

Children's Services records & the Ohio Central Registry

Society has the responsibility to protect children from abuse and neglect. To do that in Ohio, state law requires public children's service agencies (PCSAs) such as Hamilton County Department of Job and Family Services to keep records of all child abuse and neglect reports and investigations. The state must also keep investigation records from every county in what is called the Central Registry, located at the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services (ODJFS) in Columbus.

About case files kept at HCJFS

Once a report of alleged child abuse and neglect is made, it is forwarded to a Children's Services caseworker who begins an investigation. All information gathered during that investigation becomes part of a permanent and confidential file. The Ohio Administrative Code (OAC) (5101:2-39-02) requires HCJFS to keep that file indefinitely as a permanent record of the agency's actions. It also requires that information about the investigation be entered into the state's Central Registry.

What is the Central Registry?

The Central Registry is a database that contains information about all investigations of child abuse and neglect in Ohio. The information helps ODJFS to track those incidents in order to protect children.

Is the Central Registry record confidential?

Like HCJFS records, information in the Central Registry remains confidential. The law allows only a few individuals to have access to case information at certain times: ODJFS staff supervising children's protective services; law enforcement officials and county prosecutors investigating reports of child abuse and neglect or investigating people who purposely file false reports; and other child protection agencies investigating reports of child abuse and neglect.

What information is kept in the Central Registry?

Information gathered during a child abuse investigation is placed in the Central Registry, including:

- Time and date the report was received
- Source of the report ("school counselor" or "law enforcement" – not specific names)
- Type of alleged child abuse and neglect
- Whether the report was classified as an emergency or non-emergency
- Identification of any person involved in the report
- Those individuals' role and relationship to the child, and
- Disposition (whether a case is substantiated or proven) upon completion of the investigation.

As an investigation concludes, any new or updated information for local case files may also added to the Central Registry. The caseworker uses the information gathered to determine the disposition.

How long does information stay in the Central Registry?

Depending on the findings of an investigation, the OAC requires that identifying information – such as names, addresses and Social Security numbers – remain in the Central Registry for a specific time period. Those timeframes are:

- Unsubstantiated (unproven) allegations of abuse and neglect: three months
- Indicated (possible) abuse and neglect allegations: five years
- Substantiated (proven) abuse and neglect allegations: ten years

After the timeframe expires, identifying information is automatically removed, or expunged, according to the date of the case disposition. For example, if a disposition date on an unsubstantiated report is March 1, the identifying information will be removed after June 1.

Non-identifying information remains in the Central Registry at ODJFS, which uses it for statistical purposes only.

Sometimes a case disposition may not be noted, or the case may be labeled "unable to locate" because a family cannot be found or has moved before the investigation begins. Identifying information in these cases stays in the Central Registry for ten years or until a disposition can be determined.

Can my identifying information be expunged before the time expires?

ODJFS automatically removes identifying information in the Central Registry after the disposition timeframes pass (see question above). The only time information can be expunged before the timeframes pass is if an appeal filed with HCJFS results in changing the disposition.

Individuals can check with ODJFS to determine if their identifying information is in the Central Registry. Write or call ODJFS at:

Ohio Department of Job and Family Services
30 E. Broad St., 32nd Floor
Columbus, OH 43215
(614) 466-6282

You must include your address, date of birth and Social Security number, and you must sign the letter. ODJFS will then send a letter directly to the person requesting the information.

How do I file an appeal at HCJFS?

Individuals will receive a letter from HCJFS with the disposition and their right to appeal that decision. Appeals can be filed either by phone or in writing. Call the Hearing Scheduler at (513) 946-1366, or send a written request to:

Hamilton County Department of Job and Family Services
Attn: Children's Services Hearing Scheduler
222 E. Central Parkway, 5SW103
Cincinnati, OH 45202

Requests must be received within ten business days from the date of the disposition letter. If an appeal results in changing a case disposition, identifying information will be expunged from the Central Registry according to the timeframe for the new disposition status. NOTE: the outcome of an appeal is final.

Can I have identifying information expunged from HCJFS records?

No. State law requires HCJFS to maintain a permanent file of all reports and investigations. Just like data in the Central Registry, information in local files remains confidential.