



Members Brief

An informational brief prepared by the LSC staff for members and staff of the Ohio General Assembly

Author: Amy L. Archer, Research Analyst
Reviewer: Laurel Mannion, Division Chief

Volume 135
September 26, 2024

Investigating Child Abuse and Neglect Reports

Child abuse or neglect reports must be made to a public children services agency (PCSA) or a peace officer, who must follow procedures prescribed by law. PCSAs must investigate all reports and notify alleged perpetrators of allegations. Additionally, Ohio law establishes and governs the use of the uniform statewide automated child welfare information system (SACWIS) and the establishment of memorandums of understanding among county officials with respect to their duties and minimizing the number of times a child who is the subject of a report is interviewed.

Contents

Introduction	2
Receipt and investigation of reports	2
Receipt of report by PCSA or peace officer	2
PCSA investigation	3
Differential response approach	3
PCSA notification to armed forces	5
County memorandum of understanding	5
SACWIS	5
Use, access, and data entry	5
Confidentiality	6
Penalties	6
Notification of allegations	6
Person subject to investigation	6
Involving out-of-home care entity	6
SACWIS search and expungement	7

Introduction

Under Ohio law, reports of child abuse or neglect are to be made to the public children services agency (PCSA) or a peace officer in the county where the child resides or where the abuse or neglect is occurring or has occurred.¹ A PCSA is a county agency that administers child welfare services. In some counties, the PCSA is a children services board. In others, the county department of job and family services serves that role. A county also may designate another government agency or a private entity.² A peace officer is a police officer, sheriff, deputy sheriff, constable, marshal, deputy marshal, or State Highway Patrol trooper.³

For a child who is an inmate in the custody of a state correctional institution, the report must be made to the State Highway Patrol.⁴

Receipt and investigation of reports

Receipt of report by PCSA or peace officer

A peace officer who receives a report of child abuse or neglect must refer the report to the appropriate PCSA in accordance with the requirements of the county's memorandum of understanding (see below), unless an arrest is made at the time of the report and the PCSA is contacted. A peace officer cannot remove a child who is the subject of a report from the child's parents, stepparents, guardian, or other custodian without first consulting the PCSA, unless, in the judgment of the officer and, if applicable, the physician who made the report, immediate removal is essential to protect the child.

A PCSA that receives a report of child abuse or neglect, in accordance with the requirements of the county's memorandum of understanding (see below), must notify the appropriate law enforcement agency if it has received either of the following:

- A child abuse report;
- A child neglect report that alleges a type of neglect identified in Ohio Department of Children and Youth (ODCY)⁵ rules.

¹ R.C. 2151.421(A)(1)(a) and (B). For more information about reporting known or suspected child abuse or neglect, including whom the law designates as mandatory reporters, see the LSC [Child Abuse or Neglect Reporting \(PDF\)](#) *Members Brief*, which is available on LSC's website: lsc.ohio.gov.

² R.C. 5153.01(A) and 5153.02.

³ R.C. 2151.421(O)(4).

⁴ R.C. 5120.173.

⁵ H.B. 33 of the 135th General Assembly (the biennial operating budget) transferred responsibility for oversight of child welfare from the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services to ODCY effective January 1, 2025.

The report is not required if an arrest is made at the time of a report that results in the appropriate law enforcement agency being contacted concerning the possible child abuse or neglect or threat of child abuse or neglect.⁶

PCSA investigation

On receiving the report, the PCSA must categorize it as a report of: child abuse or neglect, dependency, family in need of services, post emancipation, or information and/or referral.⁷ Also, the PCSA must determine whether a child is living in a domestic violence or homeless shelter. If the child is living in a shelter, the PCSA must follow certain procedures prescribed by law.⁸

A PCSA generally must investigate each report within 24 hours of receipt to determine (1) the circumstances surrounding the injuries, abuse, or neglect or the threat of injury, abuse, or neglect, (2) the cause of the injuries, abuse, neglect, or threat, and (3) the person or persons responsible. The investigation must be made in cooperation with law enforcement and in accordance with the county's memorandum of understanding (see below). The PCSA must make available protective services and emergency support services for the child.

The PCSA must report each case to the uniform statewide automated child welfare information system (SACWIS, see below) and submit a written report of its investigation to law enforcement. In addition, the PCSA must make any recommendations to the county prosecuting attorney or city director of law that it considers necessary to protect any children who are brought to its attention.⁹

Differential response approach

A PCSA, after categorizing a report as abuse or neglect, responds to each report using the differential response approach, in which it pursues either a traditional response or an alternative response. A traditional response encourages engagement with the family in (1) a comprehensive evaluation of the child's current and future safety needs and (2) a fact-finding process to determine whether child abuse or neglect occurred and the circumstances surrounding the alleged harm or risk of harm. The PCSA must use the traditional response for reports involving the following:

- Physical abuse resulting in serious injury or that creates a serious and immediate risk to a child's health and safety;
- Sexual abuse;
- Child fatality;

⁶ R.C. 2151.421(E) and (F).

⁷ Ohio Administrative Code (O.A.C.) 5101:2-36-01(D); "Information and/or referral" is an intake category in which information is provided to any person to assist in locating or using available and appropriate resources (O.A.C. 5101:2-1-01(B)(164)).

⁸ R.C. 2151.421(E)(2)(a) and 2151.422.

⁹ R.C. 2151.421(G).

- Allegations that could result in charges of (1) felony child endangering, (2) criminal sexual conduct, (3) sexual abuse of a child, (4) an abused child who is also a victim of sexual abuse, or (5) homicide;
- A specialized assessment requirement, when the report involves an alleged perpetrator who either (1) is a person responsible for the alleged child victim's care in an out-of-home care setting or in out-of-home care,¹⁰ or (2) has access to the alleged child victim by virtue of the perpetrator's employment by or affiliation with an organization or through placement in an out-of-home care setting;¹¹
- A third-party investigative procedure requirement, generally when there is a potential conflict of interest because of the principal named in the report.

For all other reports categorized as abuse or neglect, an alternative response is preferred, if appropriate. An alternative response engages the family in a comprehensive evaluation of child safety, risk of subsequent harm, and family strengths and needs but does not include a determination as to whether child abuse or neglect occurred.

The PCSA must convert a case under investigation from the alternative response pathway to the traditional response pathway if any of the following occur:

- The family requests a pathway change;
- The evaluation cannot be completed due to the family's refusal to engage in the assessment process;
- The PCSA files a complaint alleging that the child is an abused, neglected, or dependent child;
- The PCSA screens in a report requiring assignment in a traditional response pathway.¹²

Referrals for prevention services

The PCSA, after determining that a child is a candidate for prevention services, must make efforts to prevent abuse or neglect, to enhance the child's welfare, and to preserve the family unit intact by referring a report for assessment and provision of services to an agency providing prevention services.¹³

¹⁰ "Out-of-home care" includes foster and prospective adoptive homes, group homes, residential facilities, camps, child care providers, inpatient medical clinics, and schools (R.C. 2151.011(B)(28) and 2151.421(N)(1)(a)).

¹¹ "Organization" means any institution and any private association, society, or agency located or operating in the state having among its functions the furnishing of protective services or care for children, or the placement of children in certified foster homes or elsewhere (R.C. 2151.011(B)(27)).

¹² R.C. 2151.429 and 2151.011(B)(4), (15), and (58); O.A.C. 5101:2-36-01(K) and (L), 5101:2-36-04(A), 5101:2-26-08, and 5101:2-36-20(M); traditional response governed by O.A.C. Chapters 5101:2-36, 5101:2-37, and 5101:2-38; alternative response governed by O.A.C. rules 5101:2-36-20 and 5101:2-38-20.

¹³ R.C. 2151.421(J).

PCSA notification to armed forces

A PCSA must determine, as soon as practicable, if a parent, guardian, or custodian of a child who is subject to a child abuse or neglect investigation is in the armed forces. If so, the PCSA must notify the appropriate authority of the branch in which the parent, guardian, or custodian serves, in accordance with the memorandum of understanding established by that authority, that a child abuse or neglect investigation is being made that relates to that parent, guardian, or custodian.

“Armed forces” is the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, Space Force, and Coast Guard.¹⁴

County memorandum of understanding

Each PCSA must prepare a memorandum of understanding that sets forth the normal operating procedure used by all concerned officials in executing their respective responsibilities. Two of the memorandum’s primary goals are (1) eliminating all unnecessary interviews of a child who is the subject of a report and (2) when feasible, providing for only one interview of the child.

The memorandum must include, among other items, (1) the roles and responsibilities for handling emergency and nonemergency cases of abuse and neglect and (2) standards and procedures for handling and coordinating investigations, addressing the categories of persons who may interview the children, and methods for interviewing children.

The memorandum must be signed by the county’s juvenile judge or the judge’s representative on the judge’s review and approval (or, if there is more than one juvenile judge, the judge or judge’s representative who is selected by the judges or is senior in point of service, if a judge is unable to be selected), the county’s peace officer, all chief municipal peace officers within the county, other law enforcement officers handling child abuse and neglect cases in the county, the county’s prosecuting attorney, the county’s humane society, the county department of job and family services (if the PCSA is not the county department of job and family services), and each participating member of the children’s advocacy center (if one has been established). The court of common pleas clerk is also permitted to sign the memorandum.¹⁵

SACWIS

Use, access, and data entry

SACWIS, maintained by ODCY, contains records regarding investigations of children and families and children’s care in out-of-home care, care and treatment provided to children and families, and other information related to children and families required by law.¹⁶

¹⁴ R.C. 2151.4210; 10 United States Code 101(a)(4).

¹⁵ R.C. 2151.4220 and 2151.4221.

¹⁶ R.C. 5101.13(A).

No person may access or use information contained in SACWIS, except as permitted by law. The information contained in SACWIS may be accessed or entered only as follows:¹⁷

1. Ohio Department of Job and Family Services (ODJFS), ODCY, PCSAs, Title IV-E agencies, prosecuting attorneys, private child placing agencies, and private noncustodial agencies may access or enter the information when it is directly connected with assessment, investigation, or services regarding a child or family or permitted by law;
2. A person may access or enter information in a manner, to the extent, and for the purposes authorized by ODCY rules. For example, current rules require a Title IV-E juvenile court to enter information on the services provided to any child at risk of abuse and neglect when Title IV-E reimbursement is being requested.

Confidentiality

All information contained in or obtained from SACWIS is confidential. The information is not subject to disclosure under Ohio's public records law or the law governing state or local agency personal information systems.¹⁸

Penalties

Any person who accesses or uses information contained in, or discloses information obtained from, SACWIS in an unauthorized manner is guilty of a fourth degree misdemeanor. Additionally, each PCSA must have administrative penalties, up to and including dismissal from employment, for unauthorized access, disclosure, or use of data in SACWIS.¹⁹

Notification of allegations

Person subject to investigation

A PCSA representative must, at the time of initial contact with the person alleged to have inflicted abuse or neglect on the child, inform the person of the specific complaints or allegations made against the person. The PCSA cannot provide the person with any information identifying the reporter, witness statements, or police or other investigative reports. No later than five business days after the determination of the disposition of the investigation, a PCSA must advise the person, in writing, of the disposition and inform the person of the right to appeal.²⁰

Involving out-of-home care entity

No later than the end of the day following the day a PCSA receives a report of child abuse or neglect that allegedly occurred in or involved an out-of-home care entity, the PCSA must provide written notice of the allegations and the alleged perpetrator's name to the entity's chief administrative officer, unless that person is named as an alleged perpetrator. In that case, the PCSA must provide the written notice to the entity's owner or governing board.

¹⁷ R.C. 5101.132, 5101.133, and 5101.134; O.A.C. 5101:2-33-70(J).

¹⁸ R.C. 5101.131.

¹⁹ R.C. 5101.99(B); O.A.C. 5101:2-33-70(E).

²⁰ R.C. 2151.421(G)(1) and (I)(5).

No later than three days after the PCSA makes a disposition of an investigation relating to an out-of-home care entity, the PCSA must send written notice of the disposition to the entity's chief administrative officer and the owner or governing board. The PCSA is prohibited from providing witness statements or police or other investigative reports.²¹

SACWIS search and expungement

A person may ask ODJFS to conduct a search of whether that person's name has been placed or remains in SACWIS as an alleged perpetrator of child abuse or neglect. If a search reveals that a "substantiated" disposition exists, ODJFS must send a letter to the person indicating a match.²² The main operating budget of the 135th General Assembly, H.B. 33, required ODJFS to work with stakeholders to establish an expungement policy for dispositions of child abuse or neglect in Ohio's Central Registry on Child Abuse or Neglect, a part of SACWIS.²³ That process is ongoing.

²¹ R.C. 2151.421(N)(2) and (3).

²² R.C. 5101.136.

²³ R.C. 5101.137.