

The Role of the PI in Finding Runaway Foster Kids for Child Welfare Agencies



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There are approximately 400,000 children in out-of-home (foster) care in this country. A substantial number of these children, approximately 60,000, live in institutions and group homes. On any given day, a sizable fraction of these children are in "runaway status." The runaways typically range in age from 11 to 17 years and are disproportionately female.

Life on the run for these children is fraught with danger. The longer they are AWOL/missing from foster care placement, the greater

the likelihood they will be sexually exploited, physically harmed, or even killed. They are unable to properly care for themselves and consequently suffer both physically and mentally while on the run. Many succumb to the temptation of illegal drugs and commit crimes to support themselves and their addiction. Young girls may resort to prostitution. Young boys often join up with street gangs. The nation's jails and prisons are filled with the grown-up versions of these runaway children.

Since these runaway foster kids are the responsibility of the state, the social service agencies that foster them are accountable---not only for their safety and well-being while in

care---but also for locating them and bringing them back into care when they abscond. How is this accomplished? Who finds these kids? Is it the Police? Child protective specialists (CPS)? Social workers? *Private Investigators?*

WHO'S OUT THERE LOOKING?

Child welfare agencies generally rely upon CPS and social workers to deal with a staggering number of AWOL foster kids. The CPS workers may enlist the aid of the local police to locate the children, and they rely on the judicial system to provide the legal justification to take them into custody. The results, however, are often disappointing. Why?

“I never attempt to stop, arrest, or detain any child; I let the police do that. I simply locate the child and ask the police to assist me in the recovery.”

- **The Police.** Locating AWOL children typically involves a lot of research and field work: comprehensive database and social media searches to locate family members, friends, and collateral contacts; followed by phone calls, surveillance, and face-to-face meetings to get up-to-date information. Most police departments have the means to find these kids, but are too busy dealing with high crime (murder, rape, assault, robbery, etc.) to devote the man-hours and personnel required. Even if the police do take on these cases, more often than not there is no continuity. Cases are routinely handed off at the end of the shift, or reassigned, and essential links and information may be lost in the process.

- **CPS and Social Workers.** The primary function of the CPS and social workers is to promote the safety and well-being of the children under their care, an overwhelming responsibility. They do not conduct missing persons investigations. They may file a missing persons report with the local police. They may also petition the court to obtain a civil arrest warrant for an AWOL/missing child. Once a warrant is issued the court may file the warrant with the local/county police or sheriff for enforcement. The agency case worker may be provided with a copy of the warrant. Will an officer be assigned to enforce the warrant? Maybe, maybe not. Child welfare professionals work at a frantic pace, and they typically carry heavy caseloads where the stakes are high. Do they have the time required to follow up on each AWOL child to ensure that the police effect the civil arrest of every AWOL youth that they reported missing? Not likely.

Private Investigators, on the other hand—trained professionals skilled in locating people, tracking leads, and “connecting the dots”—could greatly assist these agencies in recovering their missing, and often exploited, children, because unlike the police, *PIs* have the luxury of time. They have the capability to focus on one case at a time, to prioritize each

case, to conduct a proactive and thorough investigation, and to follow through on each case. And unlike CPS and Social Workers, *PIs* have the license to access a number of proprietary investigative databases, and often a network of professional contacts to find these runaways (who frequently cross jurisdictional lines in their journeys).

The child welfare arena is huge: according to the US Census Bureau, there are 3,143 counties in the United States. I’m willing to bet that the majority of these counties have a government-funded department of social services and/or children’s services agency, and that most all of them have a significant number of runaway foster children. This field is wide open for the services that *PIs* can provide.

HOW DO YOU GET STARTED?

I got my child welfare experience working at the Administration for Children’s Services in New York City. I served there for 6 years, during which time I had investigative oversight of more than 70,000 child abuse and neglect cases annually. This was not a desk job; I was out in the streets day and night finding kids and taking them out of harm’s way. Prior to this I served in the New York City Department of Correction, the NYC Sheriff’s Department, and the NYC Office of Emergency Management. I am fortunate to have worked in both law enforcement and child welfare.

However, *you don’t need a law enforcement or child welfare background to find kids*. What you do need is excellent interpersonal communication skills; the ability to express empathy and compassion for at-risk, vulnerable children; a *PI* license; a proven ability to find people using computer-assisted research and investigative tools; and a good dose of street smarts. Not long ago, simply by entering a cell phone number into the LexisNexis database, I was able to locate and recover a missing teenage girl at the address of an adult male who was later found to be running a prostitution ring from that address.

Getting started may seem daunting at first, but careful planning can get you to where you want to be. I formed my company, Gavin & Lacy Consultants, LLC in 2005, with my wife, Kathleen (Lacy). We are licensed PIs in New York, New Jersey, California and the District of Columbia. While our clientele is very diverse, for the past nine months 60% of our business has been recovering missing kids for child welfare agencies.

I started out in this field by contacting local foster agencies and offering to locate missing

relatives of children in foster care. By law (*Title IV of the Social Security Act*) child welfare agencies are required to make diligent efforts to identify and provide notice to birth parents, grandparents, and all other relatives of children in their care before placing them in foster care or up for adoption. I was able to provide this service by using proprietary online databases (e.g., *LexisNexis*, *TLO*, *IRB*, *SkipSmasher*), and by engaging people by phone and in person. My success in finding relatives of the children

was recognized, and before long I was asked to search for foster children who had absconded from placement. In 2013, we contracted with Westchester County, NY Department of Social Services to locate and recover their runaway foster children. To date, my recovery rate has been ~75% and the time the kids remain AWOL has been reduced by 40%. We are also under contract with three private child welfare agencies.

TECHNIQUES

My early experiences led me to devise a "Request for Private Investigator" form that the case workers are asked to complete when they request my services. Since I often had to make many calls to the case workers to get the information I needed to begin an investigation, I designed this form to elicit information I knew I would need, e.g., physical description of the child, whether or not missing persons report or family court warrant had been issued, if the child had any pending criminal charges, etc. I also ask for a recent photo of the child and where the child is to be taken once he or she is recovered (secure detention, non-secure detention).

Before I go out into the field to look for the child, I make sure I have a copy of the warrant (or the missing persons report) in hand to present to the police when I ask them to accompany me to recover the child. I never attempt to stop, arrest, or detain any child; I let the police do that. I simply locate the child and ask the police to assist me in the recovery.

If I spot a missing child on the move during surveillance, I call 911, identify myself as a government contractor, and ask for police to meet me at that location. I inform the 911 operator that I have the necessary paperwork (warrant, missing persons report) for the police to take the runaway into custody. I always enlist police assistance, and because I am able to present them with the requisite documentation, I have *never* been turned down.

After a recovery, it is usually the police who transport the child back to the stationhouse or the courthouse; they then release the child into the care of the agency from which the child absconded.

RECORD-KEEPING AND CONFIDENTIALITY.

- After each deployment I submit a detailed report to the client.
- I also maintain a database for the client in which I record my progress on all cases that have been referred to me. The client can readily see all the cases I have worked on since the beginning of the contract; a brief synopsis of

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each case; and how much time I have spent on each case, broken down by research, field work, and administrative work. The client requires that I update and submit this information on a regular basis. This database is also a great record-keeping tool for me.

- I maintain my records in a secure environment, both online and in-office.
- Confidentiality of foster care records and CPS records is essential and compulsory.
- If you choose to pursue this market, it is necessary to familiarize yourself with the policies of the agency for which you wish to work. Each state has an office of children and family services which is tasked with setting policy to ensure that the confidentiality of these records is maintained. For information on these laws, log onto the children and family services website for the state in which you are interested. For federal confidentiality guidelines, log onto the US Department of Health and Human Services “Children’s Bureau” website for guidance.

INSURANCE

Most PIs carry Errors & Omissions Liability Insurance. Government agencies may require that you name them as an additional insured. Premiums are based on your annual income---the more money you make, the greater the exposure and the higher the premium. Premiums also rise if you carry a firearm in the course of your business activity.

MARKETING

You might want to start out by writing an introductory cover letter to the commissioner of social services, or the CEO of the private child welfare agency you want to work for, letting him/her know that you specialize

“This field is wide open for the services that PIs can provide.”

in locating “hard to find” missing and exploited foster children. Provide a description of services that can assist agency staff, such as:

- Conducting rapid “boots on the ground” diligent search investigations to locate missing and exploited children, anywhere, 24/7.
- Providing a report which can be submitted to family court, documenting the agency’s diligent search efforts to locate a missing child.
- Authenticating, screening, and locating child victims, their family members, friends, collateral contacts and witnesses to child abuse and neglect.
- Acting as liaison between senior staff and law enforcement (particularly beneficial in missing person investigations).
- Providing most civil and criminal court records on any person at the local, state and federal level.
- Providing real-time actionable information on any person including, but not limited, to: email accounts, residence/address history, unlisted telephone numbers (both landline and cellular), SSN verification, DMV records.

TALKING POINTS

The subject of runaway foster kids is not something society can ignore. Too often tragedy is the outcome. Death comes early for some. Countless others go on to commit crimes against society. Some spend their lives in and out of penal institutions, others in psychiatric care. They have children of their own---children that they cannot care for---thus perpetuating the problem.

The only way to turn these kids around and work with them is to get them back into care. This may take several attempts---kids at this age often go AWOL repeatedly---but eventually many of them will be helped.

A licensed PI can be a valuable resource to the child welfare agency in locating and returning runaway foster children, far more effective and less costly than using local police, and freeing up CPS and social workers to concentrate on their primary mission: to promote the safety and well-being of the children under their care, conduct investigations and family assessments, provide in-home case management, and administer foster care and adoption services.

CONCLUSION

In the course of my work, I have come across a number of adults, former foster children, who tell me that CPS and the foster care system saved their lives. They have gone on to become solid citizens and productive members of society.

This field can be lucrative, but the gratification you get from knowing you may have had a hand in saving a child’s life, and steering that child in the right direction, is priceless. *A winning combination for a PI. PI*



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