To: DCF Families

From: Linda S. Spears, DCF Commissioner

Date: April 8, 2020

Subject: Covid-19 Information and Resources

The Department of Children and Families (DCF) is committed to ensuring the health and safety of the children and families in our communities. Over the past several weeks, our state and federal government have taken unprecedented steps to reduce the spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). We recognize that this is a very difficult time for you and the actions being taken as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak may cause additional stress, especially if your children are in DCF care. We deeply care about the health and well-being of you and your family and want to ensure you have as much up-to-date information as possible about the Commonwealth’s response and how we can support you during this challenging time.

**Our Offices**

DCF offices are open, however most DCF employees are teleworking and offices are closed to walk-in visitors. We are keeping the number of staff that needs to be in the area and regional offices to a minimum that allows for practice of safe social distancing.

If you need to contact your social worker, please email or leave a message on their voicemail. You can also reach out to their supervisor or manager if you are unable to get in touch with them. You can reach the supervisor or manager by calling the main phone number for the area office. You can find a list of DCF offices and numbers here: <https://www.mass.gov/orgs/massachusetts-department-of-children-families/locations?_page=1>

In order to do our part to reduce the spread of COVID-19, social workers are conducting most visits with children, families and foster families through videoconferencing. We understand how challenging this will be but want to assure you that we are here to support you through this process.

If social workers need to do an in-person visit, they will ask you some questions before coming to your home to safeguard everyone’s health. Social workers are also using protective items like gloves and masks when making visits to ensure everyone’s safety.

If you would like to discuss case concerns or ask questions about case practice and policy, you can also call the Office of the Ombudsman at (617) 748-2444 or complete an online form at <https://www.mass.gov/service-details/dcf-office-of-the-ombudsman>

**If You Have Children in DCF Care**

It is important to stay in touch with your social worker and your attorney for updates. DCF is working with foster parents and providers to ensure the safety of your children during this outbreak.

*Court hearings* – Both the Juvenile and Probate Court are currently hearing matters only of an emergency nature. Trials and other matters are being continued. For the next court date or other questions you have about your case, you should contact your attorney to discuss further.

*Visits* **-** In order to prioritize the safety of everyone involved, parent-child visits are currently occurring by video conference whenever possible. Your social worker will work with you and your child’s caregiver to facilitate video conference visits. We recognize there will be circumstances that necessitate an in-person visit. We encourage you to talk with your attorney and your social worker about this.

If you are in need of technology resources so that you can maintain contact, the Lifeline Program may be an option for you. To check eligibility or to apply, you can call 1-800-392-6066 or visit this site: <https://www.mass.gov/how-to/apply-for-a-discounted-communications-service-through-the-lifeline-program>

**Supporting You and Your Family**

If you are in need of support during this crisis, your social worker can help in connecting you to resources within our agency or with our sister agencies and providers. For those of you impacted by substance use, this crisis has likely changed the way you receive support and services. DCF is working with our specialists and providers on guidance to help you stay connected to services.

This can be an isolating time for many people. If you or someone you care about, are feeling overwhelmed with emotions like sadness, depression, or anxiety, if you are experiencing domestic violence or feel like you want to harm yourself or others, please seek help immediately:

* Contact [**Samaritans**](https://samaritanshope.org/our-services/247-crisis-services/) 24/7. **Call or text our 24/7 helpline any time at****1-877-870-4673****.**
* Contact [**Crisis Text Line**](https://www.crisistextline.org/) by **texting HOME to 741741**
* Visit the new [**Massachusetts Network of Care**](https://massachusetts.networkofcare.org/mh/) website to locate behavioral health resources in your area.
* Contact SAMHSA’s Disaster Distress Helpline. The Helpline provides 24/7, 365-day-a-year crisis counseling and support to people experiencing emotional distress related to natural or human-caused disasters. Call **1-800-985-5990** or**text TalkWithUs to 66746** to connect with a trained crisis counselor.
* Contact the Massachusetts Emergency Services Program/Mobile Crisis Intervention (ESP/MCI) - **1-877-382-1609** ([**read more about this program**](https://www.mass.gov/emergencycrisis-services))

*Information on COVID-19 –* Information about coronavirus, the virus that causes COVID-19 can be found at the Massachusetts Department of Public Health website [mass.gov/covid19,](http://www.mass.gov/2019coronavirus) by calling 2-1-1 or visiting <https://mass211.org/> to live-chat with a 2-1-1 staff person. . The CDC website is <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>. If you are feeling unwell or have health concerns, please call your personal health care provider. The Department of Public Health’s [COVID-19 web page](https://www.mass.gov/how-to/check-your-symptoms-for-covid-19-online) links to an [online tool](https://www.buoyhealth.com/symptom-checker/?configuration=ma_covid&concern=coronavirus) you can use to help assess your symptoms and find the right care.

*Resources for Unemployment, Housing and Food* – If you need to file for unemployment because your workplace is shut down, you can do so online here: <https://www.mass.gov/how-to/apply-for-unemployment-benefits> or by calling (617) 626-6338.

[2-1-1](https://mass211.org/): Available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week; Connects callers with essential community services like food banks, housing resources or child care.

[Family Resource Centers](https://www.frcma.org/) (FRC): FRCs are located throughout Massachusetts and offer a variety of services to help families. Some of the FRCs are not physically open, but are providing assistance to families by phone.

*Resources for Parenting and Well-Being:*

We understand that this can be an uncertain and often challenging time both for children in your home and for you as caregivers. There are many resources available to talk with children about COVID-19 and the impacts of the pandemic on their everyday life. A few of those resources are:

* The National Child Traumatic Stress Network developed this helpful guide for parents and caregivers to think about how an infectious disease outbreak might affect their family— both physically and emotionally—and what they can do to help their family cope. <https://www.nctsn.org/resources/parent-caregiver-guide-to-helping-families-cope-with-the-coronavirus-disease-2019>
* This [Online Toolkit from Sesame Street](https://hhsvgapps01.hhs.state.ma.us/ehsintranet/external-link.jspa?url=https://www.sesamestreet.org/caring)  can help families with young children structure their days.
* To further expand learning opportunities for students, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) has partnered with public broadcaster [WGBH](https://www.wgbh.org/foundation/press/wgbh-partners-with-massachusetts-department-of-elementary-and-secondary-education-to-provide-tv-and-digital-distance-learning-options-for-students-and-educators-during-school-closures) and its partner station WGBY to provide resources for use by students who are learning at home. The resources include the stations’ newly launched [online distance learning center](https://www.wgbh.org/distance-learning-center) (https://www.wgbh.org/distance-learning-center) with lessons for every grade level.

Middle and high school students also have access to more educational programming on the WGBH and WGBY WORLD Channel from noon to 5 p.m., and younger students can tune into other public broadcasting channels such as WGBH Kids for educational programming. Other supplemental educational resources have been posted on the DESE [website](http://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/ed-resources.html) (http://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/ed-resources.html).

* Resources and tips to help boost emotional health and well-being during the COVID-19 outbreak <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/maintaining-emotional-health-well-being-during-the-covid-19-outbreak#tips-and-activities-for-children>

This is undoubtedly a stressful time for you and your family. I encourage you to take care of yourself and your loved ones. Please stay proactive about your health and your family’s health including:

* Practice social distancing by keeping a minimum distance of 6 feet between you and another person
* Cover your mouth when you cough or sneeze, using a tissue or the inside of your elbow.
* Wash your hands for 20 seconds with soap and warm water frequently and use alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
* If you have a fever or feel sick, reach out to your healthcare provider.
* Clean surfaces that are frequently touched such as doorknobs and countertops with household cleaning spray or wipes.
* Think ahead about how to take care of yourself and your loved ones if one you becomes ill. This includes having a plan for who will care for your children if you become ill. In Massachusetts, a parent may give permission to someone their child lives with to make medical and educational decisions for the child. This is a much simpler process than guardianship, and no forms need to be filed in court. If you need to name a caregiver for your child, you can find more information and instructions here: <https://www.mass.gov/how-to/name-a-caregiver-for-your-child>