THANK YOU FOR YOUR COMMENTS ON
THE DRAFT OF:
"REACHING OUT TO MISSING CHILDREN".

My colleague and I have revised this protocol and present the final version here for you to download and use. To make the protocol applicable to a wide variety of situations and child welfare settings, and to keep the focus on using the process to search for permanent connections for the child, we limited the scope and adopted the checklist style. This means we could not include all of your valuable concerns, suggestions and settings.

We've summarized many of these comments below. If you would like to continue the conversation, please email your thoughts to me at bob@rglewis.com and I will post them here.

CYBER CONFIDENTIALITY AND CHILD SAFETY

The Internet has great possibilities as a tool for doing this work, but with everything you read about people using the Internet to try to exploit children, and the varying degree of sophistication with computers for child welfare workers in general, specific suggestions as to the content of email messages and how to use MySpace or Facebook and other social networking sites would be useful. We need to use these resources in a way that meets our obligations for confidentiality and safety of the children.

USE OF THE INTERNET BY YOUTH IN CARE

At a recent adolescent conference in Baltimore, a panel of youngsters talked about the fact that children in care, because of their use of the Internet, are often much better prepared than the child welfare workers. The panel of youth went on to state that whenever a conference is advertised for professionals working with adolescents, the adolescents automatically send out an electronic text/e-mail blast alerting others of the changes that will be implemented. In short, they said that to every new intervention created to work with them, they themselves create a new system of roadblocks…

In addition, the youth panel also stated that adolescents, whether they are in care, AWOL, or homeless, have unlimited access to computers and by and large tend to have had My Space accounts for years which they view as much as five time a day. One adolescent stated while he was AWOL he visited his account for updates on who was looking for him. Clearly, we need to be gathering information on adolescents' cell phones and e-mail accounts so that we can alert them of things that are available to them. We need to treat them similar to the way we alert college students of emergencies on campus via cell phone/email.

WHEN YOUTH RETURN ON THEIR OWN

It is imperative that provider agencies be trained in protocol and attitude, regarding AWOL youth. Some agency staff view AWOL activity as part of the negative characteristics of the youth, as opposed to an action the youth may temporarily display when troubled. Some youth who attempt to return to their placements, by themselves, are turned away, at their facility, simply for requesting re-placement. This happens at night, as well, when the youth is turned away without a bed.

For example, providers may sometimes discharge AWOL youth from care even though they are still responsible for planning. This may be especially true for youth that present problematic behavior. In these cases, a negative message is sent to the youth--that their caretaker, although temporary, does not want them to return and probably is no longer their advocate. This happens in both congregate and foster boarding home care.

In fact, some providers use AWOL status as a reason to reject the child's referral for placement. This begins a cycle of rejection because of AWOL activity, and the AWOL activity is exacerbated by such rejection.

Also, there are different kinds of AWOL activity and different reasons for each kind: These differences need to be taken into account when a youth is found or returns on his own. AWOL sometimes occurs because of an out-of-city or out-of-state placement, or it is the result of an Internet liaison, or an effort by the youth to seek sanctuary (e.g., moving in with friends or family). Sometimes, youth go AWOL in frequent but brief episodes. These differences need to be taken into account in the way we treat returning youth.

CHILD WELFARE INTERACTIONS WITH POLICE AND SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENTS

Working closely with the Police or Sheriff's Department to find missing youth has advantages and problems. Information obtained from relatives often helps police locate a child. If the child is has a "PINS" (New York State status offense) or JD designation, getting a warrant to will be a further incentive for law enforcement to look for a child. But, these means may be counter productive to re-engaging a child who has run away – i.e., "dragged" back to their placement by the police.

BARRIERS AT OUR AGENCIES

As an agency we don't have camera's in the area offices, and a way to print/develop pictures. I know this is just a small barrier but one that should be addressed as a systems issue. Although workers do many of these things in general to find runaways on their caseload, canvassing the area is not done to the extent listed and I am not sure how realistic it is for workers to do this although I agree it should happen.

QUESTIONS ABOUT PROCEDURE

Reviewers of the draft of "Reaching Out to Missing Children" had many questions about specific procedures.

When a worker gets a possible address for a runaway foster youth, how should the youth be approached? As an example, would the worker generally go unannounced to the address? If no one answers the door, would they generally leave a card?

If there is a fear that if the youth may run to a new location, should the worker try to arrange surveillance.

When would the police be involved in the contact? How is working with a runaway youth different than apprehension of a person wanted for a non status-offense crime?

What would the worker do if the youth refused to go with them? Would the worker ever use force or restraint? If the youth walks or drives away, would the worker follow or try to prevent their exit?

Before approaching the youth after establishing his or her probable location, what preparation should be done in advance?

Should the worker know where the youth will be going for the night such as back to the original facility, detention or to another placement?

Should the worker try to determine if the location the youth has run to is dangerous or with known criminals? If so, what special precautions should the worker take? (For example, a youth was murdered by the person she was living with because that person was selling the youth into prostitution. He was upset that if she returned home, he would lose his source of income.)

If the worker does not personally know the youth and cannot be certain if they have found the right person, do they have a right to demand identification? If the worker is relatively sure that they have found the youth but the youth denies their identity, what are the next steps?

What special steps need to be taken when it is believed that the youth has left the state or country? What protocol needs to be followed to have the youth returned?

What actions or reports should the worker take if the child is found with the parent from whom the youth was removed? How will it affect the relationship with the youth if criminal action is taken against the parent for violation of the court order?