Advocating for AWOL Youth

Key Terms

* **AWOL**: Absent Without Leave, leaves placement without permission

Why do youth AWOL?

Children AWOL or run away from placement for many different reasons. According to <https://www.praxesmodel.com/4-reasons-foster-youths-run-away-from-home/>, these reasons include but are not limited to:

* Home life. For a youth to leave their home life, where they have familiar surroundings, requires a certain amount of conflict or stress. It is possible the home setting, whether a group home or a foster family, has too much tension for the youth. This could be parents arguing, conflict with other youths in the home, being yelled at by foster parents, or other tensions. The youth might feel that being away is better than being home. The quiet of the night might help their nerves. It could also be tension from other places, such as bullies at school, in the neighborhood, or even at their home.
* Need for independence. When a youth goes to a new setting, there are a set of rules. Guidelines which every child needs in their home life. Except for a foster youth who in many instances has had to parent themselves over the years, they come to believe that they “know it all”. They can handle themselves and therefore don’t need anyone telling them what to do. After all, they can leave and come home after midnight with nothing happening to them, right?
* Life is better somewhere else. Some youths tend to run away from something and towards something else. It might be to their friend’s house, their girl or boyfriend’s house. Could even be to their biological parents’ house. Because as the group home or foster home is trying to give them the structure they need, they rebel and want to go where there is none. To the point they can come and go as they please. The dichotomy between old and new lives can be confusing to the youth and make them think their parents do better, but forget why they were placed elsewhere in the first place.
* Internal tensions. For many youths, the act of running away doesn’t accomplish anything. Because the cause or reason for leaving is an inside job. Youths who have a history of trauma leave situations which cause them stress. If a foster mother or youth counselor looks at the youth in a particular way, it could trigger a memory of an abusive episode. A smell, a picture, even a dream could lead a youth’s body to activate their fight-or-flight response and want to leave.

What steps are taken by professionals to locate youth?

When a child is reported AWOL by a caregiver, the DPSS social worker files an Ex Parte Application and Order to Issue a Protective Custody Warrant (PCW) report explaining the circumstances of the AWOL and requesting that the Court file a PCW, which is a written order by a judge or other judicial officer directing a law enforcement officer to place a child into protective custody. In addition, a police investigator is assigned to the missing child’s case.

To advocate for an AWOL youth CASAs should:

* Not have any in-person contact with the youth.
* Send texts messages and/or call the youth (if s/he has a phone) to comfort the youth, maintain consistency for the youth, and encourage the youth to return.
* Maintain notes of communications made with youth and professionals throughout AWOL period.
* Contact SW at least monthly and if/when you hear from the youth.
* Contact their Advocacy Supervisor at least monthly.
* Attend small groups to hear from peers who have also worked with AWOL youth and to feel supported.
* Continue to submit court reports and attend hearings.
  + The reports should only contain new information, including CASA’s contact or attempted contact with the youth and information obtained from the SW, PO, investigator, previous caregiver, family members or other party to the case.
  + The CASA’s recommendations should ensure that services are in place for the child upon his/her return.