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Reference Number:	100-10-DD
Title of Document:	Consumer Elopement
Date of Issue:	June 1, 1987
Effective Date:	June 1, 1987
Last Review Date:	February 9, 2016
Date of Last Revision:	February 9, 2016 **(REVISED)**
Applicability:	DSN Boards, Contract Service Providers and DDSN Regional Centers

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I. Purpose

The South Carolina Department of Disabilities and Special Needs (DDSN) places a high priority on protecting the rights of our consumers and promoting their decision-making in all aspects of their lives. As such, caution must be taken in providing overly restrictive levels of support. This philosophy must, however, be balanced against the necessity to assure adequate supports are provided to maintain consumer health and safety. One significant area in which the balancing of consumer freedoms and safety must occur is in the establishment of a tailored plan of accountability/staff supervision (refer to DDSN Directive 510-01-DD: Supervision of People Receiving Services).

The purpose of this directive is to establish a process for preventing and responding to a consumer leaving and being absent from the site of service delivery beyond the time frames established in the consumer's individualized accountability plan (which is defined as consumer elopement).

II. Procedure

A. Prevention

1. Prevention of consumer elopement is a part of every staff member's responsibility. Prevention of elopement happens where there is appropriate accountability for consumers, when there is knowledge of consumer's tendencies, when there is appropriate supports provided to consumers and when there is thorough and active communication among staff and consumers.

2. Any history of elopement should be documented in the individual's supervision plan (DDSN Directive 510-01-DD: Supervision of People Receiving Services).

3. The time immediately after an individual is known to have eloped is the most important time in locating the individual promptly and safely. Consequently, each Executive Director/CEO/Facility Administrator (ED/CEO/FA) is responsible to develop a thorough Consumer Elopement Policy.

   a. Service Provider/Facility policy should contain a provision for regular communication with local law enforcement and rescue agencies about potential support needs to maintain readiness to assist in the event of a consumer elopement.

   b. Service Provider/Facility policy should include a risk management provision for regular review of the adequacy of current supervision/precautions for consumers who have previously eloped.

   c. Service Provider/Facility policy should include a provision to develop a brief profile of consumers with a known history of elopement to include photo, aliases, and areas consumer is known to frequent which can quickly be utilized to assist in the search for a consumer in the event of elopement.

B. Consumer Elopement

1. When it has been concluded that a consumer has eloped from a Service Provider/Facility, the ED/CEO/FA or designee shall take the following actions:

   a. Notify the parent and/or guardian as soon as possible, but no later than one (1) hour after consumer is determined to have eloped. Provide updates on change in status of missing consumer to parent and/or guardian as soon as possible. Communication with parent who is not guardian should only occur if the consumer has previously given permission for such communication.

   b. Assemble staff to initiate search for consumer as soon as possible.

i. A sufficient number of personnel should be involved in the search to facilitate rapid location of the consumer without jeopardizing the support provided to the other consumers.

ii. Staff should be assigned specific geographic areas to search to assure thorough coverage without duplication of effort.

c. No later than one (1) hour after the consumer is determined to have eloped, notification should be given to law enforcement agencies (City and County, those from the individual's hometown and/or in any other locale where evidence exists to suggest that locale as a possible destination).

i. Earlier notification of these law enforcement contacts should be carried out where the consumer poses a significant threat to self or others.

ii. The ED/CEO/FA should also notify the District Director of all missing persons within one (1) hour after consumer has eloped (reference DDSN Staff Directory for weekend/night time contact telephone numbers).

d. Notify the local office of the Department of Social Services in the event the consumer is in the custody of that agency.

e. Notify the Department of Health and Environmental Control/Division of Health Licensing in writing of any consumer elopement from a Community Residential Care Facility (CRCF) within ten (10) days of incident.

f. Notify DDSN of each consumer elopement via written Critical Incident Report (see DDSN Directive 100-09-DD: Critical Incident Report).

g. If a consumer remains absent for more than 24 hours beyond initial determination of elopement, the ED/CEO/FA should consult with local law enforcement officials to determine if the assistance of local media to broadcast missing consumer information to the general public is advisable.

i. Media contact should be initiated by local law enforcement officials as they are in charge of the search for the missing consumer.

ii. The Associate State Director-Operations should be advised prior to any media contact.

h. If a consumer remains absent for more than 72 hours beyond initial determination of elopement, the ED/CEO/FA should consult with local law enforcement officials to determine if the assistance of "Crime Stoppers" to offer a reward for information leading to the location of the consumer is advisable. Contact with Crime Stoppers should be initiated by local law enforcement officials as they are in charge of the search for the missing consumer.

i. Document all contacts and actions through proper written records (e.g., time, date, person(s) contacted, staff person making contact, etc.).

j. In the event the missing consumer's whereabouts become known, but the consumer physically resists returning to the Service Provider/Facility, personnel should work with local law enforcement to return the consumer. If it is expected that consumer will not voluntarily return to Service Provider/Facility, it may be advisable to obtain an order of confinement to DDSN from an appropriate local judge (Family, Probate, or Circuit Court). This order will authorize law enforcement to pick up the consumer and return them to the provider. If the missing consumer has been previously judicially admitted to DDSN, the local judge may authorize law enforcement to pick up the missing consumer without needing a separate order of confinement.

i. This option should not be pursued without consulting with the Associate State Director-Operations.

ii. The Department's Legal Division can assist in obtaining the order of confinement.

k. When the missing consumer has been found, proper notification of all previous contacts, including family, should be given in a timely manner.

C. Follow up Actions

1. Immediately upon the consumer's return, Service Provider/Facility staff must evaluate and act upon the need to increase the consumer's accountability level (level of staff supervision).

2. The consumer's interdisciplinary team (IDT) should meet the next workday after consumer's return to develop and implement any necessary program modifications which would reduce probability of future elopement. The IDT should consider:

a. The presence of adverse conditions/individuals which consumer is trying to escape.

b. The desire of/appropriateness for the consumer to reside in another setting.

c. Electronic tracking devices (subsequent to proper review/approval by the Human Rights Committee) for consumers who engage in repeated elopement despite enhanced staff supervision.

3. On the first workday following the consumer's return, top Service Provider/Facility management should meet to review the elopement incident and any management problems indicated, and make any necessary improvements to procedures. Revised procedures should be detailed in the Final Report of Critical Incident submitted to DDSN (reference DDSN Directive 100-09-DD: Critical Incident Reporting).

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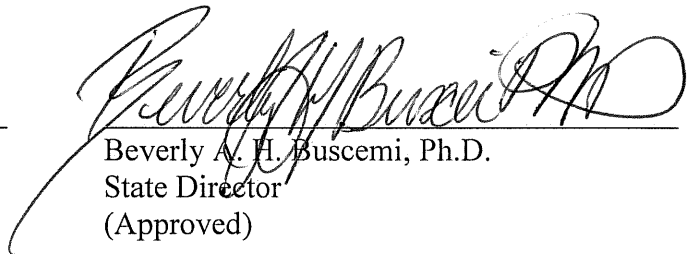

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RELATED DDSN DIRECTIVES

100-09-DD: Critical Incident Reporting
510-01-DD: Supervision of People Receiving Services