

 VERMONT DEPARTMENT FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES Family Services Policy Manual		<h1>159</h1>
Chapter:	Coordinating with Others	
Subject:	Foster and Kinship Parent Safety	Page 1 of 6
Approved:	Christine Johnson, Deputy Commissioner	Effective: 1/27/2020

Purpose

To define the roles and responsibilities of division staff in response to threats or violence against foster or kinship parents.

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Related Policies

- Family Services [Appendix 12](#): Response to Staff Safety Incidents
- Family Services [Policy 82](#): Juvenile Court Proceedings – CHINS
- Family Services [Policy 121](#): Notification of Changes for Children and Youth in DCF Custody
- Family Services [Policy 250](#): Staff Safety

Introduction

The work of the Family Services Division comes with inherent risks. The division’s work with families may cause stress to clients, and some clients may react to our intervention with feelings of anger or hostility, violence, or threats of violence. Such reactions create risks to the personal safety of staff and division partners. Hostility is most often directed towards the division itself, and the resultant safety concerns are applicable to any employee, community partner, or foster/kinship family acting on its behalf. The safety of Family Services staff and our partners is a vital issue that must remain at the forefront at all times.

Anticipatory case consultations with the staff safety manager are encouraged and may be requested at any time by all division employees. The division seeks to address safety matters in a preventative and planned way as much as possible.

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Policy

Foster and Kinship Parent Safety

When a foster or kinship parent receives or perceives a threat from a person or environment (in person, by writing, telephone contact, online or social media, etc.), the individual should attempt to secure their immediate safety by leaving the situation or location as necessary – or by calling **911**. Foster and kinship families are encouraged to immediately notify their family services worker if they are threatened with harm or actually harmed. The worker will promptly notify their supervisor and district director.

Regardless of staff availability in the office, no foster or kinship parent should feel they need to wait to report a threat or safety issue. No one shall discourage foster or kinship families from reporting safety concerns. The [Staff Safety Incident Form](#) shall be completed and submitted by the supervisor assigned to the case, in consultation with the affected foster or kinship parent, family services worker, and resource coordinator.

The staff safety manager will review all incident forms submitted and respond based on the needs of the foster or kinship family and district office. Ongoing communication occurs between the staff safety manager and RLSI leadership about threats and safety incidents impacting foster and kinship families.

Depending on the nature of the situation, either the supervisor, family services worker, resource coordinator or staff safety manager will follow up with the foster or kinship family regarding their desired safety precautions and the response to threats. Coordination should occur on a case-by-case basis to determine who will take the lead in supporting the foster or kinship family.

In addition to district support and outreach to the affected foster/kinship family, an RLSI family services worker may follow up with the family in a regulatory role to assess the impact of the significant event on the capacity of the foster/kinship home and consider the safety and protection of everyone in the home. If immediate action needs to be taken for anyone’s safety, RLSI staff will coordinate and safety plan with the staff safety manager.

When dealing with potential criminal behavior directed towards foster or kinship parents, district directors in consultation with the staff safety manager may notify the appropriate personnel, such as the assigned AAG, law enforcement, or the local State’s Attorney.

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Special Considerations Regarding Notifications of Placement Changes

Division staff should always be mindful of the safety concerns associated with putting a foster or kinship family’s home address in writing. All placement information will be communicated to parents through a phone call or in-person conversation. For additional information, see Family Services [Policy 121](#).

Confidential Placements

As stated in Family Services [Policy 82](#), the division typically informs parents of the location of their child’s placement. In rare instances, a confidential placement may be necessary for safety reasons. Confidential placements may be considered if informing the parents of the child’s placement would compromise the safety of the child or foster/kinship family. Confidential placements may be appropriate in instances where:

- There have been prior significant threats to foster/kinship families or division employees;
- There are serious domestic violence/intimate partner violence concerns;
- There is evidence of significant drug trafficking or gang violence;
- There is evidence of sex trafficking and there are safety concerns regarding the trafficker/perpetrator; or
- The parents have made threats to kidnap the child(ren) and/or there is a history of stalking.

Approval by the director of operations or a senior policy and operations manager is required for all confidential placements. Additionally, division staff shall consult with their assigned assistant attorney general (AAG) to seek a protective order in instances where the identities and location of resource families will be kept confidential from the parents. All protective orders will likely have time limitations which will dictate the duration of the confidential placement. If a time limitation is not specified in the protective order, district director approval is required for a confidential placement to last beyond 30 days. Approval by the director of operations or a senior policy and operations manager is required for a confidential placement to last beyond 60 days. Administrative staff shall be informed of all confidential placements to ensure placement letters are not sent automatically to parties.

If there is another child in DCF custody placed in the foster home prior to a confidential placement, the situation must be assessed to determine the level of risk to other children and who can safely remain in the household or be added to the household. Team discussions and consultation with RLSI is encouraged.

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The person who approved the confidential placement will notify the director of the Residential Licensing and Special Investigations (RLSI) Unit and the senior policy and operations manager who supervises RLSI of the confidential placement. **All confidential placements prompt a hold on new placements in the household** for the purpose of considering the overall safety and well-being of the children and caregivers in the home. District office staff are not permitted to place new children or youth in the home nor ask the caregivers to provide additional respite care while a confidential placement is in effect or until the hold is lifted by RLSI. This does not impact the current placement(s) in the home or existing respite arrangements unless otherwise indicated by RLSI based on the nature of the threat or safety concern and the potential impact on other children in DCF custody.

A case note alert should be applied in FSDNet for all confidential placements to alert staff to dangerous or potentially dangerous situations. Case note alerts should be dated, list the reason for the confidential placement, and include pertinent details from the protective order.

Once a protective order is in place, division staff will make efforts to ensure it is followed and exercise discretion regarding individuals who are informed of the order and placement. For instance, the location of the child’s placement will not be kept confidential from guardian ad litem (GALs) or other partners who need to have contact with the child. These individuals will be informed of the circumstances of the confidential placement and confidentiality requirements of the protective order.

Case plans may reference protective orders and the expectations of the boundaries that must be followed as clarified in the order. Family services workers should remind foster and kinship families that even with a confidential placement and protective order in place, the division cannot assure their identities or location will not become known.

Self-Protection Plans

Based on the circumstances of the threat or safety concern, foster or kinship parents may develop self-protection plans and consult with division staff while developing them. Members of the district office team (family services workers, resource coordinators, supervisors, etc.) may support foster parents in the development of self-protection plans. Consultation with the staff safety manager is available and recommended in situations of significant safety concern.

A self-protection plan is an individually driven process based on what the person reasonably believes will promote their safety. A self-protection plan can be a simple written outline or paragraph describing specific precautions to be taken upon intervention. Coordination with or approval from members of the district office team

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may be necessary depending on the nature of the plan.

Self-protection plans serve to promote the individual’s well-being and lessen risk of threat to personal safety when intervening or initiating contact with the person who made the threat. Details in the plan could include, but are not limited to:

- Where and when it is best to meet with the person (e.g., in a neutral setting and not at the foster home);
- Who, if anyone, should be present when the foster parent meets with the person (family services worker, supervisor, another foster parent, DOC staff, law enforcement, or the client’s network of supports);
- Any limitations on whether the child/youth should be present; and
- Specific actions to be taken under certain circumstances (e.g., discussing the need for safety planning or an escort when going to court, during pick-up and drop-off, or following family time).

Foster and Kinship Parent Safety & Awareness Checklist

Consider the following behaviors by any adult or youth:

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Substance use disorder | <input type="checkbox"/> History of violating court orders |
| <input type="checkbox"/> History of assaultive or violent behavior | <input type="checkbox"/> Tactical training (survivalist, military) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Prior criminal history | <input type="checkbox"/> History of stalking (in-person or electronic) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Prior threats | <input type="checkbox"/> Gang membership or activity |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Frequent law enforcement contact | <input type="checkbox"/> Sex trafficking or drug trafficking |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Current access to weapons or history of weapon use | <input type="checkbox"/> Significant sexualized behavior |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Suicidal thoughts or actions | <input type="checkbox"/> Tendency to run away |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Emotional instability | <input type="checkbox"/> History of making false allegations |
|
 | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Mental health illness or problems | |

Consider any sudden or recent life changes within a family:

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Job loss | <input type="checkbox"/> Divorce or separation |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Legal issues | <input type="checkbox"/> Death or serious illness |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Change in custody status | <input type="checkbox"/> Victimization / traumatic event |

Consider significant events or case decisions and how they may impact your relationship with families (e.g., court hearings, case plan change/concurrent planning, family time change)

How does the above information affect your safety in the community?

General Safety:

- Always be aware of your surroundings. TRUST YOUR INSTINCTS! Help can arrive quickly!
- Call 911 if you are in imminent danger or something is making you feel unsafe
- Remind yourself of the locations of safe places in your community – such as police stations, fire stations, hospital emergency rooms, courthouses, banks, or other places with security
- Make sure your cell phone is charged and accessible at all times
- Be aware of local cell phone reception and areas without coverage
- Vary your schedule of activities at home and work if you can; avoid a predictable schedule
- Avoid confrontation with individuals who have made threats against you or your family members

At Home:

- Leave the front porch light on in the evening for security
- Make sure all doors, windows, and garage doors are locked
- Think about evacuation plans in case of emergencies; talk about evacuation plans with your family members
- Obtain the phone numbers (or other contact information) of your neighbors in case of emergencies, or if you need them to check on your house
- Don't enter your home if someone has followed you or is parked on your street/across from your house – drive to a safe location and call 911

Vehicles & Driving:

- Operate a safe vehicle in working order with enough gasoline to get to and from the destination
- Keep your car doors locked; if necessary, keep windows only partially open above the ear while driving
- Drive around the area of your destination looking for unsafe conditions (poor lighting, unsecured animals, numerous cars/individuals who do not live in the home, people drinking or using substances, etc.)
- Hold your keys while walking to the vehicle

Parking:

- Try to park where you can see your vehicle while you are inside; park in the direction you want to leave
- Choose a parking space that is well lit or offers a safe walking route; try to avoid parking in driveways to lessen the chance of being blocked in
- Ask someone to escort you to your car if needed
- When approaching your car, look under the car and check the back seat before entering