert panelists to review the drafts. With expert feedback, the project staff hope to develop a product that will be relevant and accessible to the field and that agencies will use to enhance the quality and consistency of current practices related to children missing from care.

Structure of the Meeting

The meeting of experts was facilitated by Linda Jewell Morgan, Director, CWLA's Office of Program Development. On the first day of the meeting, panelists heard opening remarks by Shay Bilchik, CWLA President/CEO, and Marsha Gilmer Tullis, Director, NCMEC Family Advocacy Division. Mr. Bilchik acknowledged the considerable knowledge, skill, and experience of those in attendance. He expressed his hope that the Children Missing from Care project and the partnership between CWLA and NCMEC would enhance the prevention, response, and recovery of those children who go missing. Ms. Tullis extended greetings in behalf of her NCMEC colleague Ben Ermini. She concurred with Mr. Bilchik's remarks and welcomed the opportunity to collaborate with other professionals with a genuine interest in this topic.

These remarks were followed by a summary of the issue brief and subsequent feedback during a large workgroup session. On the second day, panelists met in smaller groups to discuss specific issues and craft suggestions for the practice guidelines. Each group considered definitions, prevention, response, recovery, and resolution as they relate to children missing from care. The project codirectors assigned panelists to one of four discussion groups based on their specific areas of expertise and interest:

1. research and data,
2. legislation and policy,
3. law enforcement and juvenile justice, and
4. child welfare and child-serving organizations.

Outcomes Desired and General Issues Panelists Raised

At the outset, Linda Jewell Morgan asked the panelists to indicate the outcomes they desired from the meeting as well as to note issues that are of primary importance to them.

The outcomes sought were:

- Identify issues and best practices to inform the practice guidelines.
- Identify concrete solutions and specific recommendations to improve policies and procedures.
- Gain a better understanding of ways to handle these cases.
- Share knowledge and information gained.
- Hear ideas from others in the field.
- Identify how to increase partnerships.
- Clarify definitions.
- Get an accurate idea of missing kids.
- Take something back to use to address this problem.
- Increase hope.

Some of the issues raised by panelists ranged from concrete agency-based practices, to national-level ideals and working relationships, to values and approaches for working with youth in placement:

- Preventing the problem.
- Developing a forensic interviewing policy and “how you talk to kids.”
- Asking young people why they run.
- Making caseworker contact meaningful.
- Instituting quality assurance practices.
- Clarifying or altering case closure policies and procedures.
- Educating child welfare and law enforcement as well as the public.
- Creating a national database.
- Addressing the “policy void” surrounding children missing from care.
- Improving collaboration between law enforcement and child welfare.
- Enhancing work related to the Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children (ICPC).
- Adding strategies to locate children.
- Creating law enforcement and child welfare practice guidelines.
- Treating children and youth in care as though they are “our kids.”

- Giving kids a voice.
- Valuing the importance of teenagers.
- Caring for and protecting adolescents.
- Implementing positive youth development principles.
- Generating alternatives for how to help young people transition to adulthood in a safer way.
- Tapping into the resiliency of children and youth.

Presentation and Discussion of the Issue Brief

The issue brief developed by project staff was the central topic for the first day of the meeting. Caren Kaplan, CWLA Director of Child and Family Protection, provided an abbreviated description of the document and requested feedback from the panelists. Specifically, she asked them to address the following:

- Which findings have the greatest relevance and why?
- What gaps in the literature are most significant?
- What are some personal experiences related to the topics found in the issue brief?

Issue Brief Summary

The issue brief primarily addresses children missing from foster care.

Defining Children Missing from Care

Three discrete groups:

- those who leave care voluntarily without permission,
- those who are removed from care—whether voluntarily or involuntarily—by someone without the authority to do so, and
- those whose presence or absence in care is unaccounted for by custodial agency.

Current State of Knowledge

- There is a dearth of research on children missing from foster care.
- Children who run from care are the most-researched group.

- Studies of missing children are predominately focused on absences from birthfamilies.
- There has been no examination of children who are lost in care.
- Law enforcement and child welfare are learning by doing.

Issue Brief Contents

- Is based on small body of literature, several select studies, case-specific examples, and anecdotal evidence
- Focuses predominately on children who run
- Addresses lack of clarity, capacity, and understanding of
 - definitions;
 - data;
 - individual, institutional, and environmental factors;
 - agency policies and cross-systems protocols;
 - and effective interventions.

Incidence and Prevalence of Runaways

- Measurement is illusive and multifaceted.
- Children in out-of-home care have more than twice likelihood of running away (2.4% vs. 0.9%).
- 11% of a sample of children in foster care for one year attempted to run from placement.
- 25% of youth from runaway shelters came from foster or group homes.
- Almost half of children in foster or residential care have run at some point in time.
- Incidence is affected by age, gender, whether child or youth has run previously, and placement setting.

Incidence and Prevalence of Children Abducted and Lost in Care

- Practice wisdom overrides accurate estimates of children abducted from care.
- Estimates are that 5% to 15% of the children missing from care have been abducted.
- Like runaways, abductions are also affected by the age of the child.
- No valid estimates exist of the percentage of children in care who are lost in the system.

Characteristics of Children Missing from Care

- Habitual running:
 - No developing pattern of running behavior.
 - Most children go AWOL only once, but they can be at great risk.
 - Pattern of running may contribute to detachment from adults, lack of school attendance, and engagement in criminal activities.
 - Like most acts of initiation, the first voluntary, unauthorized absence from care is strong predictor of future running behavior.
- Most studies show that racial and ethnic characteristics are not significant in predicting running behavior.
- Running away is the first step toward independence for a high proportion of 16- to 17-year-old children in care.

Reasons Children Run from Care

- Child-specific reasons for running
- System-specific reasons for running:
 - Culture of home—structure and authority
 - Supports and services to the foster family
 - Other children in the home
 - Youth participation in establishing patterns and making decisions

Prevention of Missing from Care Episodes

- Preparing children and youth for foster placement
- Supports to children in care
- Personal safety education for children in care
- Placement selection and placement stability
- Supports for and training of foster parents
- Risk assessment at each decision point throughout the life of the case
- Provision of necessary services
- Prevention of family abduction
- Role of information technology in the prevention of missing episodes
- Capacity and competence of those mandated to keep children safe—qualified workforce, reasonable caseloads and workloads, quality supervision, ongoing monitoring and oversight

Response to Children Missing from Care

- Law enforcement policy and practice

- Child welfare policy and practice
- Interdisciplinary response—joint protocols
- Sharing information with partners and the public

Return and Resolution

- Three essential objectives regarding child well-being:
 - gain an understanding of their reasons for going missing,
 - identify any placement-related or other problems that may have prompted them to go, and
 - plan and implement a response to these difficulties

Promising Practices

- Florida Operation SafeKids (August–December 2002)
- Kentucky Foster Care Census (July 2002–October 2003)
- Los Angeles County, California, Missing Kids website (January 2003)
- Illinois Department of Child and Family Services (DCFS) Round the Clock Missing Children’s Unit (October 2003)
- Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF) Missing Children’s Tracking System (December 2002)

Closing Observations

Competent casework and law enforcement practices in systems that are sufficiently resourced can reduce both the incidence and negative effects of children missing from care.

Discussion of the Issue Brief

Much of the panelists’ discussion centered on children who run from care and on recommendations for systemic change in areas of prevention, response, recovery, and resolution.

Prevention

- Need to begin prevention efforts earlier from the youths’ perspective; “prevention” may already be too far down the path.
- Need to add more prevention services without lowering the bar for safety.
- Need to address the gap in training child welfare workers in risk assessment and the cost of removal.

- Need to coordinate state and private agency efforts to prevent children from running. (In Kentucky, private agencies average two more moves per child than state agencies.)
- Need to understand the personality of youth who run to prevent or intervene in running behavior: Chronic runners are right-brained, action-oriented individuals. (Texas has developed a tool for assessing personality traits and working with them.)
- Need to ask youth who have histories of running before entering care why they ran.
- Some of the reasons cited for why youth run are correct and some are inaccurate. “Kids don’t run from a particular person, program, or state...they run to gain a sense of control...it is a temporary fix of power. [When I ran] what I was leaving wasn’t getting me anywhere, so running away wasn’t any worse” (Celeste Edmunds, former foster youth).
- Need to know the child as an individual, which includes knowing who the child’s friends are, knowing what family members he or she stays in contact with, knowing anniversaries of traumatic events, and so forth.
- Need to understand youth culture and pay attention to youth needs.
- Need to appreciate the family history: Does the family pose a flight risk, and what does running actually mean?
- Need to talk about foster family preservation and begin to value foster families as real families.
- Need to maintain data records and coordinate efforts between state and private agencies. (In Kentucky, children with the least information on file were the most likely to be lost. Also, children lost in care tend to come into the system at younger ages, have longer stays, have goals of adoption, have behavior problems, and have had many moves.)

Response

- Need a centralized resource for dealing with children missing from care and to competently track and monitor them.
- Need a data system that shows all identifiers as well as a placement plan. (Illinois has a system that has individual data, family data, photos, placement plans, etc. Also, as soon as a child is missing, everyone important to the youth gathers to develop a placement plan to enact after the child is found.)
- Need to have a valid court order in place to search for missing kids. (Washington has such an order that permits statewide search and arrest authority, has no expiration, and allows law enforcement to take a child into custody. As a result, the state has a 100% recovery rate on abductions.)

- Need to understand and be aware of the runaway culture. Youth who run often know where to go to eat, where to go to sleep, and so forth, and have developed a support network.

Recovery and Resolution

- Need to recognize that the challenge is not always finding the children but rather keeping them and preventing them from running.
- Need to recognize that running is sometimes functional and can be a youth's strength. For example, a youth in an abusive family may run as a response and survival strategy.
- Need to build a relationship with youth and assess where they are when they are found, because sometimes bringing a youth back into care isn't the answer.
- Need to emphasize youth resiliency and focus on the strengths of the child and family.
- Need to change the attitude of the system and intertwine nonprofit agencies with child welfare and law enforcement relationships.
- Need to use the media to educate. "The Amber alert system was used for a child abducted from care [in Illinois], and it turned out to be a great opportunity to educate the media who, in turn, educated the public" (Elizabeth Yore, General Counsel, Illinois DCFS).
- Need to raise awareness and understanding that workforce issues limit the ability to give an individualized response to each youth.

Discussion Group Summaries

After the smaller discussion groups met, the full panel reconvened, and a representative from each group summarized the key issues raised regarding definitions, prevention, response, recovery, and resolution. The large workgroup was given an opportunity to respond to each presentation. A scribe from each discussion group summarized the meetings. These overviews follow, as well as comments made during the full panel discussion.

Group One: Research and Data

The group decided to discuss the issues in the context of the entire continuum of children in state custody.

Definitions

The first item for discussion was to develop reasonable definitions for the terms *missing*, *runaway*, *lost*, and *abducted*.

- The group decided that the term *missing* could be considered the generic description for children whose whereabouts are unknown. Under this rubric are three more concrete terms: *runaway*, *abducted*, and *lost*.
- A child is considered a runaway if the child is voluntarily missing for 12 hours or overnight. This time caveat is meant to convey the critical nature if a child fails to return to his or her home overnight, despite 12 hours not having passed. This definition does not preclude the custodial agency from reporting the child as a runaway when his or her absence is less than 12 hours old. For example, if someone witnesses the child leaving without permission, the witness should report this immediately. The placement setting may also factor into the reporting: A child who is

missing for one hour from a group home may prompt more concern than a child who is missing for six hours from a family foster home.

- A child is considered abducted if someone takes or fails to return the child without prior authorization. Child abductions can be classified two ways. In a family abduction, a member of the family or someone working in its behalf takes or fails to return the child. In a nonfamily abduction, a person who is not a family member takes or fails to return the child. A child can be considered abducted even if the child willingly goes with the individual. For example, if a 15-year-old girl leaves with her 22-year-old boyfriend, she is considered abducted. Abduction also includes stereotypical kidnapping.
- A child is considered lost if his or her whereabouts are unknown and the agency cannot account for this through either a runaway or abduction explanation. "Falling through the cracks is another way to describe a lost child." Suggestions for best practice include having a regular census conducted by an outside source on a periodic basis to locate every child in the custody of the state. The census also allows the state to identify specific problems associated with tracking children. Another suggestion is to have child identifiers available (i.e., photos, fingerprints, iris scans, dental records). In Kentucky, as a result of their census, Hewlett Packard donated 75 handheld personal computers. This tool has photo capabilities along with global positioning system technology. This allows for better monitoring of the children in their custody.

This workgroup's discussion centered on the need for better data collection on missing children. A computerized data system should:

- record whether the child is missing and the length of time the child is missing for,
- record the suspected reason for the child being missing (runaway or abducted),
- record the determined reason for the child being missing, and
- track runaway destinations and other factors associated with children who run away.

Prevention

The use of risk assessments each time the child enters the custody of the state is critical. Best practice suggestions for child welfare workers are to:

- meet with the children immediately after being assigned the child's case;
- have close, very comfortable relationships with the children on their caseload; and
- maintain accurate recorded details of the child's life in the data system (i.e., important dates, friends, places they run).

Best practice suggestions for child welfare administrations are to have:

- a data system that is full and comprehensive;

- policies and procedures in place to support child welfare workers; and
- a periodic census of all children in care, conducted by an outside source.

Best practice suggestions for helping children in the custody of the state are:

- for children to get to know their child welfare workers;
- to provide wraparound services, including mental health; and
- to provide mentoring programs (New Mexico has done some great work in this area).

Response

- An interface is needed between law enforcement and child welfare and should include the use of technology.
- Interjurisdictional cooperation is paramount.
- Agencies need to use identifiers to locate children (i.e., photos, fingerprints, iris scans, and dental records).
- States use Amber Alerts for child abductions, but not for runaways. This tool needs to be used with discretion.
- When a child goes missing, the foster parents' support is important.

Future research in this area includes:

- exploring what states are doing (who has targeted responses to missing children, what are they doing, and how are they doing it) and
- examining which responses yield the most positive results—what works.

Recovery

Best practice suggestions include:

- locating children who have been lost or abducted, or who have run away, even after they have been discharged from state custody; and
- providing follow-up to children as warranted to ensure their safety.

Future research in this area includes:

- examining how many children are found;
- gathering accurate prevalence data;
- examining who is discharged from care and when;
- conducting a basic survey of all the children who run away (who, what, when, why, how) that also includes a subset of children randomly selected to complete a more in-depth qualitative survey/interview that will yield a rich qualitative analysis; and

- examining the factors related to recidivism.

Resolution

Future research in this area includes:

- a survey of what works and does not work and what would have prevented the child from becoming missing,
- an exit study to examine those children who ran away and those who did not, and
- a study on placement stability and behavioral characteristics of the child (i.e., using the Child Behavior Check List to look at child characteristics related to running behaviors).

Comments

- The term *recovery* should be replaced by either *reunification* or *return home*.
- The Amber Alert system is being reevaluated.
- The overuse of Amber Alert may compromise its efficacy with the public.

Group Two: Legislation and Policy

The group shared individual state experiences as they relate to current state legislation and policy. Florida has instituted a policy in which every child in care must be seen monthly. They have also instituted face-to-face visits and a fingerprinting and photograph policy. The group also shared success stories from Operation SafeKids. Some of the other states represented have the same policies in place.

Sonia Nesbit, a member of the congressional staff of the Ways and Means Committee, joined the discussion and shared a brief report about what staff are doing on Capitol Hill. They are creating dialogue and identifying the issues regarding children in care, especially as they relate to information systems and how to make them more effective.

Legislative Reactions

- As a result of high-profile cases, such as in Florida, legislation has caused workers to remove more children, especially in cases that have evidence of substance abuse and domestic violence. Legislation has driven the numbers of children in care higher.
- Some states, such as Illinois, are moved to action by consent decrees and lawsuits more than by legislation.

What Kinds of Legislation and Policy Are We Looking For?

- Legislation and policy that is directly geared toward missing children to reduce the number of children missing from care. This can be policy, resources, and so forth.

- Leaders need to make this legislation a priority issue.
- Definitions are needed for the various categories of missing children, because different responses are needed accordingly.

Legislation and policy that

- are not an unfunded mandate! We need to look at alternative resources; legislation should be the last resort if policy changes cannot be implemented through the normal process;
- reduce the total number of children in care and stabilize the workforce through use of training, tools, and so on;
- support coordination among law enforcement, child welfare, and nonprofits;
- look into a policy for the chain of command as it relates to how long it takes for the worker to find out a child is missing from care;
- provide for basic criteria in policy to remove a child from his or her family (a proper assessment and investigation that accounts for the risk of removal);
- include training for the workforce in risk assessment, especially in the cases of children and youth who may run away;
- provide for flexible prevention dollars;
- make all missing children a priority
- increase the focus on runaways, as they are the largest group of children missing from care; and
- address confidentiality issues and barriers of confidentiality.

What Can the Federal Government Do?

- Funding: Match community dollars for programs.
- National Crime Information Center (NCIC) gives the states the ability to set up their own system and standardizes reporting forms across the county.

Prevention

- Housing
- Domestic violence and substance abuse treatments
- Healthy Families program
- Mental health

- Flexible funding to be used for prevention programs (this tends to be hard to get unless there is a crisis)
- Development of a form of triage for the child once he or she has been recovered
- Examination and standardization of the reporting process to law enforcement
- A holistic prevention approach that allows treatment of the entire family

Issues with Reporting: Law Enforcement and Child Welfare

- Need a “key point”—May need a dedicated unit to retrieve missing children (i.e., runaways).
- Reporting systems work better for abducted children.
- Calling the runaways “missing” can increase their priority. Separating them from other missing children can make them less of a priority.
- The term *missing* versus *missing from care* causes issues between law enforcement and child welfare.
- Overlapping discrepancies among the categories (i.e., endangered, runaway, abducted, etc) are an issue, and states have different categories.
- Jurisdictional differences exist.

Resolution

- Identify who is responsible for the child.
- Figure out how to help the “recyclers”—the frequent runners and children who experience multiple placements.
- Identify what can be provided to and in support of foster families to keep their children from running.
- Get all missing children into the NCIC—this is the first step!
- Use the Amber Alert.
- Use technology-smart police officers.

Good Programs and Models

- Wraparound programs
- Family decisionmaking models/family group conferencing
- Multisystemic programs

- Integrated assessments: Some states use their local universities for integrated assessments
- Working with the media to get out a positive message
 - Education summits during foster care month—invite the media
 - Website usage
 - Capitol Hill briefings
 - Foster parent and foster child alumni editorials

Comments

- Because of confidentiality limitations, how does child welfare share information with law enforcement and private agencies? Should confidentiality thresholds be lowered to find missing kids?
- We should be honest with foster youth, especially when it comes to agency or caseworker limitations.

Group Three: Law Enforcement and Juvenile Justice

Prevention

- Law enforcement should be made available to help identify the problem.
- Child protective services (CPS) agencies need to stay in touch with law enforcement regarding missing youth (either through basic training police executive program or legislative requirement). Agencies must collaborate with one another.
- Get buy-in from the chief executive officer to promote collaborations between agencies and focus on runaway youth.
- Youth officers—find out why youth run and whether abuse or exploitation occurred. (After youth is located, interview regarding reasons for behavior.) Youth officers would be trained to focus in this area.
- Once law enforcement finds the kids, CPS should find out from the child why he or she ran to keep the child from running again. (CPS would be encouraged not only to find a new placement but also to get information on how to prevent future running.)
- We need to know how to prevent kids from running in the first place.

Response

- Coordinated, community, and multidisciplinary efforts with local law enforcement
- Practical solutions for line workers (need to have protocol in place)

- What do we do when we find them (policy with clear steps in place)
- Work with youth to encourage them not to run again (outreach)
- Intervention centers (families, schools)
- Foster parents and CPS know where the resources are located and how to access them
- Cross-training
- Create a “nuts and bolts” approach effective to create practical solutions for law enforcement
- School resource officer contact in place to work with young people in the school system
- National training program (FBI, State Department), such as the Victim Advocates Program
- Create a policy on how and where to file reports (address jurisdictions issues). Police have to take report where the child disappears, and anyone can file the report. This statement came up due to jurisdictional conflicts. Group felt very strongly about creating clear guidelines regarding filing reports.
- Uniform policy throughout the United States

Child Lost in the System

- Definitions of the Department of Social Services (DSS) versus law enforcement vary.
- Define what “lost in the system” means: The state has custody of the child and the presence or absence of child in foster care is unaccounted for by the state agency.
- DSS should make a reasonable investigation before reporting to police.
- Recommendations: Have a standard way of collecting identifying information.

Abduction/Kidnapping from Foster Care

- Definition—Children who are removed from care, custody, or control involuntarily or voluntarily by someone who does not have authority to remove them.

Recovery and Resolution

- Duty to report applies to all
- Uniform policy for reporting and taking reports of missing children

- Exempt from civil and criminal liability for sharing information in reference to a missing child (the group would like exemption from liability of information sharing, e.g., CPS workers are protected when conducting an investigation)
- Legislation that recommends that parents notify DSS when they move

Group Four: Child Welfare and Child-Serving Organizations

Prevention

Make System More Supportive

- Develop adequate resources and support for placements.
- Ensure reasonable caseloads for child welfare workers.
- Ensure that child welfare workers are making meaningful visits (monthly or more often) that adequately assess child safety and well-being.
- Reform foster care using the Family to Family model— neighborhood placements, strength-based, and so on (helped reduce AWOL numbers in Michigan).
- Recruit innovative resource homes that are heavily supported by the child welfare agency and that must take youth back after they run.

Stability, Support, and Relationships

- Provide stability and support to children and youth in care by ensuring that each has a guardian ad litem and a supportive relationship with a counselor.
- Place siblings together in care.
- Be more open to the unauthorized placements that youth have found. Assess, do a police check, and offer services.

Develop Child and Youth Potential and Involvement

- Initial assessments—Involve child and others involved in his or her life in placement decisions.
- Provide in-home tutoring (two to three hours a day) when needed for remedial schooling—build in successes and rewards.
- Offer lessons to develop the talents and skills of children and youth in care.
- Be aware of and look for ways to reduce the stigma of being a foster child or youth (i.e., obtaining driver's license like other teens).

Professional Development

- Provide education in schools of social work and public and private agency training for child welfare workers on cultural competence with youth culture and applied youth development principles.
- Partner new caseworkers with seasoned workers to shadow for one year.
- Train child welfare workers (both public and private) and resource parents to look for signals that a youth may run and how to respond, such as in the Florida program identifying causal factors from post-AWOL interviews by behavior analysts with youth who run.

Prevention of AWOL Recurrence

- The problem is not finding, but preventing children from running when found; the more habituated the child is to running, the more he or she is vulnerable.
- Families need supports for home when the youth returns (i.e., Family to Family model).
- Refrain from punishing youth who run.
- Model program: Jim Casey Youth Initiative for youth ages 14 to 23 transitioning out of foster care. Involves bank account, education, job skills training, housing, and mentors. In Michigan, none of the youth in the program have run away from care.

Preparation for Effective Coordinated Response

- Fingerprinting, photographs, and dental records (get bite impressions) are taken at intake and maintained as part of case record; connect to Child and Family Service Reviews for compliance.
- Take photographs every six months for children under 6 years old and every year for children 6 and older.
- Some states use private vendors for photographing and fingerprinting.
- Must balance civil liberty issues and need to keep kids safe.
- Crossing state lines: Have digital thumbprint and run through Automated Fingerprint Identification Systems.
- Complete NCMEC “Child I.D.” form at intake so if the child runs, the agency will have the necessary information when filing a report.
- Protocols for interagency agreements—provide social security numbers and birth certificates to be shared among agencies; meet with heads of agencies to include them in AWOL alerts.
- Liaison to work with law enforcement to understand each other’s policies and cut down on duplication of work.

Response

- Strongly recommend well-staffed centralized missing child units in state public child welfare agencies to provide support and consistency of practice and people who can “walk workers through it [the process].”
- Missing child liaison or contact in each office or county to coordinate with centralized unit.
- Child’s vital records, such as birth certificates, should be kept secure so they can be accessed when child is reported as missing.
- Statewide task force of police officers to DCF as a permanent entity that is dedicated and centralized, not district level, to provide information sharing across groups.
- Level of intensity of law enforcement response to children missing from care (from high to low):
 - Abducted from foster home
 - Abducted from kinship home
 - First-time runner
 - Chronic runner
- Abductions get more attention and stronger response than runaways; how to raise priority of response to kids who run?
- Law enforcement is reluctant to respond to cases in which parents abscond with a child of whom the child welfare agency has taken legal custody, but has not yet taken physical custody. This situation is often not discovered until the case is handed off from CPS to an ongoing unit. These cases are of particular concern because the children are usually young and there is usually a delay before it is realized that the child is missing. (Illinois expressed this concern.)

Discovery and Recovery

- Provide a stabilization unit or area for child so the youth will not run again immediately.
- Involve NCMEC so that recovery of children abducted from care will work smoothly.
- Have a child debriefing plan in place to implement when child is recovered. Florida has behavior analysts conduct post-AWOL interviews with all youth who run.

Return and Resolution

- Child debriefing form: find out if youth intended to leave (i.e., planned departure), did they know where they were going to stay, did they have any money, what were their resources.
- Provide debriefing to and processing with youth when they return.

- Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children (ICPC) makes it difficult to return youth from another state
- In one state, the interstate compact for adolescents is administered through corrections.

Lost in the System

- Factors include management information system (MIS) glitches and workers who do not enter data or who use incorrect codes.
- Conduct a census/“bed check” of all children in care. One state uses summer interns to do it annually.
- Establish a category or MIS code for youth whose whereabouts are unknown, but who contact their caseworker regularly.
- Use a tracking or coding system (e.g., AWOL, whereabouts unknown, abducted, whereabouts unknown but contacting caseworker, etc.).

Law Enforcement and Child Welfare Agency Coordination

- Conduct joint training
- Develop good working relationships at all levels and protocols

Other Issues and Recommendations

- Stand and Deliver process in Florida for monthly regional manager accountability to the secretary for regional outcomes (i.e., placement and visitation)

Comments

- Peer pressure works well to improve staff performance. For example, at staff meetings, good workers stand and say why they are good. The workers who are not performing well stand and say how they are going to improve.
- Every state should have a centralized unit operating 24 hours per day, 7 days per week. It is a point of entry for a missing child, and it captures the event ahead of the data system, which could lag a few days.
- From a law enforcement perspective, there is a legal gap for kids who are missing from care but who were never actually brought into care. We do not even know if the parents know that they have lost custody of their child.

Issues to Be Addressed in Practice Guidelines

Millicent Williams, Director of Foster Care for CWLA and Codirector of the Children Missing from Care Project, led a group discussion on issues to be addressed in the practice guidelines. Before she solicited feedback from the panelists, Ms. Williams provided several points of information and observations:

1. The practice guidelines will address all children missing from out-of-home placements, not just foster care.
2. The role of the birthfamily is important. Specifically, who decides if the birthfamily is notified, and who actually notifies them?
3. The discussions from the expert panel echo those from years ago about sexual abuse. Child welfare and law enforcement have gone through this process before, so we need to revisit our own collaborative history.
4. The Children's Bureau is doing a survey on ICPC and interstate issues, which should result in changes to ICPC.
5. CWLA and NCMEC will be compiling information on what is happening across states, so they can share protocols, forms, and so forth from your state.

In addition to the feedback from the small groups, suggestions from the panelists on what should be included in the guidelines were:

- Need to consider use of DNA for identification of child.
- Need a uniform system for DCFS across the nation to report found kids, as well as missing kids.

- Need to define terminology such as law enforcement and child welfare without offending anyone.
- Need to be aware of sibling bonds because runaways may seek out their siblings.
- Need to involve youth in discussions, but experts also need to talk and establish common understanding.
- Need to consider reunification at the onset of a missing episode.
- Need policy and practice to address normal developmental issues for kids to understand and prevent running away.
- Need a policy to address resilience and protective factors as they relate to developmental needs of youth of all ages.
- Need leadership so that the message filters to the front line.
- Need to address the differences between a social worker and an advocate.
- During the postrecovery debriefing, need to be aware of child prostitution because many kids get involved in it during missing episodes. This creates a new host of issues, especially when kids are recovered.

Approach to Best Practice Guidelines

Pam Day, Director of Child Welfare Standards for CWLA, and Marsha Gilmer-Tullis, Director of the Family Advocacy Division for NCMEC, described their processes for writing practice guidelines. CWLA is responsible for the development of child welfare guidelines, and NCMEC is responsible for the development of law enforcement practice guidelines. The agencies will work to marry the products, making them look similar, perhaps putting them in one sleeve for circulation, and hosting combined training sessions.

CWLA has historically developed goal standards that are not tied to mandates but rather that reflect what the field recognizes as best practices. Practice guidelines, in turn, are meant to elaborate on and operationalize the standards by providing more specific, detailed guidance for agencies and practitioners. As with practice standards, guidelines are informed by experts and are user friendly and detailed. The guidance of the expert panel is extremely important in developing the content of these guidelines. It is expected that these guidelines will include appendices that contain best practice tools that agencies can use when they are involved in the investigation and service delivery process.

NCMEC writers anticipate building an outline with the assistance of a small, close-knit group. Then they will see what else is known in the field. They will share their draft with other groups, and the NCMEC internal editors will review it and check it for legal issues.

Next Steps

During the course of the development of the practice guidelines, expert panelists will be asked to review these documents and provide feedback. The panelists volunteered suggestions for a coordinated approach to the dissemination and implementation of the child welfare and law enforcement practice guidelines:

- Use CWLA and NCMEC websites
- Encourage states to use it in their Program Improvement Plans
- Weave it into national standards for Child and Family Services Reviews
- Write articles and other publications
- Conduct joint trainings for child welfare and law enforcement

The leaders thanked the panelists for their ongoing commitments and contributions. The meeting was adjourned.

Appendix A

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