
**ORANGE COUNTY SOCIAL SERVICES AGENCY
CFS OPERATIONS MANUAL**

Effective Date: June 22, 2011
Revised: December 3, 2025

Number: F-0107

Sensitive Referrals and Cases

Purpose	To provide guidelines to identify, process, handle, and maintain sensitive referrals/cases.
Approved	This policy was approved by Loan English, Director of CFS. <i>Signature on file.</i>
Most Recent Revision	<p>This revision of the Policy and Procedure (P&P):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Eliminates the term “Z referral/case” previously used to reference sensitive cases• Eliminates the highly sensitive designation• Incorporates the use of OnBase as Children and Family Services’ (CFS) electronic document storage platform• Includes updated criteria for sensitive referral/case designation• Incorporates guidance from All County Letter (ACL) 17-23• Incorporates Attachment 1 — Suggested Guidelines for Sensitive Referral/Case Procedures• Incorporates semi-annual reassessments for removing sensitive case designations
Background	All Children and Family Services (CFS) referrals/cases contain confidential information. Pursuant to CFS P&P Confidentiality—CFS Client Records (F-0105) , access to referral/case record information is generally only given to employees of the agency for the purposes of carrying out their assigned duties and responsibilities.

Additionally, in compliance with Social Services Agency (SSA) Administrative P&P [Rules of Conduct \(C 32\)](#), staff must avoid any conflict of interest and ensure the protection of individual's rights to privacy, including SSA employees and their relatives.

California Department of Social Services (CDSS), All-County Letter (ACL) 17-23 provides that marking a case or referral as sensitive should be limited and only assigned to those records that could attract attention, curiosity, and extra interest from staff who do not have a professional need to directly access them.

For referrals/cases meeting these criteria, CFS uses **sensitive** referral/case designation, which impacts the processing, handling, and maintenance of these confidential referrals/cases.

Note: For information regarding confidential financial case files associated with a sensitive case, refer to Family Self Sufficiency [Confidential Cases Processing Guide](#).

Definitions

Confidentiality: The controlled dissemination of case record information to protect the rights of clients/families against identification, exploitation, and embarrassment, as guaranteed by state and federal laws and regulations.

Referral/Case Record Information: Includes all information (written and electronic) and data compiled as a result of CFS receiving a referral, opening a case, and/or providing services to a child and/or his/her family.

Sensitive Referrals/Cases: A designation for a referral or case which requires restrictive handling and maintenance.

POLICY

Sensitive Criteria

Sensitive designations:

- Distinguish confidential referrals/cases from other referrals/cases.
- Limit access of referral/case record information to authorized staff only.
- Are intended to be used sparingly, and only when more restrictive access to a referral/case is warranted.

Note: A red round-dot label located on the outside cover of a legal file indicates a sensitive designation.

Sensitive Referrals/Cases:

A referral/case will be designated as sensitive under any of the following conditions:

- A client associated with the referral/case is a current employee of SSA
- A client associated with the referral/case is related to, lives in the home and/or has a close personal relationship with a current SSA employee such as a (not an exhaustive list):
 - Relative
 - Partner
 - Resource parent
 - Non-related extended family member (NREFM)
 - Friend
- A client (or their relative) associated with the referral/case holds a politically sensitive or highly visible position (e.g., elected official, County department head, community leader, sports figure, celebrity, public figure, influencer, etc.)
- A client (or their relative) associated with the referral/case is an employee of another Orange County Agency or Department that collaborates with CFS (e.g., SSA contracted employees, temporary agency workers, PHN, CEGU, CCPU, OCDE Foster Care Liaisons) and share office space with CFS
- The referral/case involves individuals and/or sensational facts that have generated mainstream media interest (e.g., child fatality resulting from child abuse and/or neglect, etc.) and the story is covered beyond 72 hours.

Note: The person requesting the referral/case to be sensitive will monitor the story coverage duration.
- The referral/case is placed on a legal hold and/or involved in litigation
- As deemed appropriate by the assigned Manager and in consultation with Deputy Director (DD)

Designating a Referral/Case as Sensitive

A. **Identification of Referrals/Cases**

The need for sensitive designation of a referral/case may be identified by staff at any point during their involvement in the referral/case.

Additionally, staff who learn that they themselves or another CFS employee (or their relative) may be associated with a referral/case, will immediately and discretely notify their direct supervisor, Manager, or DD, as available. If the supervisor,

Manager, or DD is associated with the referral/case, notification will be made to the next appropriate level of management.

B. Out-of-County Sensitive Referrals/Cases

When a sensitive case has been transferred to Orange County from another County, the Inter-County Transfer liaison or designee will utilize the criteria outlined in the "Sensitive Criteria" section to assess the need for continued restriction/confidentiality.

C. Requesting Sensitive Status

When a referral/case requires a sensitive designation, staff will complete the [CFS Sensitive Case Privilege/Case Request \(F063-28-390\)](#). This form must receive approval by the Manager responsible for the referral/case.

Note: Once a referral/case is designated as sensitive, any prior/subsequent referral or case regarding the family will be identified as sensitive until the designation is removed. Systems Management and Reporting Team (SMART) will make the requested referral/case sensitive in CWS/CMS and OnBase, then contact the Hotline/ER Office Supervisor or designee to make any prior or subsequent referrals/cases sensitive.

If a [CFS employee \(or their relative\)](#) is associated with the referral/case, the [CFS Sensitive Case Privilege/Case Request \(F063-28-390\)](#) will include:

- Employee's name and association to the referral/case
- Employee's current assignment/program/classification
- Whether the employee is identified as the alleged perpetrator
- Date of sensitive status request
- Additional clarifying information, as appropriate

**Staff
Assignment**

CFS programs have their own protocol for assignment of sensitive referrals/cases. The following also apply:

A. CWS/CMS

- Any staff given secondary assignment to a referral/case will immediately end their assignment in CWS/CMS when no longer necessary.

- Secondary assignment privileges will be given to the assigned Unit Clerk, unless directed otherwise by the Manager
- Office/Clerical Supervisors may designate one of their staff to complete processing activity, unless directed otherwise by the Manager
- Secondary assignment to process and maintain financial case files will be given to Foster Care Eligibility Technicians (ETs) designated as confidential caseworkers

B. CFS Employee Associated with the Sensitive Referral/Case

- If a CFS employee is associated with the referral/case, the Manager and/or DD where the referral/case is assigned will review all relevant information in the sensitive case request form to determine:
 - The appropriate assignment.
- **–OR–**
 - Whether reassignment to another social worker, unit, program, or county is necessary.
- Office/Clerical Supervisors may only designate one of their staff to complete processing activity following authorization by the Manager.
- If a CFS employee (or their relative) is associated with the referral/case, Office/Clerical Supervisors will complete processing activity.

Sensitive Case Privilege

“Sensitive case privilege” refers to staff permission to view and/or input sensitive referral/case record information into CWS/CMS.

Sensitive case privilege is regulated by the CWS/CMS Security Administrator using the [CFS Sensitive Case Privilege/Case Request \(F063-28-390\)](#). The necessity for sensitive privileges must be:

- Job specific and/or time limited
- Removed upon an employee’s position reassignment (when no longer applicable) or transfer to another program

The CWS/CMS Security Administrator will conduct semi-annual reassessments of CFS staff who have been granted sensitive case privileges to determine whether these privileges are still required.

Note: Child Abuse Hotline SSSS/SSWs will be given sensitive case privilege, if appropriate.

**Database
Designation**

A. **CWS/CMS**

Sensitive referrals/cases are indicated as having “Limited Access” in the CWS/CMS database. Reasons for the “Limited Access” are entered into the Screener Alerts field (referral) or the Case Alerts field (case) on the ID Page.

The following staff must request secondary assignment from the assigned social worker, Office Supervisor, SSSS, and/or Manager prior to accessing a sensitive referral/case in CWS/CMS:

- Unit Clerk
- Foster Care ET
- Court Typist
- Case Aides (e.g., Adoptions staff, ICWA worker, etc.)
- Public Health Nurse (PHN)
- OCFC Medical Staff/Comprehensive Care Nurse (CCN)

B. **OnBase**

Sensitive cases are indicated as “restricted” in OnBase. Restricted cases in OnBase are only visible to CFS staff with restricted user group access.

**Handling and
Maintenance**

Referrals/cases designated as sensitive require special processing, handling, and maintenance.

A. **Orangewood Children and Family Center (OCFC)**

When a child enters OCFC, the assigned social worker will notify the OCFC Intake worker when the case is sensitive. The OCFC Intake worker will follow the guidelines in the OCFC Intake Manual regarding case sensitive status, which impact:

- Processing of a child’s entry information sheet
- Completion of the Dependency Log
- Handling of the *Application for Petition (F063-28-43)* (if applicable)

B. **Storage**

Physical files of sensitive referrals/cases will be kept in a locked file cabinet in the assigned social worker’s workspace or in the office of the assigned supervisor when not in use.

Electronic sensitive cases will have “restricted” designation in OnBase to secure records from unauthorized users. Refer to the CFS Imaging OnBase Filing Guide for guidance on appropriate storage/filing in OnBase.

Note: Refer to [Imaging Desk Guide](#) for guidance on storage of cases that are identified as having “legal holds.”

C. **Court**

For Court hearing purposes, all paper documentation related to sensitive case will be transported in a sealed vinyl envelope. The sealed envelope will be transported via pony mail or personal hand delivery (by a program designee) to and from Court. The name and building number of the assigned program will be clearly indicated on the envelope. Sensitive cases transported to and from Court for hearing purposes will be logged, pursuant to program protocol.

Note: Program specific-protocol will determine when hand delivery of sensitive cases is required and any additional handling restrictions.

D. **Case Transfers**

Prior to a case transfer, the assigned social worker will document the sensitive status of a case on the [Case Transfer Summary \(F063-28-319R\)](#).

Note: The reason for the sensitive status can be reviewed by the newly assigned social worker in the [Case Alerts](#) field on the ID Page in CWS/CMS.

For further information related to the transfer of a sensitive case, refer to the Procedure section entitled “Transferring a Case.”

E. **Closed Cases**

All closed sensitive cases will be stored as specified below, pursuant to CFS P&P [Record Retention \(E-0111\)](#).

1. **Legal Hold**

Sensitive cases that are closed and identified as having a “legal hold” will be delivered to Custodian of Records and **will not be imaged** into OnBase until the legal hold is lifted.

2. **Life Retention**

Closed sensitive cases identified as “Life Retention” will be delivered to the Custodian of Records for alternative storage.

F. **Release of Referral/Case Record Information**

When sensitive referral/case record information is requested by outside agencies, staff will follow the guidelines to access and/or disseminate referral/case record information detailed in CFS P&P [Confidentiality—CFS Client Records \(F-0105\)](#).

All requests for information regarding a sensitive referral/case, made by a child protective agency outside of Orange County, will be directed to a SSSS or clerical designee at the Hotline.

Sensitive referral/case record information may be cross reported to the Director/Department Head of certain outside agencies (e.g., law enforcement, District Attorney’s Office, etc.) if authorized by law. Staff will consult with their Manager, as deemed appropriate.

**Removing/
Reassessing a
Sensitive
Designation**

On a semi-annual basis, SMART will distribute to all Managers a report detailing CFS cases with sensitive case designation.

The Manager will review the report and distribute to the assigned social worker and assigned SSSS for review.

The assigned social worker and the assigned supervisor will review the circumstances warranting designation of the open case as sensitive.

The assigned social worker or program designee (e.g., Information Processing Technician [IPT]) will complete the [CFS Sensitive Case Privilege/Case Request \(F063-28-390\)](#) if information is obtained indicating the sensitive designation is no longer appropriate. This form must receive approval by the DD overseeing the program where the referral/case is assigned.

For further information related to the removal of a sensitive case designation, refer [Attachment 1— Suggested Guidelines for Sensitive Referral/Case Procedures](#).

REFERENCES

**Attachments
and CWS/CMS
Data Entry
Standards**

Hyperlinks are provided below to access attachments to this P&P and any CWS/CMS Data Entry Standards that are referenced.

- [Attachment 1— Suggested Guidelines for Sensitive Referral/Case Procedures](#)
 - [CWS/CMS Data Entry Standards—Sensitive Referral or Case Data Entry \(G0107\)](#)
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Hyperlinks

Users accessing this document by computer may create a direct connection to the following references by clicking on them.

- CFS P&P [Abuse Investigations—Practice Guidelines \(A-0412\)](#)
 - CFS P&P [Case Closure \(E-0106\)](#)
 - CFS P&P [Case Transfers \(D-0302\)](#)
 - CFS P&P [Confidentiality—CFS Client Records \(F-0105\)](#)
 - CFS P&P [Record Retention \(E-0111\)](#)
 - SSA Administrative P&P [Rules of Conduct \(C 32\)](#)
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Other Sources

Other printed references include the following:

- Orangewood Children and Family Center Intake Manual
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REQUIRED FORMS

Online Forms

Required forms listed below may be printed out and completed, or completed online, and may be accessed by clicking on the link provided.

Form Name	Form Number
CFS Sensitive Case Privilege/Case Request	F063-28-390

**Hard Copy
Forms**

Forms listed below must be completed in hard copy (including multi-copy NCR forms). ***For reference purposes only***, links are provided to view these hard copy forms, where available.

Form Name	Form Number
Application for Petition	F063-28-43

**CWS/CMS
Forms**

The following required forms may **only** be obtained in CWS/CMS.
For reference purposes only, links are provided to view these
CWS/CMS forms, where available.

Form Name	Form Number
Case Transfer Summary	F063-28-319R

Brochures

Brochures to distribute in conjunction with this procedure include:

Brochure Name	Brochure Number
None.	

LEGAL MANDATES

[California Department of Social Services \(CDSS\) Manual of Policies and Procedures \(MPP\) Division 19, Chapter 19](#) details regulations regarding the confidentiality of records pertaining to applicants and recipients of public social services and the circumstances under which these records may be released.

[CDSS MPP, Division 31, Section 31-005.15](#) directs counties to maintain the confidentiality of client records when providing this information to the Juvenile Court.

[Welfare and Institutions Code \(WIC\) Section \(§\) 827.1\(b\)](#) provides that counties shall develop security procedures by which unauthorized personnel cannot access data contained in the system as well as procedures or devices to secure data from unauthorized access or disclosure. The right of access granted shall not include the right to add, delete, or alter data without the written permission of the agency holding the data.

[WIC § 10850](#) mandates confidentiality of records pertaining to recipients of public social services and provides that examination of these records may be permitted in the administration of public social services.

[CDSS All County Information Notice \(ACIN\) I-13-09](#) recommends restricted access of certain referrals/cases and that counties regularly review who has authority/permission to access sensitive referrals/cases.

[CDSS All County Letter \(ACL\) 17-23](#) provides guidance regarding the Limited Access functionality in CWS/CMS, specifically for sensitive or sealed cases.

REVISION HISTORY

Since the Effective Date of this P&P, and prior to the Current Revision Date, the following revisions of this P&P were published:

None.