

Arizona Department of Child Safety Comparing Department Practices for Classifying and Locating Children Missing from Care to Best Practices

Department's practices for classifying and locating children missing from care are generally consistent with recommended practices, but caseworkers did not always comply with documentation requirements, the Department and law enforcement have not formalized expectations for collaboration, and the Department lacks some detailed guidance for caseworkers' ongoing efforts to locate children missing from care

Audit purpose

To compare the Department's practices for classifying and locating runaway or missing children with best practices.

Key findings

- The Department is responsible for helping to locate children missing from care (runaway or missing/abducted children).
- The Department's practices for classifying and locating children missing from care are generally consistent with many practices recommended by the Child Welfare League of America. For example, the Department maintains a 24/7 hotline that can be contacted to report children missing from care and requires caseworkers to notify law enforcement and other key stakeholders within 24 hours about children missing from care.
- Caseworkers did not always comply with Department documentation requirements in cases we reviewed, including documenting that all required notifications were made and documenting efforts to locate children within 10 days of making those efforts. The Department implemented a biweekly review process in 2020 to help ensure that information about children missing from care is accurate and up to date in its case management system.
- Although a recommended practice, the Department and law enforcement have not formalized expectations for their respective roles and responsibilities for locating children missing from care. The Department reported that formalizing expectations with law enforcement would be of value, but establishing a formal agreement with each of the approximately 150 law enforcement agencies in Arizona would be impractical.
- The Department lacks some detailed guidance on its expectations for the types and frequency of caseworkers' ongoing efforts to locate children missing from care.

Key recommendations

The Department should:

- Revise its policies to provide guidance on when specific stakeholder notifications and documentation of those notifications by caseworkers are not applicable.
- To help ensure timely documentation, expand its biweekly review process to include determining whether efforts to locate children missing from care are occurring and documented in case notes.
- Work with law enforcement to formalize expectations regarding their respective roles and responsibilities for locating children missing from Department care. For example, the Department could pilot establishing a formal agreement or mutually agreed-upon protocols with 1 or more law enforcement agencies in Arizona.
- Update its policies and/or develop supplemental guidance on its expectations for the types and frequency of caseworkers' ongoing efforts to locate children missing from care, and ensure caseworkers who manage cases involving children missing from care are informed of and trained on this additional guidance.