Locating and Engaging Absent Parents

Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth and Families
Policy: 700.0235
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The Department utilizes the principles of family centered practice in carrying out its mission to assist families in raising their children in a safe and stable environment within their communities through a partnership with families, communities and government. State and federal law and DCYF policy acknowledge and reinforce the role and responsibility of the parent as the primary source of support for a child. DCYF staff must identify, locate and engage the parents of a child in the earliest stages of DCYF involvement and there are critical times and events during DCYF involvement when staff must diligently search for absent parents and potential relative resources.

The Department is able to access the resources of other agencies to assist in locating absent parents. The 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act allows and encourages states to use the Federal Parent Locator Service (FPLS) to locate absent parents. Parent Locate is a service provided by the Federal Parent Locator Service to assist DCYF workers in locating absent parents of children. Through an interface with DHS, requests are made to the FPLS where certain federal agencies and branches of the military are searched for information.

As soon as an absent parent is located, that parent should be engaged during all DCYF processes, including child protective investigation, assessment, safety planning, service planning and administrative service plan reviews, visitation and Family Court custody and child support enforcement proceedings. Ultimately, the safety, well being and permanence of the child are of primary consideration. The process of seeking and engaging absent parents of older children should not be eliminated and, unless it is not in the child's best interests, these efforts should cease only ifwhen parental rights are terminated. These efforts, in compliance with federal law that gives preference to the placement of a child with relatives and state law that requires the Department to search for a kinship placement resource prior to placing a child out of the home, will result in permanency with kin for more children.

An absent parent often is the father of the child. Therefore, staff must make every attempt to locate and engage fathers and paternal relatives as critical partners in meeting the permanency needs of children and youth. If a putative father notifies the Department that he may be the father of a child in care, steps must be taken to determine paternity. Once paternity is established, the father is included in the assessment and service planning and service delivery processes. The Department participates with other state agencies and community partners in various initiatives to develop within the community an array of services that address issues of paternity, engaging and providing services for custodial and non-custodial fathers, father specific parent information and training programs and protocols for working with both juvenile and adult incarcerated fathers.

Related Procedure:
Locating and Engaging Absent Parents

Related Policies:
Child Support Enforcement for Children in DCYF Care
Removal of the Child from Home
Comprehensive Assessment and Service Planning
Kinship Care
Concurrent Planning

Administrative Review
Visitation
Obtaining Custody of Child through the Dependent/Neglected/Abused Petition
Termination of Parental Rights

Locating and Engaging Absent Parents

Procedure fFrom Policy 700.0235: Locating and Engaging Absent Parents

A. The search process should begin when a case is open to DCYF and continue throughout the family's involvement if necessary.
   1. The parent, who is known to the Department, must be asked to provide information about the absent parent.
   2. The child, if of appropriate age, and all family members should be questioned about the absent parent and relatives, even if the other parent does not want the Department to pursue the absent parent.
   3. Information contained in the DCYF case record may also provide assistance in locating absent parents and their families.

B. The Federal Parent Locator Service (FPLS) is a resource available to assist staff in searching for absent parents.
   1. ASFA authorized child welfare and child support services agencies to request information from the FPLS to locate individuals who have or may have parental rights to a child.
   2. There is an agreement between the Department and DHS Child Support Services to allow for this cooperative effort.
   3. Workers can request and receive information from the FPLS through RICHIST (RICHIST Window Help: Parent Locate Request/Information).
   4. Only one participant request can be made within a period of 30 days.
   5. The requesting worker on the case will receive a GroupWise e-mail when information is returned from FPLS.
   6. Worker documents the result of the search in RICHIST.

C. Staff must make every attempt to locate and engage fathers, including teenage fathers, and paternal relatives as critical partners in meeting the permanency needs of children and youth.
   1. Mothers are encouraged to identify fathers early in the case. If mothers fail to cooperate, staff may attempt to identify and locate fathers through interviews with relatives and family friends, access child support information or request assistance of the Family Court if necessary.
   2. If a putative father notifies the Department that he may be the father of a child in care, worker seeks advice of legal counsel to determine which steps must be taken to establish paternity.
   3. Once paternity is established, the father is included in all aspects of the child's involvement with the Department unless there are issues of concern relating to the safety, well being and permanencye of the child.

D. Absent parent is engaged in a manner relevant to the parent's situation and sensitive to the parent's culture. DCYF staff make every effort to:
   1. Gain the support of the involved parent to reduce barriers to the engagement of the absent parent, using mediation and negotiation.
   2. Establish trust and honesty by clearly explaining the current situation of the case, the role of each parent and the DCYF worker, agency expectations and all policies that are relevant to the family's involvement.

E. Extended family members and community partners, who are interested and committed to the safety, permanency and well-being of a child, can assist in developing effective strategies to involve absent parents.

F.

G. When a child becomes involved with the Department, the assigned DCYF staff person, regardless of the operational area providing services to the child and family, is responsible to attempt to locate absent parents.

H. All efforts to locate absent parents must be documented in the DCYF case record.

I. The following policies address the need to locate and engage absent parents and relatives at various critical periods from the time that a child and his or her family becomes involved with the Department until the Department's involvement is terminated. Several policies include directives specifically relating to the father, who is often the absent parent.

1. PDCYF Policy 500.0075, Removal of the Child from Home addresses the need to search for fit and willing relatives prior to placing a child with a non-relative caretaker.
2. DCYF Policy 900.0025, Kinship Care requires that staff make every effort to search for, thoroughly assess, utilize and support kinship resources each time a child is in need of placement.
3. DCYF Policy: 700.0215, Concurrent Planning provides that a search for absent parents and the establishment of paternity is another critical step that should be initiated as soon as possible after case opening.
4. DCYF Policy 700.0075, Comprehensive Assessment and Service Planning requires staff to locate and engage absent parents and document efforts in the case record. Worker encourages full participation of the child's custodial and non-custodial parents, other extended family and service providers to the extent permissible in the assessment and service planning process.
5. DCYF Policy 700.0030, Administrative Review provides that custodial and non-custodial parents are invited to all reviews of the service plan. Inquiries are made at the reviews about absent parents.
6. DCYF Policy 700.0040, Visitation provides that visitation should be arranged for custodial and non-custodial parents.
    a. A visitation plan can be developed with a putative father, who wants to visit his child in placement, once paternity has been adequately verified by the courts.
    b. The primary service worker shall ensure that the putative father is informed that he will be allowed visits after paternity has been established.
    c. The visitation plan is developed in conjunction with the DCYF Service Plan.
7. DCYF Policy: 1100.0000, Obtaining Custody of Child through the Dependent/Neglected/Abused Petition provides that it is the responsibility of the Department to attempt to locate an absent parent when the child enters DCYF care. DCYF must offer reunification services unless there is evidence which allows for immediate filing of a TPR petition.
8. DCYF Policy: 1100.0020, Termination of Parental Rights provides that the Department is obligated to attempt, through reasonable efforts, to provide services to involve the natural father with his child.

a. ~~If natural father father cannot be contacted directly, the natural father has the right to be notified of his child's adoption through legal service or advertisement, and his parental rights must be terminated before the child is eligible for adoption.~~

b. ~~If the mother cannot or will not identify the natural father, the Court, after taking testimony of the mother may give notice to all parties of interest through appropriate newspaper advertisement.~~

c.