

MEMORANDUM

TO: CDSS and all California county child welfare agencies
FROM: Evident Change
SUBJECT: Notice and Summary of Updates to the California SDM® Hotline Tool
DATE: January 26, 2021

Evident Change and the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) have updated the California Structured Decision Making® (SDM) policy and procedures manual, which will go live in WebSDM on February 1, 2021. These updates include foundational changes to items and definitions within the SDM Hotline Tool, which are summarized in detail in this memo.

Counties are encouraged to review [All-County Letter 20-142](#), which describes the foundational policies and regulations guiding the SDM Hotline Tool revisions and expected screening practices.

BACKGROUND AND POLICY

Evident Change uses continuous user feedback, changes in statutes and regulations, and emerging research and evaluation to update SDM assessment tools over time. For better alignment with statutory and regulatory guidance and to strengthen consistency of current practice, Evident Change and CDSS have updated the SDM Hotline Tools. These revisions focus on three key areas.

1. Child abuse and neglect allegations in out-of-home care.
2. Allegations of commercial sexual exploitation of a child (CSEC) by third-party perpetrators, regardless of caregiver knowledge.
3. Child maltreatment-related fatalities when no other children are reported to be in the home.

CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT ALLEGATIONS IN OUT-OF-HOME CARE

State policy and regulatory guidance require allegations of abuse or neglect in a group home or residential care setting to be screened similarly to all other referrals for appropriateness of an in-person child protection response. While cross-reports to law enforcement or a licensing authority may be necessary, they should not be used to determine or delay the child welfare or probation agency's response when an in-person response is indicated.

To ensure that allegations of maltreatment in out-of-home care settings are consistently screened for response, the updated SDM Hotline Tool allows users to apply an expanded definition of "caregiver" for dependent or ward children in out-of-home care, which includes individuals who are responsible for the care and supervision of a child, as described in California Penal Code section 11165.5. Please note that this expanded definition of "caregiver" *only* applies to the SDM Hotline Tools and does not apply to any other SDM assessments.

To support consistent screening of such reports, "allegations of harm in a group home, residential treatment facility, or other institution" has been removed from the assessment's preliminary screening section. A screening decision was added to identify when no screening criteria are selected, but a cross-report to another agency such as Community Care Licensing is required.

ALLEGATIONS OF CSEC BY THIRD-PARTY PERPETRATORS, REGARDLESS OF CAREGIVER KNOWLEDGE

Child welfare agencies are expected to consistently screen reports of child trafficking or exploitation by any perpetrator, regardless of caregiver knowledge or involvement. To support consistent screening to assess whether an in-person response is required, the SDM hotline tools now have an expanded sexual exploitation item and definition to include situations that may not include active caregiver involvement or knowledge.

Updates include additional data fields to support tracking of whether (1) a caregiver actively involved the child in acts of exploitation or trafficking, or (2) the child is exploited or trafficked by someone other than a caregiver. The definitions for these items are now expanded to clarify that allegations of sexual abuse should be applied *only* to the alleged perpetrator(s) of the actual exploitation.

Note that if the SDM hotline tool indicates screening in a referral for CSEC where the caregiver has *no allegation of abuse or neglect*, responding social workers should NOT complete the SDM safety and risk assessments.

CHILD MALTREATMENT-RELATED FATALITIES WHEN NO OTHER CHILDREN ARE REPORTED TO BE IN THE HOME

CDSS policy states that an in-person child protection response is required in child fatalities where the reporting party indicates that child abuse or neglect may have contributed to the cause of death. This is required even when no other children are reported to remain in the home. To support proper screening and response to child maltreatment related fatalities, the SDM screening criteria for death of a child due to abuse or neglect, which requires an automatic 24-hour response, will no longer specify that there is another child in the home. Instead, additional data fields have been added to support tracking of whether the report involves (1) the death of the only child, or of all children, reported to be in the home; or (2) the death of a child, with other children reported to be to be in the home.

In addition, the definition for the “No child under age 18” item in the preliminary screening section will provide explicit direction that this item should not be selected in such situations.

IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

Depending on current county practice, the updates outlined above may require a substantial shift in screening practice and subsequent in-person response practices. County leaders are encouraged to review the regulations described in ACL 20-142 and identify any areas of county policy or practice that may require updating. If areas of local policy or practice currently conflict with these expectations for screening practice, counties may want to consider developing a small workgroup or subcommittee to support implementation of the revised tools, including identifying areas where local policy requires updates and planning for any necessary internal training or supports needed to embed these practice shifts.

Counties requesting support or technical assistance, including with any SDM policy changes, training, or coaching, are encouraged to reach out to Evident Change Program Associate Claire Crowley at CCrowley@evidentchange.org. Counties with questions regarding changes to CDSS policy or practice are encouraged to contact the CDSS Child Protection Policy Unit at ChildProtection@dss.ca.gov.