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Face-to-Face Contacts During COVID-19 Pandemic

Background:

In March of 2020, many local child welfare and youth justice agencies began making certain face-to-face contacts with children, youth and families through technology in order to reduce the risk of exposure to COVID-19. Guidance from state and local public health, state emergency and executive orders, and the Department of Children and Families (DCF) has guided this process. DCF has been asked to provide updated guidance on face-to-face contacts. With respect to caseworker-child/youth and caseworker-family contacts, the DCF is rebalancing the guidance towards how we as a field can accomplish home visits and in-person contacts with children, youth and families while maintaining local flexibility to handle exceptional circumstances and/or localized outbreaks of the virus. DCF has also issued updated guidance regarding face-to-face family interactions that similarly seeks to rebalance the guidance along the same lines (<https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/files/press/2020/covid/f2f-update.pdf>).

As the circumstances of COVID-19 continue to evolve, it has become apparent that total elimination of the risks of infection with this disease will not happen soon. We know that face-to-face contacts with children, youth, parents, and out-of-home caregivers are essential in assessing safety, creating engagement and in case planning. They are also necessary for timely and positive outcomes for children and youth.

The federal Administration for Children and Families' Children's Bureau ("Children's Bureau") has provided updated guidance related to whether technology may be used in order to meet the federal statutory requirement for monthly caseworker visits for children in out-of-home care. That guidance provides, in part:

"[T]here are limited circumstances in which a title IV-B agency could waive the in-person aspect of the requirement and permit monthly caseworker visits to be accomplished through videoconferencing. Such circumstances are limited to those that are beyond the control of the caseworker, child, or foster family, such as a declaration of an emergency that prohibits or strongly discourages person-to-person contact for public health reasons; a child or caseworker whose severe health condition warrants limiting person-to-person contact; and other similar public or individual health challenges.... The waiver of the requirement would be narrowly limited to the timeframe during which the public or individual health challenge or issue renders it impossible or ill advised to meet the in-person requirement....Scheduling conflicts and the like are insufficient grounds for waiving the in person requirement."

See Federal Child Welfare Policy Manual, Title IV-B, Section 7.3, Question no. 8.

In light of this federal guidance and the continuing COVID-19 pandemic, local agencies are encouraged to consider all information available to them including individual circumstances, any county or local orders that may be in effect, community public health advisories, and CDC recommendations, in determining the best course of action, with preference towards home visits and in-person contact when they can be achieved with minimal risk to the parties involved. Multiple protection strategies are necessary when resuming in-person contact to minimize risk to children, youth, parents, out-of-home caregivers, child welfare professionals, and others in our homes and our community. Re-instituting and maintaining home visits and in-person contact should be pursued in a planful manner and will require additional precautions.

Local child welfare and youth justice agencies should refer to the Center for Disease Control (CDC) for additional guidance and resources (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>) as procedures for decision-making are established by each agency.

Guidance

In-person contact is still required in the following scenarios:

- Initial face-to-face contact on an Initial Assessment
- When a Present Danger Threat or Impending Danger Threat is identified
- For families on an active safety plan, it is expected that in-person visits with the child and the family happen a minimum of once per month. Agencies may use discretion in determining how to handle other contacts required by the safety plan.
- For placement danger threats in out-of-home care where a child safety assessment is needed.

Although there is not a statutory requirement that youth justice intakes be done in person, local agencies are encouraged to resume in person youth justice intakes where possible, subject to the considerations below.

For other face-to-face contacts, local agencies are encouraged to consider the possibility of having the contact occur in-person. Prior to in-person contact, agencies can consider assessing for COVID-19 issues by asking question like or similar to:

1. Does the parent, child/youth or any member of the family living in the home have any symptoms of COVID-19?
2. Has the parent, child/youth or any member of the family living in the home come into close contact with a person diagnosed or under investigation for COVID-19? Close contact means being within approximately 6 feet for a prolonged period; or having direct contact with infectious secretions – e.g. being coughed on – while not wearing a gown, gloves or eye protection.
3. Is any person in the home currently awaiting test results for Covid-19 or received a positive test result?
4. Is anyone in the home considered to be in a “high-risk” group?

If the answer to any of these questions is “yes,” contact can be completed virtually using technology, such as Skype, FaceTime, Zoom, etc. If the answers to these questions are “no,” the agency is encouraged to have the contact occur in-person but can also consider any other circumstances that may necessitate virtual contact. An example of such circumstances could be a spike in community spread or a local public health order. Limiting or restricting face-to-face contacts may be warranted to ensure the health of all involved. In these unique circumstances, virtual interactions must be maintained and increased when possible, until face-to-face contact can take place.

For all face-to-face contact that does occur, local agencies should take every precaution to ensure the health of all involved. These may include:

- Meeting in an outside space
- Taking a walk with the child/youth
- Coordinating across jurisdictions to have one caseworker meet with multiple children if an in-person visit is needed, to limit the number of caseworkers entering a placement.
- Finding a mutually convenient place to meet in-person

For contacts that are made using technology, local agencies should keep in mind guidance from the Children's Bureau that agencies should:

- conduct the virtual visit in accordance with required timeframes;
- "closely assess the child's safety" at each virtual contact;
- "consider plans of action should a caseworker not be able to reach a child via videoconference, or should the videoconference raise a concern about the child's safety or well-being"; and
- document the waiver of the in-person requirement for the visit in the child's case plan.

See Federal Child Welfare Policy Manual, Title IV-B, Section 7.3, Question no. 8.