

**Safe Harbour: NY Fast Facts:  
Addressing Absence without Consent (formerly known as AWOL)**

Youth who are absent from care are at high risk of experiencing CSEC or trafficking<sup>1</sup>. About 50 percent of youth in foster care placement will run away while they are in care.<sup>2</sup> OCFS has issued [16-OCFS-ADM-09](#) to inform local departments of social services (LDSS) and voluntary authorized agencies (VAs) of the requirements regarding the response to youth who are absent without consent, missing, or abducted, from care or home.

The following factors are known to contribute to a youth's decision to leave care without consent<sup>3,4,5</sup>:

- Separation of youth from their siblings and/or their own children.
- Overly restrictive placements. The more restrictive and punitive an individual placement is, the more likely it is that a youth will leave without consent, compared to a similar program with more flexibility. While professionals often place youth in more restrictive settings to protect them, youth frequently experience new trauma as a result of being moved to a more restrictive setting.
- Untreated substance abuse. Substance misuse is another common coping mechanism youth use to deal with trauma. When we remove one coping mechanism from a youth (like using a substance) they may adopt new ones (like leaving without consent).
- Need for a healthy coping mechanism. Some youth have learned that leaving home is the best way for them to respond to a negative situation. When youth are used to leaving home they will need support from staff to develop safer and more healthy coping mechanisms while in care.
- Frustration in their lack of involvement or control over an assigned placement. When youth are offered very little substantive involvement in planning their placement the decisions can result in a youth leaving care without consent. In New York, youth provide input in their placement via permanency hearings.

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Education. (2014). Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care. Retrieved from

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/307867/Statutory\\_Guidance\\_-\\_Missing\\_from\\_care\\_3.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/307867/Statutory_Guidance_-_Missing_from_care_3.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Finkelstein, M., Wamsley, M., Currie, D., & Miranda, D. (2004). *Youth who chronically AWOL from foster care. Why they run, where they go, and what can be done*. New York: Vera Institute.

<sup>3</sup> Behavioral Health and Welfare Program Institute for Juvenile Research, University at Chicago. (2010). *Residential runaway risk assessment user guide*. Retrieved from [http://www.nrcpfc.org/teleconferences/4-21-10/Runaway\\_Risk\\_Assessment\\_User\\_Guide\\_.pdf](http://www.nrcpfc.org/teleconferences/4-21-10/Runaway_Risk_Assessment_User_Guide_.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Thomson, N. (2014, December 10). Conference call.

<sup>5</sup> Day, A., & Riebschleger, J. (2007). Circumstances and suggestions of youth who run from out-of-home care. *The Michigan Child Welfare Law Journal, Fall*, 20-30.



## Office of Children and Family Services

### Risk Assessment<sup>6</sup>

- All youth should be assessed for their likelihood to engage in a variety of risky behaviors at intake, including leaving care without consent. Assessment should be ongoing and reviewed whenever risk factors change. Minimally, a new assessment is recommended 30 days after intake and at quarterly reviews.

### Suggestions for working with youth at high risk of leaving care<sup>7,8,9,10</sup>

- Seek input from youth in their placement planning. When youth are engaged in their own treatment planning they have an increased sense of control over their lives.
- Support safe connections to non-offending family members. Youth are most successful when they have at least one consistent adult in their life.
- Acknowledge that youth *can* leave care, even when it isn't allowed. Be factual and non-threatening about what can happen if a youth does leave care without consent. Help youth create safety plans for what to do if they leave care without consent and get into trouble.
- Create an environment where the youth feel safe and supported. Youth need to feel physically and psychologically safe in their placements. Youth need to believe that the adults in their environment genuinely care about their wellbeing and that their decisions and wishes are supported. Be friendly!
- Provide youth with leadership opportunities and responsibilities in placement and within their community. Young people who are contributing members of the community are less likely to exhibit rebellious and delinquent behavior and are more likely to become effective in coping with their own challenges.
- Provide support, training, and supervision to front-line staff surrounding best practice on this issue. It will help them provide better services to youth and prevent staff burnout.
- Don't make youth less safe by taking shoes or coats to blocking them from leaving. Youth have the right to their belongings, and keeping these items does not effectively prevent absence from care. Traffickers are also known to target youth without coat, shoes, and other necessities.
- Staff may believe that they've failed when a youth leaves care without consent. Staff need to be supported in not taking youth's behaviors personally and that an unplanned absence is not personal or 'about them'. Programs need to be accepting of the risk inherent in working with youth and be supportive of their staff.

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<sup>6</sup> Behavioral Health and Welfare Program Institute for Juvenile Research, University at Chicago. (2010). *Residential runaway risk assessment user guide*. Retrieved from [http://www.nrcpfc.org/teleconferences/4-21-10/Runaway\\_Risk\\_Assessment\\_User\\_Guide\\_.pdf](http://www.nrcpfc.org/teleconferences/4-21-10/Runaway_Risk_Assessment_User_Guide_.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Shared Hope International, ECPAT-USA & John Hopkins University. (2013). *National colloquium 2012 final report: An inventory and evaluation of the current shelter and services response to domestic minor sex trafficking*. Retrieved from <http://sharedhope.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/National-Colloquium-2012-Report-B.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Finkelstein, M., Wamsley, M., Currie, D., & Miranda, D. (2004). *Youth who chronically AWOL from foster care. Why they run, where they go, and what can be done*. New York: Vera Institute.

<sup>9</sup> Day, A., & Riebschleger, J. (2007). Circumstances and suggestions of youth who run from out-of-home care. *The Michigan Child Welfare Law Journal, Fall*, 20-30.

<sup>10</sup> Thomson, N. (2014, December 10). Conference call.



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### **When youth return from an unapproved absence from care:**

- Be happy when a youth returns after an unplanned absence. Showing youth that you're happy they're back safe helps to build healthy relationships and strong connections with youth.
- If a youth's bed was filled when they return from an unplanned absence, state this in a neutral way to let the youth know that the bed was reassigned not as a punishment, but because another youth needed a safe place to be.
- If a youth leaves care once or makes one bad decision, understand that the young person does not 'become' that one decision. Youth are teenagers who make mistakes – it's part of the normal maturing process.
- Refer to *Protocols and Procedures for Locating and Responding to Children and Youth Missing From Foster Care and Non-Foster Care* ([16-OCFS-ADM-09](#)) for specific requirements.