



AUDIT SUMMARY

Department of Children and Families' Response to Children Missing from Care Performance Audit

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Fiscal Years Ended June 30, 2021, 2022, and 2023

BACKGROUND

Running away from foster care placements exposes children to risks such as human trafficking, health issues, substance use, academic struggles, and involvement with the criminal justice system. According to The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), children in foster care are particularly vulnerable to human trafficking, with 17% of all children and 27% of female children missing from care suspected of being trafficking victims.

ABOUT THE AUDIT

We have audited certain operations of the Department of Children and Families' (DCF) Response to Children Missing from Care. The scope of our audit included, but was not necessarily limited to, the fiscal years ended June 30, 2021, 2022, and 2023. The objectives of our audit were to:

1. Evaluate the efficiency and effectiveness of the department's policies and procedures for reporting, locating, and monitoring children missing from care; and
2. Determine if the department is using best practices to collaboratively work with law enforcement to locate missing children.

We conducted this performance audit in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

[Link to full report](#)



17

Total
Findings

Our audit identified internal control deficiencies; instances of noncompliance with laws, regulations, or policies; and a need for improvement in practices and procedures that warrant management's attention.

NOTEWORTHY FINDINGS



Findings

1

The number and rate of episodes of children in the Department of Children and Families' (DCF) care who are missing increased between fiscal years 2021 through 2023. DCF did not assess common risk factors or develop any formal plans to address children who go missing from care.

2

DCF did not meet the clinical needs of six female teenagers. The case records identified concerns from DCF social workers or other service providers that the children's current level of care could not keep them safe, and the appropriate level of care was unavailable. These children experienced adverse consequences such as sex trafficking, victimization, or juvenile justice system involvement, and went missing a total of 341 times over three years.

3

DCF did not have procedures to determine a child's experience while missing and either did not document or screen some children for sex trafficking.

4

DCF did not comply with legal requirements to determine and respond to the reasons why children went missing, frustrating efforts to prevent future missing episodes.

5

DCF's missing from care policy does not specify procedures for missing children remaining at unapproved placements with DCF's knowledge (known as AWOL), such as harm reduction approaches or ways the department can meet the child's basic needs.



Recommendations

DCF should:

- a. Assess missing from care episodes to identify common risk factors, evaluate the care environment, and address any systemic issues.
- b. Develop a plan with measurable benchmarks and data driven strategies to reduce missing from care episodes.

DCF should assess behavioral health service capacity across all levels of care based on the needs of the children in care. The department should develop performance measures regarding the adequacy of such care.

DCF should:

- a. Develop procedures to determine the child's experiences while missing from care.
- b. Amend policy to require sex trafficking screenings for all missing children when they return to care.
- c. Ensure its workers receive and save prevention plans and sex trafficking screens completed by congregated care or other providers in LINK.

DCF should:

- a. Amend its policy to require workers to determine and document the factors that contributed to the child being missing from care and create a prevention plan that responds to those factors.
- b. Ensure its workers receive and save prevention plans developed by congregated care or other providers in LINK.

DCF should develop policies and procedures to meet basic needs for children who are AWOL.