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Missing Children in Washington State: *Information Sharing and Public Education*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

While local law enforcement officers have primary responsibility for identifying and recovering missing children in Washington State, three state agencies also play a role in this effort:

- The 1985 Legislature directed the Washington State Patrol to establish the **Missing Children Clearinghouse (MCC)** to assist with the location of missing children. The MCC has a toll-free 24-hour hotline, maintains computerized links with national and state missing person systems, and distributes information on missing children to local law enforcement agencies, school districts, and the public.
- The **Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS)** provides services to some youth who have run away from their legal residence. In addition, in 1999, the Legislature enacted the HOPE Act (Chapter 267, Laws of 1999) and directed DSHS to develop a procedure for reporting missing children receiving services in each of its administrative regions to the MCC.
- The 1985 statute creating the MCC also directed the **Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI)** to meet semi-annually with the MCC to develop a coordinated plan for distribution of information to teachers and students in the state about missing children.

As part of the 1999 HOPE Act, the Legislature directed the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (Institute) to review the procedures established by DSHS to report missing children to the MCC and any impediments to effective utilization of those procedures, describe the utilization and operation of the MCC, and review public education and public awareness regarding missing children.

Key Findings

Information About Missing Children:

- In Washington, information about missing children is **recorded by local law enforcement officers** into the Washington Crime Information Center (WACIC) database and **forwarded electronically to the MCC**.
- Between **March 2000 and June 2001, 28,685 missing child reports** were filed in Washington. Thirty percent of these reports involved children reported missing multiple times.

- During that period, **16,732 individual children** were reported missing. Females were reported missing most often (58 percent), as were youth aged 15 to 17 (63 percent). Cases were closed on 51 percent of missing children within one week.

Utilization and Operation of the Missing Children Clearinghouse:

- The **MCC becomes involved** in a missing child case **at the request of local law enforcement, parents, or other interested parties**. Since 1985, the MCC has assisted in the recovery of 2,157 children (through September 2001).
- Between **March 2000 and June 2001**, the MCC was **contacted for assistance in finding 220 children**.
- **Fifty-one percent** of requests were **made by parents**, and **51 percent of the cases** involved issues of **custodial interference**. One-third of MCC cases were initiated out-of-state.

DSHS Reporting of Missing Children:

- **DSHS does not directly report missing children to the MCC**, but utilizes the same flow of information from local law enforcement to the MCC (through WACIC) that occurs with any report of a missing child. DSHS service providers are contractually obligated to contact law enforcement, parents, and the DSHS social worker if a child runs away from a DSHS placement.
- However, the **MCC cannot differentiate missing children reports initiated by DSHS** from other reports. Therefore, there is no way of knowing how often youth are reported missing from DSHS facilities or how long it takes for them to be recovered.
- One **option** for increasing communication regarding missing children who are receiving DSHS services would be **to require DSHS social workers to forward to the MCC key identifying information about children who run from DSHS placements**.

Public Education Regarding Missing Children:

- The MCC has **one staff position to assist in the recovery of missing children and provide outreach and education**. Training for law enforcement and outreach to schools and other community groups occurs, but on a limited basis.
- Many **governmental entities and the public appear unaware of the existence of the MCC** and the assistance and services it provides to help identify and recover missing children.
- Clearinghouses in other states have reported successes with **public education strategies**, such as publishing the clearinghouse name and toll-free telephone number on state publications, expanding information on the clearinghouse website, and obtaining private sponsorship of outreach efforts, such as child identification (ID) kits.