

Operation SafeKids

Results, Findings & Recommendations



Presentation to Governor Jeb Bush
by
Commissioner James T. Moore and Secretary Jerry Regier
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OPERATION SAFEKIDS RESULTS, FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS



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Executive Summary

Initiated in the Fall of 2002 at the request of Governor Bush, Operation SafeKids established a partnership between FDLE, DCF and Florida's local law enforcement with a primary mission to 1) search for and locate the 393 children under the supervision of DCF and unaccounted for; and 2) make recommendations for improvements to enhance accountability and improve child recovery. Seven Regional Child Location Strike Forces were created throughout the state to accomplish these objectives.

At the conclusion of the initiative on December 10, 2002, 290 of the 393 children had been located; 1 was emancipated with the case closed by both DCF and law enforcement (Note: The law enforcement agency has since reopened this case as a missing adult); 13 were emancipated and have closed cases with DCF but are still active cases with law enforcement; and 1 was discovered murdered in Broward County. Eighty-eight (88) children that were not located by the conclusion of Operation SafeKids remain under active investigation by the local law enforcement agency and DCF district in the jurisdiction from which the child went missing.

On any given day, there are 48,000 children in the care and/or custody of DCF. The goal of Operation SafeKids was to focus on the 393 children identified as missing, but it did not address that this number accounts for less than 1% of the total children receiving DCF care. Florida marshaled tremendous resources at the state and local levels to focus on the SafeKids children, and many things were learned in the process. While SafeKids has demonstrated this state's commitment to addressing missing child issues, it is important to maintain perspective by keeping these numbers in context and remember that this report does not relate to the vast majority of the children in DCF care.

During the course of the Operation, the Strike Forces identified 35 findings and recommendations that fell into five focus areas: *Reporting and Investigating Missing Children Cases*, *Public Awareness and Outreach*, *Recovery*, *Prevention*, and *Legislative Issues*. While many of the efficiencies identified were implemented during the course of the operation, others are currently being addressed, and still more are recommended for action.

In the area of *Reporting and Investigating Missing Child Cases*, changes were made early in the Operation to standardize DCF reporting definitions and automate the reporting process to reduce the number of entities to which DCF caseworkers were required to report. Improving communication and information exchange between DCF and local law enforcement agencies was a common and repeated theme, and is an issue that continues to be addressed. Local law enforcement cited the creation of Investigative Support Units in each DCF District as a top priority. These permanent and specialized units are in the process of being established and will house staff dedicated to exclusively work with law enforcement to locate children missing from DCF care.

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A training curriculum for law enforcement and DCF is being developed for statewide delivery in early 2003. Training courses will cover reporting protocols, investigative tools, and legal issues and will highlight the statewide resources available to assist with search and recovery. Investigative follow up is also emphasized; law enforcement agencies are encouraged to proactively debrief recovered runaways in an effort to understand what triggered the episode and identify any circumstances that would warrant further investigation. Recommendations also call for provisions to require that families under DCF supervision report changes in residence to DCF.

The major issue addressed pertaining to *Public Awareness and Outreach* involves disseminating information about missing children to the public. It is recommended that DCF take a more active role with law enforcement in disseminating flyers of missing children and building relationships with local schools and non-profit children's organizations. DCF is in the process of exploring a pilot project with another state to electronically share posters of missing children.

Findings and recommendations addressing the *Recovery* of the child primarily address legal and jurisdictional issues. The centralized DCF Clearinghouse in the process of being established within DCF Headquarters should be staffed by staff members familiar with out of state or international recovery protocols. While this unit is expected to spearhead recovery efforts, Florida should explore developing agreements with neighboring countries to help facilitate a missing child's safe return.

The *Prevention* issues identified include ensuring that DCF collects photographs and fingerprints of all children under supervision. It is recommended that DNA samples be retained for children under school age. Other prevention issues focused on reducing repeat runaway behavior and the option of providing early emancipation or early transition into independent living for certain older runaways who are close to the age of emancipation and have demonstrated appropriate levels of self-sufficiency.

The *Legislative* changes identified include a recommendation to require households under investigation to report a move or relocation to the respective DCF district. On the national level, findings indicate there is much room for improvement when it comes to information exchange between child protective agencies from state to state. State social service agencies would benefit from on line direct access to FCIC/NCIC missing and wanted information, as well as access to national criminal history information.

In conclusion, Operation Safekids was successful both in terms of recovering the missing children and improving inter-agency communication, as well as identifying additional areas in need of improvement.



Introduction

On August 20, 2002, Governor Jeb Bush requested that the Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE) team with the Department of Children and Families (DCF) to immediately locate the 393 children missing from the supervision of DCF. The Governor requested that the initiative be modeled after the successful "Operation Safe," a recent project that called upon multi-disciplinary regional task forces to locate sex offenders and predators with outstanding warrants.

Six days later, Operation SafeKids was launched, bringing together FDLE and DCF in partnership with local law enforcement, the Department of Juvenile Justice, and key child service providers to serve on Regional Child Location Strike Forces throughout the state. Operation SafeKids formally ended on December 2, 2002. The report that follows was prepared jointly by FDLE and DCF and contains the final results, findings, and recommendations of the Strike Forces. (The full report from each Regional Strike Force may be found in Appendix A).

Goals

The goals of Operation SafeKids were as follows:

1. To locate the children that the Department of Children and Families have declared "missing;"
2. To develop a team approach in each region involving Local Law Enforcement, FDLE, and DCF to locate children;
3. To assess the working relationships between Local Law Enforcement, FDLE, and DCF and provide recommendations to streamline and facilitate missing children investigations; and
4. To develop a clearinghouse in DCF to recover or resolve cases where the child was located outside of the state of Florida.

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Memorandum of Understanding

At the commencement of Operation SafeKids, FDLE Commissioner Tim Moore and DCF Secretary Jerry Regier entered into a Memorandum of Understanding which outlined ten areas of agreement:

1. DCF to provide a senior level member to work at FDLE headquarters to assist in facilitating the effort.
2. DCF will assign a senior level member to each of the seven Child Location Strike Forces.
3. DCF will assure that case information provided to the Strike Forces is current and accurate.
4. FDLE and DCF will coordinate efforts to assure compliance with applicable legal standards involving entering premises where children under DCF responsibility are believed to be located.
5. Each Child Location Strike Force will endeavor to complete its actions on DCF files by November 1, 2002.
6. DCF will establish an intensified response team at DCF headquarters dedicated to fully resolving any custodial, legal, civil or social issues.
7. DCF will provide subject matter experts on DCF practices and procedures to work with FDLE and local law enforcement on working groups to identify proposed improvements.
8. Working group efforts should include short and/or long term recommendations for enhancing accountability and improving child recovery.
9. Working groups shall address the DCF classification of "missing," warrants issues, training needs, permanent assignment of DCF personnel to FDLE's Missing Children Information Clearinghouse (MCIC), and any required statutory revisions. Working groups shall make recommendations no later than November 15, 2002.
10. FDLE and DCF command personnel will review efforts of the Strike Forces and the working groups to determine if any changes in practices and procedures are warranted; whether efforts defined in this Memorandum of Understanding should be extended, modified, reduced or terminated; and if legislative changes are to be sought. FDLE and DCF will propose the recommended changes.

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Organizational Framework

A Steering Committee was established to provide oversight, establish necessary reporting procedures, assess ongoing efforts of the regional Strike Forces, and provide immediate resolution and problem solving for issues that arose. This established an immediate outlet for the agencies involved to communicate and discuss a variety of concerns, findings, and resolutions on a daily basis at the highest level, if necessary. Senior members from FDLE, DCF, and local law enforcement comprised the membership of the committee and met routinely throughout the duration of the operation. FDLE's Director of Criminal Justice Information Systems served as Chairperson of the Steering Committee.

The backbone of Operation SafeKids was the Regional Strike Force teams that were established in each of FDLE's seven regions (Fort Myers, Jacksonville, Miami, Orlando, Pensacola, Tallahassee, and Tampa) and their integration with the fourteen different DCF districts. Typically, each Regional Strike Force consisted of FDLE Agents, Public Assistance Fraud Investigators, DCF personnel, local law enforcement representatives, Department of Juvenile Justice employees, support staff, and appropriate level supervisors from all involved agencies.

The Regional Strike Forces conducted "ground zero" meetings where organizational guidelines and reporting procedures were established. Assignment of cases throughout the state was predicated on where the child was reported missing and then assigned to agents, investigators and case workers to conduct an investigation into the whereabouts of each child.

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Summary of Results

On August 23, 2002, after a thorough analysis of records from the Florida Crime Information Center (FCIC), Missing Children Information Clearinghouse (MCIC), and DCF, 393 children were identified as unaccounted for and classified as missing. These 393 children served as the initial group for Operation SafeKids and the primary focus of the Regional Strike Forces. The children were further classified into two levels for the investigative Strike Force teams:

- Endangered / Parental Abduction / Involuntary
- Runaways

On December 10, 2002, at the conclusion of the Operation, the results were as follows:

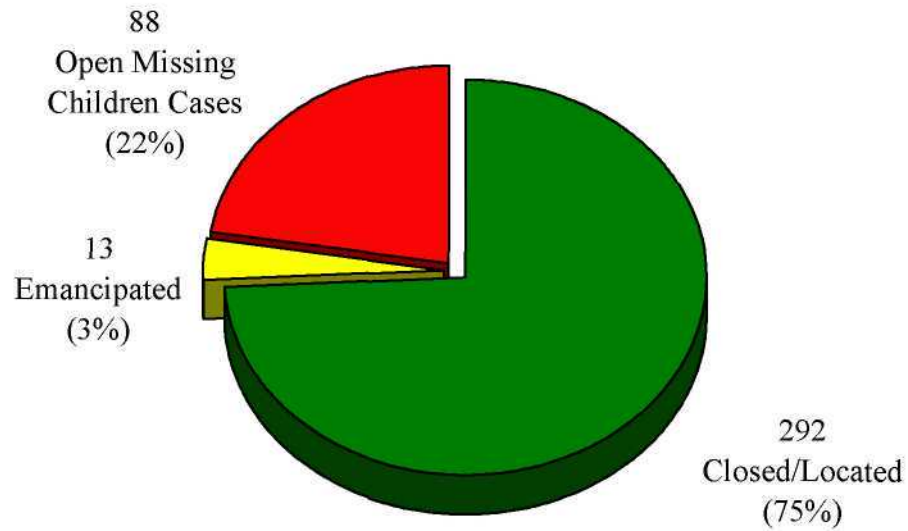
- 292 (75%) children were located or cases were closed
- 13 (3%) children were emancipated and have closed cases with DCF but are still active cases with law enforcement
- 88 (22%) children were not located and remain under active investigation by the local law enforcement agency and DCF district. Of these cases, 20 are listed in the Endangered/Parental Abduction/Involuntary group, and 68 are listed in the Runaway group.

In the case of children categorized as Endangered, Parental Abduction, or Involuntary, a child was not considered located or recovered until that child was actually viewed by a law enforcement officer, even when reliable information suggested that a child was accounted for. Similarly, a Runaway was not considered located or recovered until the child was viewed in person by a DCF caseworker or a law enforcement officer.

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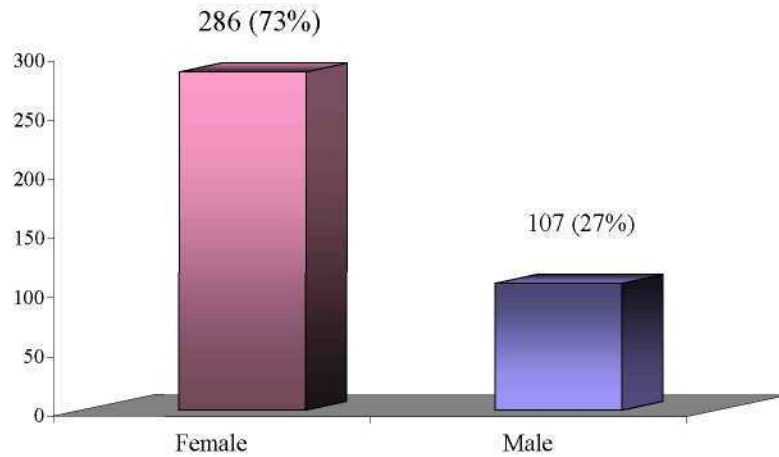
Original 393 Missing Children (Results as of December 10, 2002)



Category	Missing at Start	Located / Closed	Emancipated (Open with law enforcement)	Still Missing (Open with DCF and law enforcement)
Parental	31	21	0	10
Involuntary	4	0	0	4
Endangered	19	13	0	6
Runaway	339	258	13	68
TOTAL	393	292	13	88



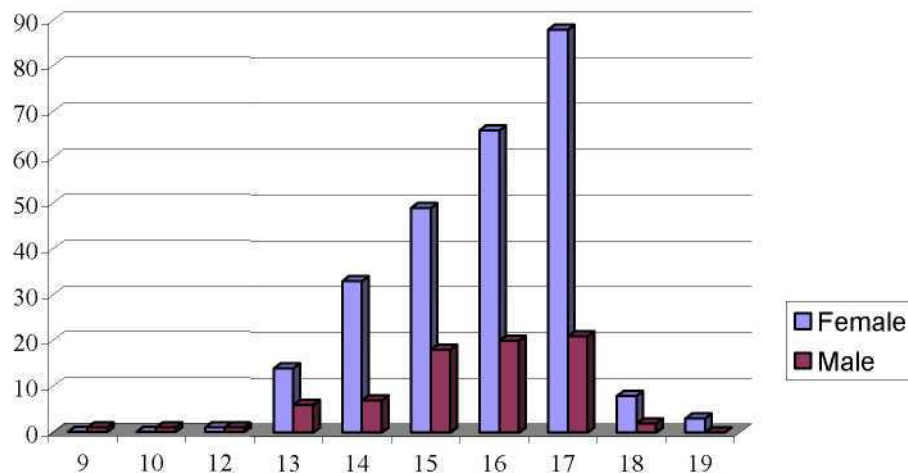
Gender Distribution of Original 393 Missing Children



Runaway Characteristics (Total Runaways: 339)

- 35% were age 17
- 77% were female
- 60% were between the ages of 15 and 17

Age and Gender of Runaways



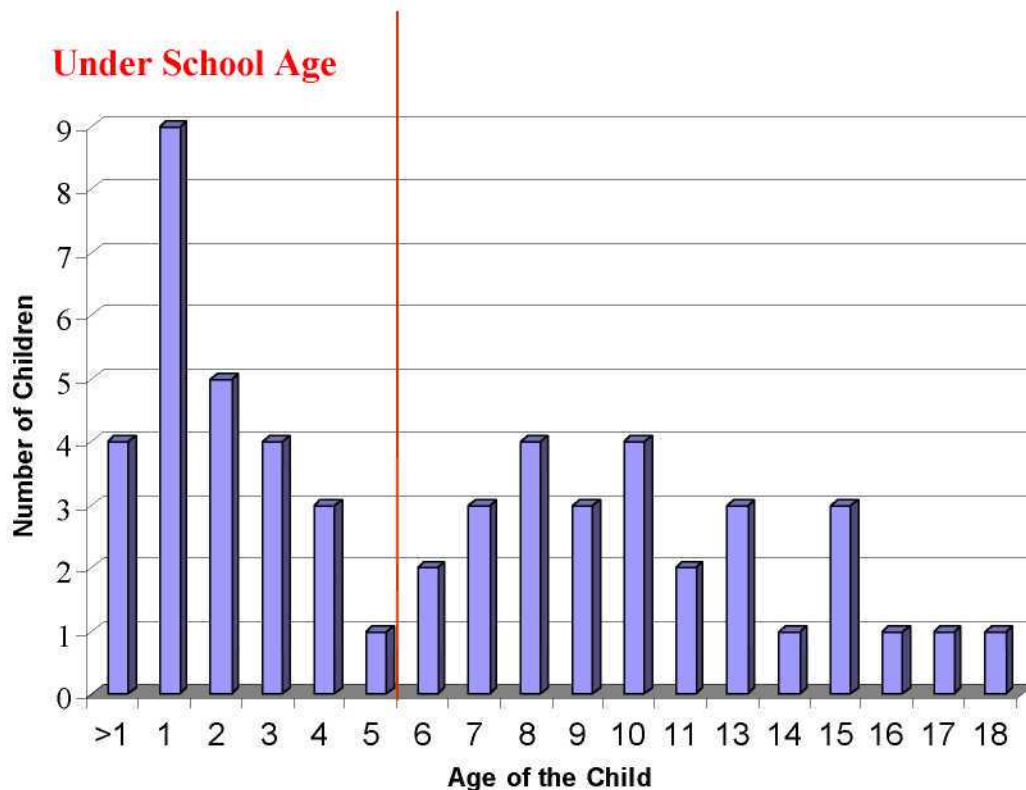


Habitual Runaways

- Of the 339 runaway children, 35 (10%) ran again after being located, with one child running a total of 4 times during the 15 week Operation
- This does not include the children reported missing after August 23, 2002 who ran away multiple times

Parental, Endangered, Involuntary

- More likely younger children
- 25 (46%) under school age (5 and under)
- 42 (77%) 11 years of age and younger

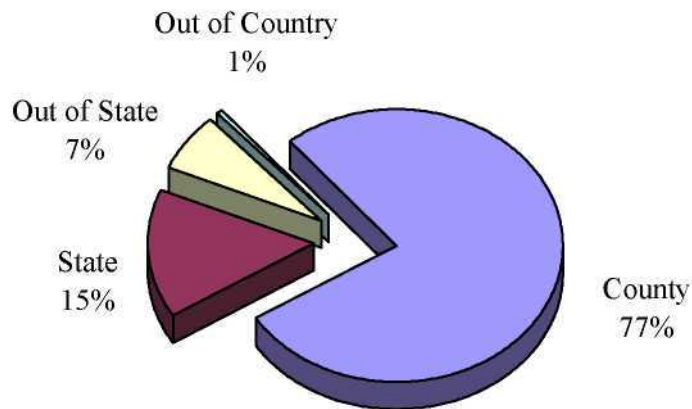


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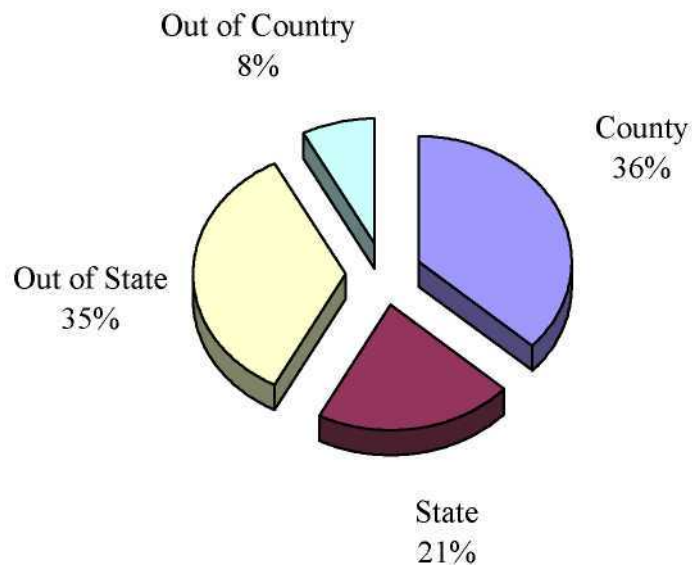
Where Were the Children Located?

Runaways:



- 77% of runaways located in the same county that they ran from
- Over 90% of runaways remained in the state

Parental / Endangered / Involuntary:



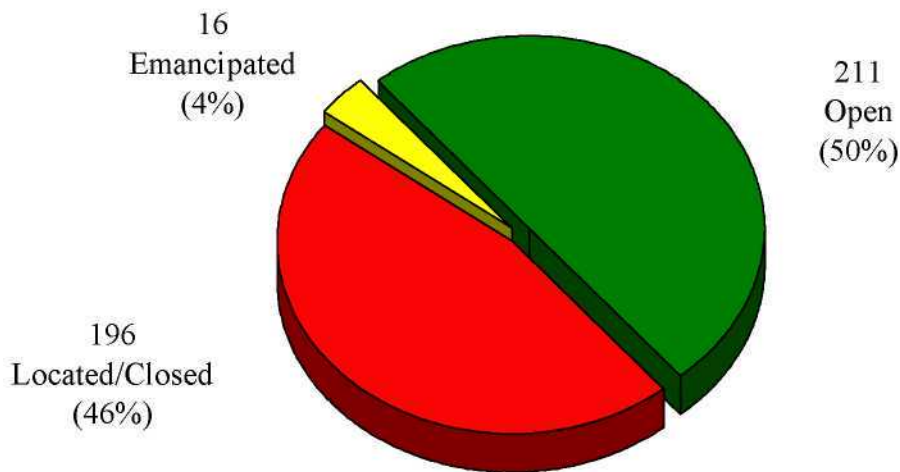
- On the contrary, 43% (almost half) of the parental and endangered children were taken out of the state of Florida



Children Reported Missing after August 23, 2002

A second group of unaccounted for missing children began to form during the life of the Strike Forces, and after the Operation SafeKids inception date of August 23, 2002. For purposes of control and accountability within Operation SafeKids, this later group of missing children was categorized separately. The Regional Strike Forces were notified of these cases as they were opened, and many of these children were located during the course of the Operation. Several of these children ran multiple times. As of December 10, 2002, there were 211 DCF cases open with FDLE's MCIC, in addition to the 88 reported above, for a total of 299 DCF open cases in MCIC.

Missing Children Cases Reported Between
08/23/02 and 12/10/02 (423)



Category	Missing Cases after August 23 rd , 2002	Located / Closed	Emancipated (Open with law enforcement)	Still Missing (Open with DCF and law enforcement)
Parental, Endangered, Involuntary	43	28	1	14
Runaway	380	168	15	197
TOTAL	423	196	16	211

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Unresolved Missing Children Cases

The children still classified as missing remain as active investigations with local law enforcement and the Department of Children and Families. In order to ensure a smooth transition from Operation SafeKids, and continue focus on these unresolved cases, regional meetings will continue to occur between local law enforcement and DCF liaisons for purposes of sharing pertinent information on missing children. These meetings will be facilitated through the proposed DCF Regional Investigative Support Units.

There are a variety of reasons children have not been located. Many are in hiding, as evidenced by those children who make non-traceable telephone contact with their caseworkers or non-custodial parent, advising of their well being but indicating they will not disclose their whereabouts until they reach the age of eighteen. Investigators and caseworkers are repeatedly told by children that they will flee again at the first opportunity.

If the children are not in hiding, some parents are, fearing arrest or termination of their parental rights. These same children or parents enlist the aid of relatives, friends and neighbors, making it difficult for law enforcement and DCF to track their movements. In addition, some missing children and families utilize false identifications and aliases, further thwarting investigative efforts to locate them.

In other cases, all current leads have been exhausted, and the Strike Forces have been unable to locate the child. These cases will continue to be actively investigated by local law enforcement and the DCF district.

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Findings & Recommendations

This section will cover issues that were observed or encountered during the operation of the Strike Forces. The recommendations come from those members of FDLE, DCF, local law enforcement, prosecutors, and others who have an interest in the welfare of those children who are under the care of the state.

As children were located, investigators attempted to gather as much information as possible about the circumstances surrounding the episode. The data set was small in size and consequently limited the inferences that could be drawn using a quantitative analysis. Interviews conducted with recovered children, however, did produce information that could be used to help find and protect children in the future. The information gathered as a result of these interviews was factored into the recommendations, regardless of whether or not it constituted a comprehensive picture of all missing children.

The findings, actions taken, actions in progress and recommendations, will be divided into five areas:

- A. Reporting & Investigating Missing Children Cases
- B. Public Awareness & Outreach
- C. Recovery
- D. Prevention
- E. Legislative Proposals



A. Reporting & Investigating Missing Children Cases

Issues that have already been addressed during Operation SafeKids

1. **Finding:** As Miami-Dade Police Department began reviewing cases with DCF prior to the onset of Operation SafeKids, they learned that the definition of "missing" by DCF standards was not consistent with Florida State Statutes. Some DCF numbers of missing children were inflated and, consequently, law enforcement efforts were being wasted looking for children for whom DCF actually knew the location, but were reported as missing when the children were not found in their assigned placements or failed to attend DCF scheduled appointments.

***Action Taken:** DCF has since changed their definition of missing to statutorily coincide with law enforcement's definition, ensuring that a child is not considered missing unless their whereabouts are unknown. Training will be a critical component of implementation. Data will be collected by DCF from this point forward and the information will be used to evaluate the policy after it has been in place for nine months to one year.*

Finding: Previous reporting of missing children was burdensome and error prone. Caseworkers were required to make 4 different contacts any time a child went missing. First, police were contacted, then DCF (via HomeSafenet entry), then FDLE Missing Children Information Clearinghouse (via computer application), then the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (via phone call). This process was open for errors and omissions. All the same contacts also had to be made when a child was located. There was no quality review of the required submissions. Prior to the Strike Force, only 19 children were posted on the FDLE Missing Children web site during the month of May. While many children often returned before posting, it was obvious that most children were not being processed. At the start of the Strike Force, Governor Bush acknowledged this problem and directed both departments to streamline the process. While many children still return before posting, over 100 new missing children were posted using the new process during November.

***Action Taken:** Staff created an automated system of reporting that minimizes effort by the caseworkers and speeds up processing of the information to all the required contacts. Caseworkers will have to manage only 2 contacts in order to update the system when a child is missing and 2 when the child is located. First, police are notified and then an electronic application is completed (on the state's Intranet). This electronic application was created within 2 weeks of the Strike Force start and is maintained by DCF. It populates a database of all missing children episodes. The electronic application is used to generate an alert in the department's computer system and through an electronic submission (requires both a DCF and FDLE quality check,) make an entry into the FDLE system. Once a child is located the application will be closed and the police notified.*

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FDLE and DCF have established an agreement with the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) to allow FDLE to directly open cases for DCF with the NCMEC. FDLE is in the process of redesigning their database to meet the fields required in NCMEC cases; the project is expected to be complete at the end of January 2003. NOTE: Florida is one of only two states that report missing DCF children to the NCMEC.

- 3. Finding:** A consistent theme from the Strike Force effort is the need for better coordination of these cases. DCF uses HomeSafenet to indicate the alert missing status of a child and law enforcement uses the Florida Crime Information Center to enter the child into state and national databases. These two databases, along with Missing Children Clearinghouse data, must be in sync to confirm the current status of the child. There continue to be problems, such as discrepancy between what is in FCIC and what is on HomeSafenet, with the cases being submitted. As the FDLE Missing Children Information Clearinghouse is the centralized point with access to both sets of information, this is where discrepancies are identified and handled.

Action Taken: In order to facilitate consistency in the report information and to assure the most accurate and current information is available to both law enforcement and DCF, DCF has co-located 2 positions in FDLE's Missing Children Information Clearinghouse to handle the cases and the volume of issues that are associated with each case. The co-location facilitates active resolution between the data and has shown improved efficiency in the reporting and locating process.

- 4. Finding:** At the onset of Operation SafeKids, it was determined by local law enforcement that in some cases, DCF had reported children as missing who were actually receiving public assistance from the agency and could have been located prior to a report being made to local law enforcement.

Action Taken: DCF, in its new operating procedure, requires diligent searches of all internal databases prior to reporting a child missing unless exigent circumstances determine the need to do otherwise.

- 5. Finding:** At the beginning of the operation, local law enforcement voiced a concern that some adults who were in the company of, or had absconded with, a child were not in the FCIC/NCIC system and therefore created a gap in finding children who were missing.

Action Taken: FDLE sent a training memo to local law enforcement acknowledging that if the circumstances dictate, law enforcement could choose to enter the adult, as well as the child, as missing. Where warrants exist or can be obtained then the adult should be entered into FCIC as a wanted person, and linked to the child's missing record. FDLE has programmed its system to allow for the linking of these records.



6. **Finding:** Several children who were missing from DCF custody were also children adjudicated delinquent and as such currently, or had previously, fallen under the supervision of the Department of Juvenile Justice. A number of the located children were found at a DJJ facility or had outstanding warrants and were taken to a Juvenile Assessment Center for booking and intake once located (see also finding #14, Reporting and Investigating).

There continues to be confusion in the reporting process of these cases, as some of these children are already in the FCIC/NCIC system with outstanding warrants and are being sought as fugitives as opposed to missing juveniles. The process was further complicated by the fact that the FBI did not allow both a warrant and a missing entry in the NCIC system.

***Action Taken:** FDLE submitted a formal request to the FBI through the National Criminal Justice Information Systems working group. On December 4th 2002, the national policy was changed to allow for dual entry of the juvenile as both missing and wanted. While the policy has been approved, the FBI is currently effecting programming changes and a "live" date for the system changes has not yet been established. Further discussion between law enforcement, DCF and DJJ needs to occur on the best methods for handling these situations. Local law enforcement will still need to evaluate their own procedures for handling these unique but not uncommon cases, and this issue needs to be included in future training.*

Issues that are in the process of being addressed

7. **Finding:** A common theme from several of the Strike Forces, particularly from local law enforcement was a lack of communication between DCF with law enforcement during the investigation and recovery of the child. Due to the high volume of cases and attrition at DCF, caseworkers were sometimes unable to attend scheduled meetings with local law enforcement and FDLE to jointly pursue looking for the children. In several cases, the child had returned home or to their placement and DCF failed to notify the law enforcement agency of jurisdiction and FDLE.

Establishing points of contact in each of the DCF districts proved to be invaluable to Strike Force participants in relationship building. DCF contacts were available to troubleshoot and provide assistance at a moment's notice. The relationships that developed over the Strike Force effort will only be sustained as long as the same persons remain in those positions. Therefore, it is critical that the underlying process used in Operation SafeKids be institutionalized within DCF policy.

In order to maximize the investigative efforts of local and state law enforcement, DCF needs to have a good understanding of the investigative process and tools so they can work cooperatively in the investigation. It is imperative that a cadre of trained professionals be

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assigned to locate missing children, enabling caseworkers to continue working on open cases.

Action in progress: *The DCF is in the process of **immediately** developing Missing Children Investigative Support Units in DCF Districts. The purpose of these units is to provide dedicated groups throughout the state with appropriate knowledge, training, and expertise to work closely with local law enforcement to locate missing children. The DCF will have three standard plans that will be used in the 14 districts based on the district's average number of missing children. **This recommendation was the number one priority of local and state law enforcement.***

It cannot be overstated that DCF and local law enforcement should ensure that all DCF missing children cases are worked in a cooperative and coordinated fashion. Investigations should be frequently discussed with the detectives and new information or updates shared immediately with law enforcement and with the FDLE Missing Children Information Clearinghouse. The formation of centralized missing children investigative support units at each DCF district charged solely with the responsibility of locating missing children is critical to ensure a coordinated effort of reporting, locating, recovery and safe placement of children.

- 8. Finding:** As stated in Finding #7, prior to Operation SafeKids, it appeared that when DCF reported the child missing, some caseworkers rarely updated the local law enforcement investigators with information that could possibly assist in the investigation. In some cases, they continued to look for the child but did not share their efforts with the law enforcement agency. Additionally, in order for DCF to evaluate the effectiveness of the reporting process, DCF needs access to the local police report. Some caseworkers had a difficult time in obtaining those reports from local law enforcement in a timely manner.

Action in progress: *FDLE and DCF have developed an electronic validation process that requires the DCF member assigned to the FDLE to validate the status of the missing child biweekly and to report updated information to the Missing Children Information Clearinghouse and to remind districts that they should be doing the same with local law enforcement. Additionally, DCF training must include an orientation to investigative tools and resources (also see finding #10, Reporting and Investigating) to assist DCF employees in understanding the type of information that could be of value to law enforcement in locating the child. Law enforcement should routinely provide copies of the police report to DCF when a child in DCF custody is reported missing.*

- 9. Finding:** Pertinent information contained in DCF case files was not accessible to anyone other than the caseworker. The practice of caseworkers maintaining their files with them should be eliminated.

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***Action in Progress:** DCF has agreed to maintain a centralized file in each district so that a child's information is available 24 hours a day. Training and implementation of centralizing files will commence immediately.*

10. Finding: It was clear during the operation that both law enforcement and DCF could benefit from multi-disciplinary training that focused on the roles and responsibilities of each entity in the investigation of missing children. Training areas that should potentially be included are:

- DCF policy on reporting missing children
- Information contained in HomeSafenet and FCIC/NCIC
- When a pickup order is necessary
- When a warrant should be obtained
- Investigating missing children cases
- Tools available in missing children cases
- FDLE Missing Children Clearinghouse and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children
- Communication/Coordination between law enforcement and DCF

***Action in progress:** FDLE, DCF and local law enforcement are developing a "train the trainer" curriculum to be delivered across the state beginning in late January. The Florida Sheriffs Association and Florida Police Chiefs Association are encouraging agencies to send appropriate representatives to the training. It will be critical that the training that is delivered become an ongoing part of local law enforcement procedures and DCF district protocols, and that the appropriate policies and standards be institutionalized in each of the agencies impacted to assure that this occurs.*

11. Finding: The Strike Force participants from local law enforcement were asked to debrief the runaway children that they located, in an effort to determine such things as the circumstances they were running from, where they went and if they were involved in, or victims of, criminal activity. According to investigators, the information obtained, when available, provided an interesting insight into the runaway issue and revealed circumstances that when reported or found should be thoroughly investigated (also see finding # 2, Prevention).

***Action in progress:** The Commissioner of FDLE currently serves on the Executive Committee for the National Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies (CALEA). He has submitted for consideration a new accreditation standard that would require local law enforcement to do the following:*

- *Have a formal policy and procedure in place for responding and investigating all missing children cases; and*

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- *Have a procedure that requires that runaways who are located be debriefed upon recovery. The investigator should ensure that the child was not victimized while away or involved in criminal activity.*

12. Finding: The overuse of pickup orders was observed and noted during the Operation, even in cases where it was not necessary in locating and recovering the child. The practice of obtaining pickup orders on missing children predates the mandatory entry of children into the NCIC system by federal law. The entry of the child in NCIC, followed by the hit confirmation by the entering agency, gives law enforcement the right to take appropriate action with the child. A pick up order is only necessary when the child is located out of state or when circumstances preclude DCF from recovering a child. A judge must add language to the order if he or she wishes law enforcement to remove the child by force.

Action in progress: Local law enforcement, particularly legal advisors, first responders and missing children detectives/supervisors, need to receive training on civil issues related to pick up orders. The Florida Association of Police Legal Advisors has already discussed this issue at its last meeting and has agreed to include a session on this topic at their spring training. DCF is developing policy language to address the limited use of pick up orders in the missing child process.

Issues and Recommendations to be Addressed

- 13. Finding:** In reference to the concealment of missing children (Endangered, Abducted, Absconded and Runaway) who have been aided by parents, other relatives and friends, Strike Force investigators have learned that two scenarios apply:
- Legal custodians, or parents are not apprised by the judge or the caseworker that leaving or removing a child from the state is in violation of the court order; or
 - Legal custodians or parents are aware they are in violation of court orders. However, no criminal reports are filed allowing law enforcement to seek arrest warrants for the perpetrators (parents).

Recommendation: Once a child becomes the charge of the state or is under court supervision, the parent or legal custodian will be advised orally and in writing that it is a criminal violation pursuant to FSS 787.04 to remove, lead, take or entice a minor beyond the limits of the state, or to conceal the location of a minor. The parent or custodian will sign a receipt that he/she has been apprised of FSS 787.04. The receipt will be witnessed and co-signed by the caseworker, or DCF designee.

Caseworkers who discover that children are missing and have information that any person violated the court order, will file a police report reference the criminal violation, thus enabling law enforcement to pursue an investigation pursuant to Florida Statute 787.04.

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(See also finding #2 in the Legislative section, regarding expanding this statute to include parents or caretakers who move or relocate within state but do not notify DCF.)

14. **Finding:** A number of missing runaways were actually located in DJJ facilities. Others had previously been under the supervision of DJJ for delinquent activities (also see finding #6, Reporting and Investigating).

Recommendation: DJJ's information should be made available to DCF to facilitate coordination of services and to avoid the reporting of missing children who are currently in DJJ facilities.

15. **Finding:** During the Strike Force efforts, one common complaint from law enforcement, particularly in larger metropolitan areas, was that officers who had recovered children and notified DCF had to wait for extended periods of time for the caseworker to respond. While improvements were noticed during the course of the operation, a timely response by DCF needs to be instituted consistently statewide.

Recommendation: DCF will adopt a "timely response" protocol when summoned by local law enforcement. DCF realizes that this issue impacts the time constraints on law enforcement resources, jeopardizes the cooperative effort being sought, and can negatively impact the child's perception of the system. One possible solution is to have DCF transporters respond and wait with the child until the caseworker can arrive on scene.

16. **Finding:** Historically, case activities have been documented in a variety of formats including hand written notes on forms, notes attached to the case file, and electronic entries into HomeSafenet. DCF has implemented a policy that requires all case activities be entered electronically into HomeSafenet and that all case notes are reviewed quarterly by a supervisor. However, during the course of this Operation it was observed that this was not consistently occurring throughout the districts.

Recommendation: The Investigative Support Units that are being established in each district will review HomeSafenet entries to ensure that DCF policies are being adhered to and there is accountability for supervisors.

17. **Finding:** Some of the missing children became pregnant or gave birth while they were gone. Of the children that were located and interviewed, there were at least 6 who were pregnant, two who gave birth and one who indicated she had an abortion during the time missing. The age range for these girls was 14 through 18. The situation in these cases became more complicated when the missing child was emancipated prior to being located. This raises a

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host of concerns about the welfare of both the missing child and the infant. However, there is no policy that automatically affords DCF responsibility for the baby and mother's care.

Recommendation: Policy will be established mandating that when DCF reports a pregnant child as missing, DCF will go to court to request that the judge place the infant in the custody of DCF when born. If the child emancipates before being located, then law enforcement should leave the case open until the welfare of the mother and infant can be determined. This may also require legislative change.

- 18. Finding:** Across the state, police departments and sheriff's offices have a variety of policies for accepting reports from DCF. In some jurisdictions the police department will not accept cases if a child ran from a shelter; they instead refer DCF to the jurisdiction of the child's home.

Recommendation: A standard for law enforcement needs to be established that clarifies that the law enforcement agency of jurisdiction is that from which the child physically disappeared. This standard should include what incidents constitute a "missing child" and requires a law enforcement report and should be circulated to local law enforcement agencies and included in future training.

- 19. Finding:** DCF does not have care and custody of children once they turn 18 years old. Following the child's 18th birthday, DCF closes their case on missing "emancipated" children and notifies law enforcement as such. In some instances, DCF notifies law enforcement that the case is closed but fails to disclose that the child was never recovered.

Recommendation: Local law enforcement agencies should not remove these children from FCIC and close their case until the individual has been located and their well being established. FDLE has already begun to notify local law enforcement the month prior to the child's emancipation date that DCF will make the child's file accessible should they choose to keep the case open. It should be noted that during Operation SafeKids, the Strike Forces located and made a visual on all but one of the closed emancipated children and maintained an open case on the ones that were not found but were closed by DCF.

- 20. Finding:** In some instances, DCF makes a determination that a child should not be returned to a home or shelter once the child is located. However, there is nothing in place to notify a law enforcement officer that a child should not be returned to a particular placement.

Recommendation: When local law enforcement enters such a child into FCIC, DCF should inform law enforcement of the special circumstances. Law enforcement should then make a notation in the remarks field that the abuse hotline must be contacted in lieu of returning the child to the originating point of departure.



B. Public Awareness & Outreach

Issues that are in the process of being addressed

1. **Finding:** Sometimes, children missing from DCF may surface in another state's child welfare system. The other state may not be aware that a child in their care is actually missing from Florida (also see Finding #3, Legislative Issues). The ability to exchange information and photographs between states could help alleviate this problem.

Action in progress:

DCF is working on the implementation of a pilot project called the Locater System. Locater is a computer system used to create and disseminate posters of missing children locally, statewide, or nationwide. It is typically used in law enforcement agencies; however, Congressman Foley, in conjunction with Governor Bush's office has asked DCF to pilot its use in social services. The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children has provided equipment to DCF and agreed to also provide equipment to DCF's counterpart in another state at no charge. The system enables the instantaneous exchange of children's photographs and could have significant potential if implemented nationwide.

Recommendations

2. **Finding:** The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children has indicated that 1 out of 6 children are recovered when their photos appear on an ADVO card (a mass distributed photo insert mailed to residence and businesses throughout the country). Wal-Mart has seen similar results since they began posting missing children in their stores. Leads from the public are among the best sources for locating and recovering missing children.

Recommendation: DCF is pursuing avenues for posting the information and photographs of their missing children. Missing children non-profit groups, community groups, civic organizations, and school districts are potential outlets for providing assistance in distributing flyers and information.



C. Recovery

Issues that are in the process of being addressed

1. **Finding:** Once a child's whereabouts are confirmed, the child's recovery becomes the next priority. In cases where the child is located out of state or out of country, the recovery efforts become more complex as they involve the various jurisdictional issues that arise with different rules and law. Persons involved with these cases must be familiar with the Uniform Child Custody Jurisdiction Enforcement Act (legislation adopted by individual states to govern non-custodial abductions), as well as international treaties. Obviously this level of expertise is beyond the scope of the day-to-day operational duties of caseworkers and district liaisons.

***Action in progress:** One of the original goals of Operation SafeKids was to develop a centralized clearinghouse for the recovery of missing children. One of the duties of the new DCF Central Office Investigative Unit will be to pull together an established team as needed to diligently work those issues involving other states/countries, etc. This team would include representation from the Family Safety program office, Interstate Compact for the Placement of Children unit, General Counsel, and others deemed appropriate.*

Issues and Recommendations to be Addressed

2. **Finding:** Several children reported missing are believed to now be outside of the United States. Leads indicated their location in foreign countries, but investigators were unable to gain cooperation from the authorities there to confirm the welfare and whereabouts of the child. Of those children who were confirmed and located, the FBI, U.S. Customs, and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children assisted in the process.

***Recommendation:** Due to the number of foreign born residents, the volume of international tourists, and the high population of illegal aliens, Florida should explore the feasibility of developing international agreements with Columbia, the Bahamas and Mexico, as well as other South American countries, to assist our state in locating children believed to be in their jurisdiction and ascertaining the child's well-being. Due to the fact that these countries are signatory to the Hague Treaty (an international treaty governing the return of missing and abducted children), federal resources and NCMEC should be utilized in all cases of this type. The State Department and international social services should be considered as additional resources.*

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- Finding:** Since the end of August 2002, Orlando Police Department has responded to 17 calls from DCF offices to take reports when a child has run away from the office. In some cases this has occurred after law enforcement located and took the child to the DCF office, as requested. Two such incidents resulted in a child stealing a DCF employee's automobile to flee.

Recommendation: While state law prohibits a runaway child from being physically detained, DCF will establish a supervised location within each facility that is suitable to place runaways when recovered.



D. Prevention

Issues that are in the process of being addressed

1. **Finding:** Lack of photographs has been a problem for investigators who go to schools, neighborhoods, and shelters, looking for a child. Particularly if a child is enrolled under an alias, persons who could provide information are unable to do so without viewing a picture of the child in question. Only 28% of the DCF children featured on FDLE's website have photos available.

Action in progress: DCF is actively working to obtain fingerprints and photographs of all dependent children, as recommended by the Governor's Blue Ribbon Panel on Child Protection. DCF is pursuing creative ways to obtain pictures, i.e. yearbooks, friends, former placements, as a part of their overall plan. Additionally, DCF has purchased fingerprinting machines for DCF districts. While many of the children under DCF's care now have fingerprints and photographs, children reported missing prior to Operation Safekids would not have been included in this initiative.

2. **Finding:** The majority of the missing children cases are runaways and many of these are habitual runaways. In fact, 86% of the original 393 cases were runaways and of those the majority were females between the ages of 14 and 18. 35 of the 339 runaway children ran multiple times. Proactive preparation of individual placements is needed to promote the stability of runaway children upon their return (see also finding #11, Reporting and Investigating).

Action in progress: Behavior analysts are involved to varying degrees in prevention and intervention with habitual runaways in every district/region of the state, including participating on Operation Safekids Strike Forces. Analysts are reviewing data provided by counselors to a) identify the individual patterns and characteristics of habitual running displayed by each child and b) prioritize initial interventions based on the safety of the child. Analysts are also reviewing files, interviewing caregivers and children and observing placements as part of behavioral assessments to identify and prepare placements for the return of children, and facilitate successful interventions when children already have returned. Behavior analysts have provided training and on-sight support to caregivers and are providing training and technical assistance to runaway shelters in many districts. In some districts behavior analysts are presenting this information to the courts. As part of the Behavior Analysis Services program, the University of Florida and South Florida are using these efforts to determine and develop best practices for prevention and intervention.

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The desired result is that children who are identified as habitual runaways will be evaluated prior to their next runaway episode so that appropriate intervention occurs prior to another runaway episode. And, should the child have already run again, to plan for the child's return.

- 3. Finding:** Several runaway children were debriefed by DCF and local law enforcement after they were located. According to investigators, a majority of these children had run to a parent, friend or relative. This suggests that some of these children are not necessarily running away, but rather seeking to find their own alternative placements. In one case, the child indicated that she wanted to go back to her mother. She was originally removed because of abuse by the stepfather, but he was now in prison and she couldn't understand why she was still in foster care.

When interviewed as to why they have repeatedly run away from shelters or foster homes, some children complained of poor or abusive living conditions. Only when they report a crime, is there a follow-up by law enforcement to these complaints.

Action in progress: *The new DCF operating procedure on missing children requires that workers trained in interviewing children will debrief all runaways and document why they ran away. This information will be acted upon when analysis reveals a particular shelter/home may be contributing to the children running away or there are indications of risk factors present in the home. Additionally, close attention will be paid to where the child ran and, if an alternate placement that meets the child's needs and wishes without jeopardizing the child's safety or treatment can be accommodated, then it should.*

Recommendation: *Currently DCF's hotline only intakes certain reports of "child on child" abuse that occurs in shelters, foster care, or DCF placements. The hotline criteria should be amended to accept all reports of "child on child" physical/sexual abuse. Law Enforcement and DCF should jointly investigate these reports.*

Issues and Recommendations to be Addressed

- 4. Finding:** Unfortunately, there are times when it may be necessary to compare the data, such as fingerprints or DNA, from a missing child to another subject for positive identification purposes. DCF is in the process of fingerprinting all children under DCF care and custody to store in case files. Children under school age are difficult to fingerprint as the size of their fingers yield small fingerprints. Infants and toddlers are in rapid growth years and photographs become out of date very rapidly. 46% of missing children cases in the Parental, Endangered, or Involuntary category involved children under school age.

Recommendation: *Law Enforcement recommends that DCF collect and store DNA samples without analysis for children under school age.*

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- Finding:** Some districts noted a routine placement pattern of children leaving from a non-secure facility, without the prior knowledge or approval of the caregiver, only to return a few hours later.

Recommendation: The policy on missing children in DCF will be reviewed during the year, after enough significant data on these children can be analyzed to determine if any changes should occur in the manner of reporting.

- Finding:** Of the 393 children, 121 or 35% of children were 17 or older and 41 (including the 13 cases still open with law enforcement) emancipated during the course of the operation. In a sampling of children who were asked why they ran away, the response from one third of the children was that they did not want to be in the DCF system or a DCF placement facility. A case in point, a seventeen-year old runaway who will turn 18 in two weeks, has obtained her GED, is attempting to get financial aid to attend community college, works and has established a residence with her fiancée. She contacts her care manager by telephone but will not come in because she knows she will be placed in foster care. There is a perception among DCF caseworkers that interference in these types of cases may actually hinder the progress of these individuals. While there is an understanding regarding the need to locate and determine safety for these children, they may not be placed as a high priority by DCF.

Recommendation: DCF currently has 227 placements in subsidized independent living. The youth range in age from 16 to 21. DCF is exploring early emancipation or early transition into independent living for runaways who are within a year of turning 18 and who demonstrate a high level of self-sufficiency.



E. Legislative Action

Florida Legislature

1. **Finding:** Runaways comprise the majority of all missing children, including those missing from DCF care. While the state has some excellent programs and facilities that deal with runaway children, it appears that there needs to be more options and resources for these children who are running away from DCF placement.

Additionally, the inability to hold some youth so they can be assessed and appropriately placed or treated is a frustration to all that work with this population. In many instances the youth ran again before he or she could be contacted by a DCF staff member.

Law Enforcement Recommendations: *Make available a continuum of resources for missing children under the care of DCF, such as:*

- *Assessment centers/facilities to handle the return of runaways so that proper evaluation can occur to prevent another episode and to determine the best placement after an episode*
- *Limited secure treatment beds for youth who run but become a danger to themselves in the process, i.e. prostitution*
- *Explore early emancipation or early transition into independent living for runaways who are within months of turning 18*
- *Begin planning for independent living early on. Explore investing in state trust funds for youth who remain in care to help provide for them initially when they reach 18 years of age. (The costs of looking for these children may far exceed the investment in this type of program).*

Law Enforcement Recommendation: *While there are strict federal and state standards that prohibit the detention of children, the legislature should consider instilling mandatory secure treatment options and providing additional funding sources to assist youth whose runaway actions have put their lives in danger.*

2. **Finding:** Parents who are being investigated for abuse are not required to report to DCF if they move or relocate. Consequently, there are no sanctions in place to insure that the abuse complaint is fully investigated and the child is not further abused.

Additionally, another category of parents or caretakers who are being supervised by DCF, but whose children are not under DCF physical custody, should be required as part of their court order to report any address changes to DCF within 48 hours. However, even if these requirements become part of the court order, it is unclear as to whether law enforcement has the authority to automatically enter that child as missing in the event the order is violated.

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This is because DCF does not have legal custody of the child. In both instances there may need to be legislative resolve.

Recommendation: DCF should adopt a policy to ensure that when obtaining court orders in these cases, that the order contains a provision that requires notification within 48 hours of all change of address.

Recommendation: The Legislature should mandate that parents under investigation for abuse notify DCF of their location if they change residences. The legislature should further clarify if failure to do so should constitute these children as "missing" for purposes of reporting to law enforcement.

Recommendation: The Legislature should also articulate the authority for law enforcement to enter children as missing who are under DCF supervision but not DCF custody when the parent or caretaker disappears. Section 787.04, F.S. deals with concealment of missing children and should be reviewed to determine if this is the appropriate place to clarify this issue.

National

- 3. Finding:** There were a few instances in which the child (and/or absconding adult) was located in another state and had actually been involved with the DCF equivalent agency in that state. The other state was not aware that the child was missing from Florida, and had no knowledge of any pending abuse allegations against the family.

Recommendation: Explore federal legislation that provides on line direct (view only) access to the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) Missing/Wanted files to each state Social Service Agency. Consider federal legislation that requires that each state social service agency check these files when coming in contact with a child in their state to determine if the child or parent is missing/wanted in another state.

Recommendation: Also explore federal legislation that allows on line direct access to national criminal history information via NCIC to state social service agencies to be used during investigations of child abuse allegations. Currently, the information can only be shared (indirectly) with DCF if the local agency is jointly working the investigation.

Recommendation: Explore the possibility of a centralized pointer index that would allow states access to other state abuse information to ascertain if a child had a previous report of abuse. Each state would be required to submit to the centralized registry.

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Conclusion

Operation Safekids ran successfully for 15 weeks and resulted in the location of close to 75% of the original 393 children reported missing from DCF supervision. During the course of the Operation, an additional 423 cases beyond the original 393 were opened; 196 of these cases had been closed/located as of December 10, 2002. In this same timeframe, FDLE's Missing Children Information Clearinghouse saw a 150% increase in case submissions.

While the Operation demonstrated strong results in terms of recovering the children reported missing, it also yielded several collateral benefits in terms of process improvements, enhanced communication between DCF and local law enforcement, and the identification of recommendations for continued progress.

The most critical recommendations included the establishment of Investigative Support Units in DCF districts to provide a permanent and dedicated resource to search for missing children. Advanced and specialized training for both DCF personnel and law enforcement officers is also a top priority. Prevention efforts must address reducing the incidents of habitual runaways by examining the reasons behind the child's departure and by developing alternative and more appropriate placement options.

As indicated in the report, the statewide Steering Committee made immediate improvements wherever within their scope or authority, and additional policy and procedural changes are underway. Legislative assistance is suggested to address some findings and recommendations, and it is expected that new resources will be needed to implement some of these components.

In general, Operation Safekids proved to be a sound example of the positive results that can be generated when state and local governments work in concert toward a common goal.

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Appendix A - Regional Child Location Strike Force Reports

**Operation
S.A.F.E. Kids II
Child Location
Strike Forces**

**Pensacola Region Final Report
December 2, 2002**

ORGANIZATION

The Pensacola Region Operations Center (PROC) strike force consisted of Department of Children and Families (DCF), District 1 and a portion of District 2. The strike force was comprised of representatives from the Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE), Department of Children and Families (DCF), Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) and local law enforcement. Meetings primarily coincided with the video teleconferences held during operation Safe Kids II. Within this region, there has always been a very good working relationship between DCF, DJJ and law enforcement. As such, communication between strike force members was by telephone or e-mail. This informal method of contact met the needs of the strike force and presented no obstacles or problems.

PROBLEMS / ISSUES / RECOMMENDATIONS

- A positive result of the regional strike force operation has been improving and enhancing the lines of communication between DCF, DJJ and state and local law enforcement. The increased communication between the involved agencies has produced a greater network of individuals who are responsible for missing children investigations.
- The DCF policy should be reviewed regarding when a missing child report is made to law enforcement as it relates to children who are considered habitual runaways. An example of this would be a child placed in a non-secure facility who routinely leaves the facility only to return a few hours later. It is felt that each case should be examined to determine what the child's normal pattern is prior to reporting as runaway. For some children, they do leave their placement setting, without the prior knowledge or approval of the caregiver, but will return within a matter of 4 to 6 hours. Calling in a report on these habitual runaways requires a lot of time and energy for several different agencies, time that could perhaps be better utilized in trying to

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locate children that are known to be missing. Certainly if the habitual runaways are gone in a manner that is not consistent with their normal pattern, then all of the required steps for locating a runaway would be activated.

- Difficulties were experienced in dealing with cases that involved other states. Not all states use the same criteria that Florida does in recognizing that children who are with their parents can be categorized as missing. This hindered our efforts to locate children believed to be outside of Florida. A national system would enhance the ability to locate missing children that have crossed state lines. This would make available information from all states and would go far to ensure joint cooperation from all states.



ORGANIZATION

The Tallahassee Regional Operations Center (TROC) Task Force was comprised of two areas within the region - the Live Oak area and the Tallahassee area offices. This task force also included the Department of Children and Family (DCF) District 2 (eastern half) and District 3 (western half). The task force held several meetings and often communicated through telephone and email. On a routine basis they would communicate their efforts and progression in locating the various identified kids.

PROBLEMS / ISSUES / RECOMMENDATIONS

No major problems were encountered in the region. In the western half of DCF District 2 two (2) separate cases of parental abduction occurred in Bay County, wherein local law enforcement did not place an FCIC alert for the involved children. This same issue arose in Liberty County wherein the local agency had not entered an infant under DCF care and the infant's mother, who was a 15-year-old runaway not under DCF care.

Another issue that occurred with the Leon County Sheriff's Office was when a DCF child ran away and the DCF employee was unable to provide necessary information to locate the child after hours.

The regional task force recommends the following:

- Law enforcement need to improve on entering missing children in a timely manner, so the children if located can be identified as missing.
- DCF needs to establish a more effective protocol for after hours contact.
- DCF and law enforcement agencies need to have a clear understanding of what's expected.
- DCF needs to provide a more timely notification of recovered kids.



**Operation
S.A.F.E. Kids II
Child Location
Strike Forces**

**Jacksonville Region Final Report
December 2, 2002**

ORGANIZATION

The Jacksonville strike force consisted of members from the Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE), including Public Assistance Fraud, Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ), Department of Children and Families (DCF), local Sheriff's Departments, local Police Departments. Since the beginning of SafeKids II in August of 2002, there have been monthly strikeforce meetings, conference calls and e-mails with participating agencies. The last meeting was held December 2, 2002, where outstanding issues were discussed.

PROBLEMS / ISSUES / RECOMMENDATIONS

The majority of problems encountered during this operation were primarily related to communication between DCF and local police agencies. DCF had certain requirements for entry of a child into FCIC where the local agency would have other requirements for reporting i.e. missing child versus runaway. These problems did appear to resolve towards the conclusion of SafeKids II.

There are still problems with communication and training of DCF and local agency personnel. These issues are being worked on with cooperative training between DCF and the local agencies so that the local agencies understand DCF's reporting criteria and for DCF to understand local agencies report taking criteria i.e. custody orders versus missing person or runaway. One thing that was noticed by FDLE, was regarding a lack of communication with the locals and DCF personnel when the children were cleared. Perhaps a solution to this would be a one contact point person for the cases.

The following are issues/questions presented to the strike force:

- DCF/Tallahassee & FDLE/Tallahassee ask local DCF to reconcile children who are reported as runaways, but don't have active FCIC assignment.

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- Children don't show up in FCIC for a variety of reasons. (I.e.) DCF counselor hasn't reported child missing to local law enforcement, which we can usually resolve by initiating a new missing child report.
- Some are "rejected" because they show up in FCIC as having a "warrant" and FDLE requires they be listed as "missing." When we attempt to get a missing child report, we have been told that JSO will not take another report & that the "warrant" is all that is needed. How can this be resolved?
- Another example of a "rejection" in FCIC is if the child's name does not "match" on the JSO report. Perhaps we can ask DCF counselors & the officers taking the report to be sensitive to this issue.
- Children who are located out of state and not picked up. How are other states made aware of Orders to Take Into Custody?



ORGANIZATION

The Suncoast Tampa Bay Strike Force was organized after the initial videoconference held August 23, 2002, at FDLE in Tampa. The strike force held it's first meeting on August 30, 2002, at the DCF Suncoast office with DCF, FDLE, Tampa Police Department (TPD), Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office (HCSO), Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) and private providers Hillsborough Kids Inc. (HKI) and Family Continuity Program (FCP). Subsequent meetings were held on September 5, 2002, September 12, 2002, September 18, 2002, September 30, 2002, November 18, 2002, and November 26, 2002 and December 2, 2002. For agencies unable to attend the meetings in person a conference call option was made available. This practice maximized the opportunity for involvement by all entities. Frequent, sometimes daily, telephone contact occurred between FDLE and DCF Coordinator and a significant amount of business and transfer of information was conducted via email. FDLE's Lakeland (DCF District 14) and Brooksville (DCF District 13) Field Offices met with their respective counterparts whom because of regional boundaries were in different DCF Regions.

The Suncoast Tampa Bay Strike Force held a status meeting on Tuesday, November 26, 2002, at the DCF Suncoast office. In attendance were members of DCF, HKI, FCP, Tampa PD, FDLE and DJJ. Members of the taskforce discussed the final efforts to locate the outstanding missing child cases and the coordination of taskforce activity after closure of the official SafeKids initiative. A follow-up planning meeting was also held after the December 2nd Videoconference. The goal of the final meeting was specifically aimed at identifying those strategies needed to sustain the on-going efforts to follow up and resolve the outstanding cases.

PROBLEMS / ISSUES / RECOMMENDATIONS

- Caseworkers not returning telephone calls or keeping open communication with local law enforcement. *This appears to be primarily an issue of workload and*

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newly-assigned caseworkers with a minimum number of contacts and limited knowledge of resources outside of the DCF framework

- The need to foster increased working relationships between DJJ JPO's, DCF and private child welfare providers. *Substantial progress has been made in this area through the activities of the Strike Force.*
- Lack of protocols for notification among disparate agencies when a child is located or recovered. *Local notification has improved, however, statewide strategies are necessary to develop best practices.*
- No systemic plan for the placement (detention) of chronic runaways who are located. This is particularly troublesome when they run away again and generate a new missing child report.
- Age of Majority cases (DCF closes their cases at 18, DJJ closes at 19). *Policy issue; Coordination is necessary between State Agencies regarding when a child reaches the age of majority.*
- Children who are near the age of majority who are actually succeeding on their own. In Tampa we have a seventeen-year-old runaway (who will turn eighteen on 12/10/02) who has obtained her GED, is attempting to get financial aid to attend community college, works and has established a residence with her fiancée. She contacts her care manager by telephone, but will not come in because she knows she will be placed in foster care. There is a perception among DCF Caseworkers that interference in these types of cases may actually hinder the progress of these individuals. While there is an understanding regarding the need to locate and determine safety of these children, they are typically not placed at a high priority by DCF.
- Inconsistent protocols for the entry of children into FCIC resulted in erroneous reporting. *Resolved through follow-up communication with staff regarding initial FCIC entries, subsequent case closures and new cases based upon children running away again.*
- Jurisdictional issues within DCF (when kids are located outside of reporting Region). We had an incident when a child was reported out of one region and located in the adjacent county (another region) and jurisdiction became an issue for DCF. *DCF policy issue; as a State Agency artificial lines (regional boundaries) should not hinder recovery efforts. Issue resolved but slowed recovery.*

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- Lack of established or effective communication channels and uniform protocols for handling children by multiple agencies working toward the same goals. Any unresolved issues in the region required policy decisions at the state level. These items have been identified above and are provided as recommendations. The Strike Force recognizes the importance of resolving any issues that impede the recovery of missing children and has agreed to continue its efforts to communicate through department liaisons and to work towards improving operations within the Region.
- DJJ in Hillsborough has a Special Projects Unit. One of the many duties this unit handles is dependency cases. The benefit of this unit is that DCF/private providers in Hillsborough County have a consistent, designated contact(s) for JPO's.
- Systemic approach for chronic runaways. May require legislative consideration for the detention of endangered cases (particularly chronic endangered runaways).
- Create one designated reporting section. That designee would be responsible for disseminating information to the appropriate parties.
- Maintenance of law enforcement contacts.
- Investigative training for DCF/private providers may be helpful in knowing the tools/resources available to locate children and their parents.
- Monthly follow-up on remaining Category I (Endangered, Involuntary, and Parental) cases with all Strike Force participants.
- All state agencies should be regionally in line. Like other FDLE Regions, TBROC has multiple DCF regions within it and parts of these DCF regions overlap into other FDLE regions.
- DCF and private providers would like to see more Behavioral Analysts so that these children could receive more intensive treatment.

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**Operation
S.A.F.E. Kids II
Child Location
Strike Forces**



Orlando Region Final Report December 2, 2002

ORGANIZATION

The Orlando Region Operations Center (OROC) began the Strike Force for Operation SafeKids II on August 26, 2002, immediately following the Statewide Video Teleconference. The Strike Force consisted of members from OROC (including Public Assistance Fraud), Department of Children and Families (DCF) Districts 7, 12, 13 & 15, Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ), and members from various city and county law enforcement agencies. The Strike Force conducted formal meetings on August 30, September 6, 23 & 26 and October 22, 2002. Cases were assigned to the Operations Center or Field Offices based on where the child was reported missing. OROC prepared analytical packages on the children it was assigned and then assigned the endangered cases to an OROC Special Agent, while assigning the runaway cases to local law enforcement. OROC personnel maintained daily contact with Strike Force members to track the Team's efforts, assist in furthering individual investigations and to identify and/or solve issues or problems. A Government Analyst and a Special Projects Coordinator maintained the daily tracking and reporting to the Missing Children Information Clearinghouse (MCIC). Daily tracking was facilitated through the development and use of an "OROC Working List".

PROBLEMS / ISSUES / RECOMMENDATIONS

- Need for improved communication between all entities.
- Timely notification by DCF to law enforcement when a child is recovered.
- Dual entries in FCIC for the missing child and Take Into Custody Order (if applicable). Lake & Osceola County Sheriff's Departments enter TICO's in the remark section of the FCIC missing child Teletype.
- Quicker response by DCF to law enforcement in the field. At the conclusion of this operation law enforcement noted that District 7 had improved in their response time.
- Need for better security of children taken to DCF offices to prevent the children from running away from the DCF office. Since the end of August 2002, Orlando Police Department has responded to 17 calls from DCF offices to take reports when a child

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has runaway from the office. Often this is after law enforcement has located the child and as requested taken the child to the DCF office. Two such incidents resulted in a child stealing a DCF employee's automobile to flee.



ORGANIZATION

Following an FDLE statewide teleconference held on August 26, 2002, the Ft. Myers Region Operation Center (FMROC) scheduled a meeting for August 30, 2002, with the Department and Children and Families (DCF) Deputy Administrator for District 8. The purpose of the meeting was to formulate operational procedures for responsible agency members tasked with the implementation of Operation SafeKids II. The DCF Public Information Officer (PIO), DCF Rehabilitative Program Director, and the Chief Juvenile Probation Officer for the Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) also attended this meeting.

As strategies were implemented, a subsequent meeting was held on September 6, 2002. The purpose of this meeting was to address any problems or issues pertaining to the overall effectiveness of the operation. Throughout the course of this initiative, FMROC maintained frequent contact with DCF and DJJ via electronic mail messages and telephone conversations.

PROBLEMS / ISSUES / RECOMMENDATIONS

A final Strike Force meeting was held on December 2, 2002. The purpose of this meeting was to address the overall effectiveness of the operation as well as to address open cases and recommendations for the final report.

- The most difficult problem during the operation was dealing with the time delays that occurred when information was flowing from local law enforcement to DCF to FDLE. Consistent lapses in time occurred following the recovery of Missing Children. In many instances, a Missing Child was recovered for several days before FDLE Program Administrators recorded the information. As time went on, both DCF and FDLE created computer resolutions that greatly improved the flow of information.
- It is recommended that a more effective way be found to deal with runaways. An overall consensus is that our system is simply not equipped to handle runaways effectively.



ORGANIZATION

The Miami Region Operations Center (MROC) established an Operation SAFEKIDS Strike Force comprised of one supervisor, six special agents, two PAF investigators, and one analyst. MROC had three points of contact from Department of Children and Families (DCF) Districts 9, 10 and 11.

The Public Assistance Fraud (PAF) Investigators provided analytical and investigative leads stemming from welfare records, school records and other state databases. A crime intelligence analyst was instrumental in maintaining records on all children recovered, providing additional leads to agents and serving as a liaison between other law enforcement agencies and FDLE.

Agents met weekly with local law enforcement members having jurisdiction of the missing children. Meetings were also held with Department of Children and Families (DCF) caseworkers to review their case files and develop leads to locate the children. When possible DCF and local law enforcement met jointly with the FDLE agents so that all parties could share pertinent information. These meetings alone resolved at least 1/3 of the cases.

PROBLEMS / ISSUES / RECOMMENDATIONS

- As Miami-Dade Police Department began reviewing cases with DCF prior to the onset of OPERATION SAFEKIDS, they learned that the definition of "missing" by DCF standards was not consistent with Florida State Statutes. Therefore, law enforcement efforts were being exhausted looking for children for whom DCF actually knew the location but were reported as missing when the children failed to attend DCF scheduled appointments. Twenty-two percent (22%) of the MROC Category One cases should not have been reported as missing to local law enforcement. DCF has since changed their definition to coincide statutorily with law enforcement's definition.

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- Due to the high volume of cases and attrition at DCF, caseworkers were frequently unable to attend scheduled meetings with local law enforcement and FDLE to jointly pursue looking for the children. The formation of units at DCF charged solely with the responsibility of locating missing children may alleviate this problem.
- Communication and training deficiencies were a common theme throughout the operation. DCF had located children on the SAFEKIDS lists, but failed to notify FDLE or local law enforcement in 18% of the cases. This failure to notify local law enforcement also meant that the found child remained in FCIC. Agents became frustrated when DCF caseworkers failed to appear at scheduled appointments or showed up but did not have relevant case file information.
- Many of the children on the lists who were recovered ran away again. Children, when interviewed as to why they have repeatedly run away from shelters or foster homes, complain of poor or abusive living conditions. Yet, there does not appear to be a system in place to assess the validity of the children's complaints. Only when they report a crime, is there a follow-up by law enforcement. The children are placed in inadequate facilities and are under-served by their caregivers and the systems that are in place to protect them. Complaints include poor food, sleep deprivation, lack of educational opportunities, abusive mental and physical treatment, inadequate or no counseling for issues common to children, lack of transportation to after-school events, lack of interest or concern by the caregiver. Although DCF conducts "unannounced" visits to the shelters, normally the shelters are given advance notice of the visits. Additionally, children are not allowed the opportunity to verbalize any problems they are experiencing at the shelters. (There is a system. If a child is being abused or neglected in a foster or shelter home an abuse report is generated and a full investigation is completed in conjunction with foster care licensing. If the allegations are verified, the foster home usually loses their license and is often referred to the police for a criminal investigation. Children often verbalize problems to their assigned counselor and many call the abuse hotline themselves. However, this system addresses abuse and neglect as defined in statutes, but there is no current system for dealing with quality of life issues.)
- It has been recommended that DCF maintain a centralized file so that a child's information is available 24-hours a day. In one particular case, with the approval of DCF, an agent broke into a locked office to retrieve case files of endangered children. These children were subsequently located, but the practice of caseworkers maintaining the only files in the trunks of their vehicles must be abolished.
- As a result of Operation SAFEKIDS, all agencies found that by working together we were better able to locate missing children. Having a point of contact from

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each of the DCF Districts proved to be invaluable. They were available daily to troubleshoot and provide assistance at a moment's notice. A point of contact or liaison to local law enforcement should be in place even after the termination of the SAFEKIDS initiative.

- Each entity sharing their information led to recoveries. Utilizing the flagging system also helped. However, a software system that could link the various state and public record databases including insurance, school records, Medicaid files, law enforcement records, Juvenile Assessment Centers and National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), would greatly enhance any operation to locate missing children. District 11-Miami-Dade is currently in the process of establishing a procedural manual for an Investigative Unit that would be charged with recovering missing children. The investigators would be trained to develop and follow-up on leads in coordination with local law enforcement. This will allow caseworkers to dedicate their time to the welfare of children while the investigative unit would devote their time to finding at-risk children. Currently these two functions are being inadequately performed by caseworkers that are already burdened with a steady stream of new cases every week.
- Several children were taken out of the United States. The FBI, US Customs, and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children assisted in locating some of these children. Federal resources and NCMEC should be utilized in all cases of this type.
- Over the period of the operation, a problem was identified in that the missing children lists being used by DCF, FDLE and local law enforcement were often not the same lists with some individuals not appearing on one list, or found children may not have been removed from lists. This continues to be a problem. Coordination through the Missing Children Information Clearinghouse may alleviate multiple lists.
- School principals and teachers would help with DCF efforts if asked. There are low and no-cost ways to include Florida's high schools, middle schools, and elementary schools in DCF's efforts to safeguard children
- Community college and state universities train teachers and educational counselors. Those teachers and counselors in training are required by most of the programs to intern at a school; an internship position (with a background check and other safeguards) with a local DCF investigator should also be a way to satisfy the requirement. Business schools and management programs at community colleges and state universities should be invited by DCF to assess their management processes and to make recommendations. Work-study programs, internships and educational grant programs also could accomplish this. Students seeking higher education degrees at the master's and doctoral

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levels are required to collect test data and make assessments. DCF could insure the confidentiality of the subjects and still provide a valuable market for the mining of data by researchers. The benefit is that DCF would get research-based advice, more involvement, and maybe some young college grads that want to stay around for a few years finding children.

- Management of runaway and at-risk students should be a team effort. DCF investigators should have the time and resources to make a school-based assessment of a child who has been identified as a frequent runaway. This should mean that the caseworker tracks a child's progress, talking to each teacher. A child's teachers should have some input into the management of a child's case (as should the school counselor). Children spend at least as much time in school and with their peer group as they do with family. DCF caseworkers should be more commonly seen at large public schools.
- "Train the Trainer" type courses in the efforts of DCF and Law Enforcement could include public school administrators, especially if the state provides Continuing Education Credits for teachers and administrators who sign up to attend such sessions. DCF's insulated management environment would change if education administrators, such as public school principals and vice principals, were attending DCF training on strategies for finding missing children and the laws surrounding missing children. While not traditionally thought to be in the area of education, at-risk children and the efforts to safeguard them should be of interest to school administrators across the state.
- On a monthly or quarterly basis, DCF could be mailing or emailing a list such as the list of Category I and Category II missing children to each county school board, and directly to public high schools, middle schools, and elementary schools across the state. This vastly increases the number of eyes on the lookout for missing children.
- DCF should be contacting Parent-Teacher associations across the state to request their involvement in missing child recovery efforts. PTA's are effective lobbying groups for school boards. One example: PTA members could create a middle school or high school level curriculum for students aimed at describing the problem of runaways and describing the efforts spent on recovery of runaways. The class could be taught by PTA volunteers and integrated into the health/social studies curriculum. This curriculum could be a low cost way to expose children to the realities of life on the streets. Another example: PTA members could publicize the MCIC web site and phone numbers at meetings, along with other MCIC information. Another example: PTA members could contribute to safer bus stops for children, that might include signage identifying the area as a student bus stop (the signs could list the Florida Statutes for kidnapping or abduction, false imprisonment of a child etc., and the missing children hotline number).

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- The recovery of missing children should be the focus of all the agencies involved once a child is discovered missing. Actions should be quick and diligent. However, we learned that the bulk of the children were teen-aged runaways. Many ran back to their parents or families but many others lived transient lifestyles, staying with different friends, becoming part of a gang, prostituting and using drugs.
- We must focus on prevention and services to these children must begin immediately after recovery. We would recommend that these children undergo a comprehensive assessment to include medical (HIV and pregnancy testing), psychological, educational, etc. soon after they are brought into care. There is currently an effort underway to implement a behavioral analyst program to address part of this issue.
- A placement for these children should be sought based on the findings of these assessments. These children have a myriad of issues and often need consistent and intensive services that could be provided in a quality residential group care setting. The availability of these homes is currently limited and the quality of the services currently being provided should be re-assessed based on the needs of this runaway population. We recommend that a greater effort be made to recruit and retain quality residential group care homes to reduce the number of children who runaway.