

Department for Children and Families
Family Services Division
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Waterbury, VT 05671-1030

Agency of Human Services

March 19, 2020

Dear Community Partner,

As a community partner providing essential care and support to our vulnerable children, youth, 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 our whole community. And finally, we understand that this situation brings with it numerous questions. The Family Services Division will utilize the following website to consistently communicate Division specific 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 we take to protect ourselves from COVID-19?*
2. *What are the symptoms of COVID-19?*
3. *What are protocols for pre-screening meetings with families?*
4. *What if someone I am serving becomes ill?*

Encourage persons to call their primary care physician if anyone in their household becomes ill. Report any possible COVID-19 illness to the VT Department of Health at (802) 862-7240. Also, please notify the associated Family Services Worker if you are aware of COVID related illness of a person you serve.

5. *What if a DCF involved person has an emergency after hours?*



The FSD 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 and youth from place to place during this period in an effort to follow Vermont Department of Health guidelines.

6. 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.

7. 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, our staff and contracted partners will be actively engaged in systematically facilitating phone calls with all parents, foster parents, and care facilities 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 and caretakers 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 concerns related to the effect of parent child contact on the parties involved. These issues will be addressed on a case by case basis.

8. *What about monthly face to face contact with Family Services Workers? (FSW).*

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

9. *Is travel for placed children and youth permitted?*

No non-essential out of state travel is currently permitted for children and youth in Vermont DCF custody. The intent of current VT Department of Health COVID guidance is to ensure and increase social distancing, so other community travel is discouraged.

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,



Christine Johnson

Deputy Commissioner

DCF Family Services Division