



April 4, 2020

Dear Vermont Foster Caregiver,

First, let me thank you for all your efforts to support Vermont children and families during this unprecedented series of events. Your continued compassionate caring will be what helps to create safety and reassurance for the young people in your care. We could not meet the needs of these children without you!

The Family Services Division Management Team has been developing guidance related to the Coronavirus as we face this challenge together as local, national and international communities. It is of the utmost importance to ensure the health and well-being of staff, community partners, families and children as we continue to provide services and support to youth and families in the State of Vermont.

This memo addresses issues that have been raised from all over the state. We hope that it will provide you with some answers.

For up to date information about the Coronavirus and strategies for staying healthy, please visit the Vermont Health Department's website at: healthvermont.gov/covid19.

Additionally, DCF has stood up a COVID-19 information page on our website. Links to other DCF Division information can be found at this link:

<https://dcf.vermont.gov/COVID-19>

Financial Relief

We are pleased to share that we have secured funding to support a \$10.00/day/ per child temporary increase to your foster parent reimbursement. This temporary increase will be applied to be standard foster care rates and to caregivers who are receiving an enhanced rate through a CRF. We are working with our Business Office to include these additional funds starting March 1, 2020. Future communications will provide information about how long we anticipate the increase will be in effect. As you know, things are changing rapidly

Parent Child Contact:

We understand that sustaining face to face parent child contact is presenting concerns for many of you. This matter was heard by the Vermont Supreme Court. Several members of the foster parent community offered testimony. Currently, the division is still being required to support in person parent child contact.

The 3.19.2020 Family Services Division guidance for Parent Child Contact is directing our work at this time. The number one priority of that guidance was to establish Family Time plans.

When a child has been removed from a parent's care and placed in DCF custody; parent child contact is ordered by the court. DCF, as the custodian, has a responsibility to ensure that this contact occurs. 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.

To accomplish this goal, a small workgroup made up of the following individuals or their designees: Chief Administrative Judge, Defender General, State's Attorney, FSD AAG Director, FSD Director of Operations, Parent Attorney, Child Attorney and GAL has been meeting by phone regularly to discuss parent-child contact.

Support staff (such as case aides and CFS providers) in the offices, systematically facilitated 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 may mean remote/virtual contact in most situations.

For those families that were amenable to virtual/remote parent child contact, a family time plan was developed to include the details of how contact would occur and what the amount of contact would be.

These plans will be in effect for 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.

In cases of disagreement with virtual/remote contact:

If the parent disagreed with shifting to virtual/remote contact, facilitators were directed to ask two screening questions (see below) of all individuals directly involved in the parent-child contact (parent, caregiver, child).

1. Have you been in close contact with a person who has COVID-19?
2. Have you felt unwell with respiratory symptoms in the last few days? *Cough, high temperature, shortness of breath, difficulty breathing?*

If any party answered "yes" to either of the screening questions, **virtual/remote contact** was instituted. and the **FSW was required to request of the State's Attorney that an emergency motion to suspend in-person parent-child contact be filed.**

Additionally, if any household members identify as "high-risk for serious health issues" were they to contract COVID-19, and the parent disagrees with remote contact, Dr. James Metz will be consulted to verify this individual is in the high-risk category. If the individual is verified as in the high-risk category, this **statement by Dr. Metz will be included in the emergency motion to the court regarding the disagreement.** DCF will immediately implement remote contact until the matter can be reviewed by the court.

The Division is aware that many caregivers are continuing to support face to face parent child contact. **Please be sure to communicate with parents prior to each scheduled parent child contact to revisit the screening questions to ensure safety. If someone answers yes to a screening question, the visit**

should not occur face to face. Please be sure that you communicate these details to your Family Services Worker.

The links below will take you to a tip sheet and guidance for caregivers supporting virtual visits:

https://www.dcyf.wa.gov/sites/default/files/pubs/CWP_0049.pdf

<https://www.nccdglobal.org/blog/successful-video-visits-young-children>

Monthly Face-to-Face Contacts with Family Service Worker:

At this time, monthly face to face contact for each child in custody is suspended for the duration of the Vermont State of Emergency Declaration (currently April 15, 2020). Family Services Workers are still required to coordinate contact through video conferencing. If you do not have the capacity to participate in a video conference, please communicate this to your Family Services Worker. This is a very NEW shift that we have been required to implement. Calls from staff may come through to you from different phone numbers as they will be working remotely. Please answer unknown numbers and check your voicemail frequently.

Health Care Appointments for Children in Foster Care:

It is more important than ever that caregivers receive a placement checklist and medical treatment authorization form for children new to care. Your FSW should be providing this document to you. These documents should articulate critical health information about the child and should identify the Primary Care Provider (PCP) for the child placed in your home. If a child appears ill, or you have concerns, call the office of the PCP with any questions, and you will be guided whether to have the child come to the office, go to the ED, or to monitor the child from home.

Most routine appointments for children are being rescheduled. Some health providers including mental health care providers can hold appointments virtually. Please check with your provider to see what their availability may be.

For access to information about mental health supports, including crisis calls please click on the link below:

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

Court

On 3.16.2020 the Declaration of Judicial Emergency and Changes to Court Procedure guidance was issued. Hearings that involve the Family Services Division and potentially caregivers that will continue include temporary care hearings and hearings on motions to suspend parent child contact.

Some of you are waiting for an adoption finalization date from the probate court. We have been successful finalizing adoptions through the mail and remotely. Our partners at Lund will be able to help support you, if this situation applies to you.

If you have received recent communication about a hearing, you will want to contact the court or visit the judiciary website below to determine the status of the hearing.

<https://www.vermontjudiciary.org/court-hearings>

Enter the docket number of the case, it should be referenced on earlier court paperwork you have received, and it should look something like this: #123-12-19 Cnjv / Juvenile / Juvenile Hearing

COVID-19 Supports for Former Foster Youth

As colleges and universities move toward closure of their campuses, the DCF-Family Services Division and our contracted transition and aftercare program, the Youth Development Program, aims to ensure that former foster youth that are currently living on campus and impacted by these changes have access to necessary housing, food, health care, and emotional support services at this time. We know that many college-attending former foster youth rely on campus housing, may not have other options, and risk homelessness and other challenges.

If you know of a former foster youth that is in college and living on campus, please encourage them to reach out to their local Youth Development Coordinator. Contact information for local case managers and the statewide Youth Development Program (YDP) can be found here:

www.vtyouthdevelopmentprogram.org.

Youth can also access assistance by emailing YDP@wcysb.org. YDP can assist youth with accessing funding to support independent housing costs, funds to live with an approved caring adult, and/or navigation of community housing resources and other services. YDP can also help youth to contact their colleges and advocate to either remain on campus during this time, or to identify other potential options through their institutions.

Caregiver Training Opportunities

Family Services and The Child Welfare Training Partnership are pleased to announce that we can support on-going caregiver training during the COVID epidemic. The Partnership will be reaching out via email announcing the launch of their new resource- **Homebound Heroes Weekly**. Embedded elsewhere in this newsletter will be a link to the online training platform.

Childcare

The Governor has designated Foster Parents as Essential Persons. As an essential person, foster parents will have access to childcare for their foster children who are aged birth through 8th grade. The link below contains the guidance that was provided to childcare providers. It contains information that some of you may find helpful.

<https://dcf.vermont.gov/sites/dcf/files/CDD/Docs/COVID/COVID-19FAQs-for-Child-Care-Providers.pdf>

Link to list of essential persons:

https://vem.vermont.gov/sites/demhs/files/Essential%20Persons_03182020.pdf

Respite Care

Some of you have questions about respite. We are close to being able to issue our guidance related to respite. Before we can share additional details, the Vermont Department of Health needs to ensure that our plan is in alignment with best practice to minimize risk to the community. As you know, we have been directed by the Governor to “Stay Home, Stay Safe”.

Education and COVID

On March 27, 2020 Governor Phil Scott ordered schools to stay closed for the remainder of the academic year. School districts have until April 13th to come up with a plan for distance learning. We understand that MANY of the children in your care have special educational needs.

We are also aware of a few situations where youth are not engaging in the online school activities provided by schools. Please make your Family Services Worker aware if this situation applies to your family. We want to know if you have a “tech related” barrier (i.e. the family only has one laptop or device, or your internet connection can’t support the volume of activity). Schools do have an obligation to ensure their methods can be accessed by all students, including those with special needs and barriers to the internet. We have reached out to the Agency of Education for guidance related to what caregivers can expect from schools related to specialized instruction, attendance expectation and other accommodations. In the meantime, we know that you are doing the best you can. Right now, the best and most important thing children need is your compassionate care and your reassurance. Thank you for giving them that!

How to Talk to Children about COVID-19:

Below are resources to help you talk with kids about COVID-19; It is important to help children and youth understand that this is serious, while not causing them to be afraid.

- [Talking about Diseases in the News](#) (Bradley Hospital)
- [How to Talk to Your Kids about Coronavirus](#) (PBS)
- [How to Talk to Kids about Coronavirus](#) (NY Times)

On behalf of the Family Services Division, I want to express profound appreciation for your commitment to Vermont Children and Families. Foster Parenting can be challenging even on a good day. Please remember that you are not alone. Our staff are working remotely but they are available. Our Centralized Intake and Emergency Services Team are available 24/7 at 1(800)649-5285.

Warmly,



Barb Joyal
System of Care Unit Director
DCF/ Family Services