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DCFS Partners with Sheriff Dart to Rescue At-Risk Runaways

COOK COUNTY, IL – The Illinois Department of Children & Family Services is joining forces with the Cook County Sheriff's Office in a landmark mission to locate and save runaway state wards, who are particularly vulnerable to crime and trafficking.

As part of a two-year pilot project, the Sheriff's Office and DCFS will combine resources to broaden the impact of an existing specialized Sheriff's unit dedicated to recovering missing or runaway wards. Since its formation in October 2012, this Sheriff's unit has made more than 520 juvenile rescues.

Pending County Board approval, the cross-agency unit will be comprised of seven sworn Sheriff's officers with specialized training in juvenile justice as well as three DCFS child welfare specialists. The collaborative team, commanded by the Sheriff's office, will be officially rebranded as the **Child Rescue Unit (CRU)**. DCFS will fund four of the Sheriff's Office positions within the Child Rescue Unit at a cost of about \$400,000 a year.

Through this coordination, the enhanced Child Rescue Unit will be more than a sum of its parts. The DCFS child welfare specialists will bring accurate long-term data on the custodial history of the missing children, along with working relationships with group homes and foster parents, making it significantly easier to locate and recover missing children. The Sheriff's Office brings investigative expertise, a history of success in rescuing runaway juveniles, and a day-to-day connection to the communities to which missing wards often run. The Sheriff's Office made over 100 juvenile rescues in 2015 alone, but with these added resources the augmented Child Rescue Unit is aiming to more than double that number in 2016.

The underpinning of this partnership dates back to December 2012, when Sheriff Dart demanded a state audit into the rules and compliance of previous DCFS regimes with regards to the handling of missing and abducted children. The results of the audit, made public in December 2014, revealed that the previous DCFS regimes often failed to report missing wards in a timely manner – and sometimes the runaway children were not being reported missing at all, making it impossible to find these vulnerable children.

When a ward of the state goes on the run, the stakes are high and time is of the essence. The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children reports one in six endangered runaways in America to

be likely sex trafficking victims. At any given time, there are 100 open child protection warrants in Cook County. When George Sheldon began his stewardship of DCFS in February 2015, one of his first calls was to Sheriff Dart to propose working together in an effort to correct this glaring problem.

"It's an open secret that both drug traffickers and sex traffickers seek to prey on runaway wards of the state. The government, which is effectively their parent, must prioritize finding these children as quickly and safely as possible," said Sheriff Dart. "I've been impressed by Director Sheldon's dedication to turning DCFS around and couldn't be happier to collaborate with him. Simply put, this partnership will save lives."

The state of Illinois is the legal guardian for more than 16,400 youth across the state. On any given day, more than 200 of these youth, approximately half from Cook County, are reported missing or on run. In response to the Auditor General's findings, in 2015, DCFS revised and strengthened its rules and procedures for missing youth and pledged to continue to find ways to reduce the number of missing youth.

"The very nature of child welfare is that of collaboration - working with government agencies, law enforcement, the courts and others to ensure the safety and well-being of children," said George H. Sheldon, Acting Director of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services. "So following the findings of the Auditor General and changes to our internal procedures, partnering with Sheriff Dart was a logical next step to address the issue of missing youth. By joining forces we'll be able to bring the expertise and experience of professionals from both departments together to quickly and efficiently locate and return our missing youth."

The intergovernmental agreement is set to go before the Cook County Board of Commissioners for approval today (Wednesday).