

March 19, 2020

Dear Vermont Foster Caregiver,

As a family providing essential care and support to our vulnerable children and their families you are depended on each and every day. We very much appreciate the compassion and care with which you have responded to our community's current and evolving response to the COVID-19 infectious disease outbreak. We know that school closings and childcare closings bring an additional set of challenges to caregivers. We are working with our District Offices to identify and support your needs.

We understand that this situation brings with it numerous questions. The Family Services Division will utilize the following website to consistently communicate information to you, our partners, and the families whom we serve.

<https://dcf.vermont.gov/fsd/COVID19>

The Vermont Department of Health has created a comprehensive website that is updated at 2pm on a daily basis. This is the best place to go for up to date information regarding COVID -19 specific questions. We are trying not to cut and paste content from this site as it is evolving and changing daily.

<https://www.healthvermont.gov/covid>

You will find answers related many questions here, to include:

1. *What precautions can I take to protect myself from COVID-19?*
2. *What are the symptoms of COVID-19?*
3. *What if someone in my place of work or family becomes ill?*
4. *What if someone in my place of work or family is diagnosed with COVID-19?*

Call your primary care physician if anyone in your household becomes ill. Report any possible COVID-19 illness to the VT Department of Health at (802) 863-7240. Also, please notify your Family Services Worker if someone in your family becomes ill.

5. *How can I stay connected?*



We are encouraging you to stay as connected as you can given the current social distancing recommendations. Several of the local Foster Parent Associations have active Facebook pages where information about resources and support are being shared. We have learned that some caregivers are pairing up with a “partner family” that is part of their usual social network. By working collaboratively, on a very small scale, families are meeting each others needs – trips to the grocery store, pharmacy etc.

6. I’m worried about financial hardship on my family?

We understand that this crisis may have a financial impact on your family. We are working with our Business Office to identify additional financial supports for you during this state emergency. More to come shortly.

The Vermont Department of Labor has been directed by order of the Governor to extend unemployment insurance to those Vermonters following the instruction of their healthcare providers to self-isolate or quarantine.

7. What if I have an emergency after hours?

The Family Services Division’s Emergency Service Program (ESP) will continued to be staffed 24/7. ESP can be reached at 1(800)649-5285. We will be encouraging limited movement of children from place to place during this period in an effort to follow Vermont Department of Health guidelines.

We understand that you may have concerns about bringing a new child into your home at this time. We are doing everything we can to place children in settings that are familiar to them, with known caregivers. There will be some situations where this is not possible. Our staff has been directed to ask every client we have contact with a set of COVID-19 screening questions. Additionally, a child will be referred to their primary care physician to assess their health status and to determine if they should be tested for COVID 19 where a screening question response is “yes”.

8. Does Medicaid cover COVID-19 related expenses?

Children in custody are covered by Medicaid. Testing for COVID-19 is covered. Additionally, some over the counter medications may also covered by Medicaid.

9. What about parent child contact guidelines?

Child parent contact was suspended for a 48 hour period from 03/17/2020 to 03/18/2020 to facilitate planning for how to move forward under current circumstances. Beginning 03/19/2020 the following guidance is in place:

When a child has been removed from a parent’s care and placed in DCF custody, that parent and child contact is ordered by the court, and DCF, as the custodian, has a responsibility to ensure that this contact occur. At the same time, during the COVID-19 pandemic, DCF has a responsibility to ensure that contact occur in a manner that is safe and appropriate, in alignment with the latest guidance from the Department of Health, and in compliance with the expectations of the court.

Effective immediately, we will be actively engaged in systematically facilitating phone calls with all parents and foster parents (or staff caretakers) of children/youth in DCF custody to develop safe, appropriate parent-child contact. This will mean remote/virtual contact in most situations.

Detailed, regular virtual/remote plans will be developed and documented, and facilitators will follow-up via electronic communication with the parents regarding the written plan for remote contact. These electronic communications will include the instructions to parents that they should speak to their attorneys about these options, and a final, agreed-to plan will be in writing and distributed to all parties.

These plans will be developed to cover the period in which Vermont is in a state of emergency. Currently that is for the time period of 3/19/20 until 4/15/20.

Parents will be given the options of how parent-child contact could occur (e.g. in person, telephonically, Skype, etc...), including the amount of contact that is to be part of the plan. The preferred and encouraged method of contact will be virtual. Before moving forward with any in person child/parent contact plan the following items will be taken into consideration:

- none of the individuals directly involved in parent-child contact (parent, child, or caregiver) have been in close contact with a person with COVID-19,
- none of the involved persons have felt unwell with respiratory symptoms in the past few days,
- none of the individuals directly involved in the parent-child contact (parent, child, or caregiver) or any individuals in those persons' households feel they are a member of the population that is considered to be high-risk of serious health issues were they to contract COVID-19

In cases where parents still ask for in person contact and there is evidence of COVID contact or vulnerability, FSD will petition the court for only telephonic or virtual contact.

We understand that the above parameters may not completely address your concerns related to the effect of parent child contact on your home and family. Please work with your local district office in regards to your specific situation.

10. What about monthly face to face contact with my Family Services Worker (FSW)?

Monthly *in person* Face to Face visits between the children or youth in custody who are residing in foster or kin settings are suspended for the duration of the State of Vermont Emergency Declaration (currently April 15, 2020) unless there is imminent concern about the safety of the child or youth. FSW's are still required to have at least monthly communication with each child.

11. How do I handle the appointments scheduled for the child in my care?

For therapy appointments, some clinicians are moving to virtual appointments. Check with your provider to see if this is an option. Here is a link to the Designated Mental Health Agencies:

<https://mentalhealth.vermont.gov/services/emergency-services/how-get-help>

For routine appointments that are not time sensitive, we are recommending that they be rescheduled to limit possible exposure. We have heard that pediatric walk in clinics are closed. Please be sure to contact your primary care physician before heading for an urgent care facility, again this is to avoid long waits in settings where sick people are likely to be.

12. Are there any good resources that can help me answer questions that the children in my care might be raising about the Corona Virus?

https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/factsheet/outbreak_factsheet_1.pdf?fbclid=IwAR02_xh6JTvFs34K2q_w38m2AbywAx4JTajSw7NEAdsoX43YdmWeoLzQvgg

We are aware that some caregivers do not have email, have not yet provided an e-mail address to the Division or have changed their email address and have not provided an updated contact to the Division. If you know of someone who might be in this situation, please share this information with them. Also, for people who need to update or share an email with the Division, please send your First and Last names and your email address to our System of Care Unit Director, Barb Joyal at:

Barbara.Joyal@vermont.gov

Finally, I want to express my gratitude to all of you for your ongoing commitment to meeting the needs of our most vulnerable Vermonters. We are in this together!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Christine Johnson", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Christine Johnson
Deputy Commissioner
DCF Family Services Division