DATE: December 2005

CIRCULAR LETTER# SSA 06-8

TO: Director, Local Departments of Social Services
Assistant Directors, Local Departments of Social Services
Child Welfare Supervisors, Local Departments of Social Services

FROM: Dr. Rebecca Bridgett, Acting Executive Director
Social Services Administration

RE: Runaway/Missing Children in Out-of –Home Placement

PROGRAMS AFFECTED: Department of Human Resources Programs

ORIGINATING OFFICE: Family and Children’s Services

ACTION REQUIRED OF: Out-of-Home Placement Staff

REQUIRED ACTION: The Local Department of Social Services will implement runaway policy procedures established

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Background

Thoughout the history of Out-of-Home Placement each year a number of children are reported missing from their placement. Clinical strategies are constantly being implemented to reverse this action, however, some children will runaway or be abducted.

Purpose

This circular letter is to provide guidelines for the implementation of the protocol to be used when a child (foster care or kinship care) is reported missing from his or her out of home placement.

Runaway/Missing Children in Out of Home placement

The safety and well-being of children, utilizing foster and kinship care services in the care of the Department of Human Resources is one of the Department’s highest priorities. As soon as the local department staff is aware that a child in the local department of social services (LDSS) care and custody is missing or has not returned home at a prearranged time, the following steps must be taken to locate, account for the child’s whereabouts and assure that the child is returned to a safe and stable placement.

1. Ensure that the local police are immediately notified and obtain a complaint number;
2. Give the police all available information about the child especially any tips/clues about hangouts and information friends.
3. Notify the birth parents (unless agency has guardianship), the CINA attorney for the child and the department’s attorney;
4. Compile information on the last whereabouts of child and his/her activities;
5. The caseworker shall try to locate the child by contacting and speaking with relatives, friends and associates, school personnel and persons at the child’s place of employment (if applicable) and also with individuals in the child’s neighborhood of origin and out-of-home placement neighborhood;
6. If a child calls and ask to return, the worker must pick the child up or make arrangements to have the child picked up.
7. Check with local police as to how the child will be returned when found (i.e. will child be transported from local police station to the local department or will the child need to be picked up);
8. The local department shall make a plan for placement of the child upon return:

- Notify night or weekend staff with any pertinent information needed to place or replace the child
- Caseworker shall discuss with current placement provider whether the provider is willing to hold placement for up to 30 days with payment for when the child returns. (Placement can not be held beyond 30 days without payment);
- If current placement unwilling to hold the child’s space, or it is over the 30 day period, the caseworker needs to contact the financial unit to stop foster care board payment for the child;
- Local department shall conduct a placement search;

9. Child’s runaway status (with a begin and end date) must be documented on the Child’s Whereabouts Section on Case Plan I

10. The record Contact Sheets must document weekly search efforts to locate child;

11. The worker will keep parents, placement provider, attorneys and significant others updated weekly on status of search;

12. The worker will keep weekly contact with police to inquire about search status, provide additional information and

13. When a child is located or returns:

- The local department with jurisdiction over the child is responsible for retrieval of the child if found in another jurisdiction;
- Notify parents, placement provider and attorneys;
- If runway refuses placement, call police to escort child to placement;
- Interview child as to reasons for runaway and record on Contact Sheet; and
- Get medical care, if appropriate

**Tracking Procedures**

When a child is missing or has runaway from their placement, it is critical that every available resource be utilized to assist in locating the child. It is the responsibility of the Social Services Administration (SSA) to track children in out-of-home placement to ensure their safety and receipt of proper care.

Make sure that the foster care case is not closed because no one knows were the child is. All Maryland Out-of-Home Placement children’s whereabouts in regard to placements must be accounted for.
A Client Information System (CIS) alert has been developed to identify children in State custody who are in runaway or missing status when they seek or are referred for services and/or investigation. If a child is in this status, the message “Alert Runaway/Missing” will display in yellow at the bottom of the CIS Client Data Base Participation (CDBP) screen, the Services System/Client Inquiry screen, and the Services System/Service Unit Summary screen for the child’s active out-of-home placement service unit.

This message indicates that the individual for whom inquiry was made is active in out-of-home placement and is in runaway or missing status. When the alert message is displayed, the out-of-home placement caseworker for the active out-of-home placement project category must be notified by the case manager (i.e. FIA, Child Support). The out-of-home placement caseworker ID is displayed in the line for the active out-of-home placement project categories (01P1, 01P2, 01P3, 05P2, 06P1, 06P2, 06P3) on the CDBP screen. The name and telephone number of the active out-of-home placement caseworker can be located by completing the following steps:

- From the Welcome Menu, Enter Option O (File Inquiry) in the selection field
- Enter K (Worker ID) in the selection field and the Social Services caseworker ID in the Worker ID field
- The name of the Social Services caseworker will display along with their telephone number

Note: The telephone number may be obsolete. The current telephone number may be obtained by looking up the out-of-home placement caseworker’s name on the automated phone listing on the Department of Human Resources Intranet System (DHR Net).

The case Manager must notify the out-of-home caseworker immediately. If the child is in the local department of social services’ (LDSS) office, the Social Services caseworker may request that the Case Manager to allow the out-of-home placement caseworker sufficient time to come to the office and pick up the child.

If the out-of-home placement caseworker is not available or unable to come to the LDSS office, or if the child is not in the LDSS office when the alert is discovered, the Case Manager shall provide the out-of-home placement caseworker with the child current location (address, telephone number, etc.) and/or any information that will assist the out-of-home placement caseworker in recovering the child. The Case Manager must speak directly to the out-of-home placement caseworker, Social Services caseworker’s Supervisor, or the LDSS out-of-home placement manager.

Note: DO NOT LEAVE A MESSAGE ON THE WORKER’S VOICE MAIL.
The case manager must write on the narration screen the CDBP alert and all actions taken. The narration must include the name and telephone number of the out-of-home placement caseworker, or LDSS staff person that the information was provided to.

All LDSS out-of-home placement supervisory service unit must adhere to quarterly reviews of placement data on individual cases. This review must include documentation of monthly visits and account for each child and their whereabouts. This count must include the number of children from other states placed in the LDSS through Interstate compact. LDSS must contact tribal authorities regarding missing Native American children that are missing from approved tribal placements. Case records must contain an up to date photo of the child. Pictures from the palm pilot cameras are acceptable.