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Division of Safety and Permanence

Guidance on Child, Family and Facility Contact During COVID-19 Public Health Emergency

Introduction

The department is committed to supporting the children and families in our communities, and to keeping our workplace safe and healthy. Child protection is an essential community service for some of our most vulnerable residents and families who are struggling to safely care for their children. In general, there is no substitute for seeing children and families in person, but given the current COVID-19 pandemic it is necessary and prudent to balance the need to see children and families in person with the use of distance visits, in some circumstances, to protect the health of our workforce and the children in placements and in the community. This guidance is effective until the end of the public health emergency, or until new guidance is released.

Background

COVID-19 is a respiratory illness caused by a novel virus that has been spreading worldwide. We are gaining more understanding of COVID-19's epidemiology, clinical course, and other factors as time progresses, and the situation is changing daily. The Department of Health Services is in the process of monitoring COVID-19, providing guidance on testing with local and federal partners, and providing guidance and resources to prevent, detect and respond to the occurrence of COVID-19 cases in Wisconsin.

At this time, DHS is identifying more positive cases of COVID-19 in Wisconsin. Counties, agencies and programs should prepare for possible impacts of COVID-19 and take precautions to prevent the spread of COVID-19, as well as other infectious diseases, including influenza.

The purpose of this memo is to provide guidance to child welfare agencies and providers in the difficult task of deciding which cases demand in person contact and in which cases contact can be made through technology. At this time the federal government has not relaxed the in-person caseworker contact standards. However, we understand the urgent need for some guidance and what follows is meant to supplement local decision making with regard to which families require in-person contacts and which can be done by technology.

All programs should have a plan for what they can do in the event that COVID-19 becomes widespread in the community. The goals for your plan should be to reduce the spread of acute respiratory illnesses and minimize the impact of COVID-19 among your children and staff.

This guidance helps programs understand how to help prevent the transmission of COVID-19 within their facilities and among their workforce. Please continue to check back on our website for additional guidance in the upcoming days. <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/covid-19>

Guiding Principles

The following guiding principles surround the department's effort to provide guidance related to our child welfare system requirements given the current public health condition faced by our communities:

- Child safety is the top priority of the child welfare system.
- If child welfare workers are unable to react in times of emergency, due to exposure to COVID-19, more children will be at risk.
- We need to balance the key priorities of assessing and ensuring child safety while keeping our workforce healthy and available to respond to emergency child abuse and neglect situations.

Guidance

Face-to-face contacts related to children and families of children in out-of-home care can be completed using technology (such as Skype, FaceTime, Zoom, etc.). This includes:

- regularly scheduled monthly contacts between caseworkers and children in out-of-home care,
- contact between caseworkers and families of children in out-of-home care,
- family interaction between children in out-of-home care and their families,
- family interaction between siblings in out-of-home care,
- caseworker visits with families with no known active danger threats within the placement home, and
- bi-monthly contacts by child placing agencies workers serving treatment level foster care with children placed in a home licensed by the child placing agency.

Technology should be the preferred method of contact in the above situations, assuming Confirming Safe Environments have been completed and the child is considered to be in a safe setting. Risk management plans should continue to be monitored and updated as necessary.

Non-emergency regular contacts between families, children, and caseworkers, both in foster homes and group care, should be done by technology if feasible and safe to do so. The first priority for caseworker contacts should be to connect with the child through means that allow for the most interaction. Video-based visits are strongly encouraged, or telephone in the event that is unavailable. Efforts should be made to speak privately with the child during these contacts, where possible and appropriate. If technology is being used in lieu of in-person caseworker contacts this must be documented in the case note. Workers are encouraged to meet with the children on their caseloads more frequently when having contact via technology, and to check in specifically on how the conditions of a placement may have changed or adapted in light of COVID-19. Visits with parents also require that we minimize potential spread. Therefore, whenever possible, these visits should be by telephone, skype, video or other technology.

In-person contact should still be completed when there is concern for safety for a child in any out-of-home care setting. If a child cannot be made available by phone, or specific concerns about a child's safety in a placement are present, in-person visits may be necessary to ensure child safety. In this instance, caseworkers and facilities should take every precaution to ensure the health and safety of the other residents in the home or facility and the worker. These may include:

- Meeting outside the home or facility
- Take a walk with the child
- 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.
- Find a mutually convenient place to meet in person

Face-to-face contacts with children and families where there are identified present or impending danger threats, initial contacts on Initial Assessments, and in-home safety plan related visits.

In person contact is still required in the following scenarios:

- First contact with a child in the course of a new Initial Assessment to identify present and impending danger threats.
- 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.

Prior to an in person contact, workers should assess for COVID-19 issues by asking the following screening questions by phone, text or email:

- a) Does the parent, child/youth or any member of the family living in the home have a lower respiratory illness (e.g. cough, shortness of breath) or fever?
- b) 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.
- c) Within the last 30 days, has the parent, child/youth or any member of the family living in the home recently traveled in an area with known local spread of COVID-19?

Local child welfare agencies in coordination with their local public health departments should provide additional guidance to their workers and supervisors to determine how to proceed with the in-person contact, if the above questions indicate possible exposure. Safety and risk of the child and the child welfare worker should be considered in local guidance.

Other In-Person Contact Requirements

Kinship – initial applications and renewals

- Initial and renewal kinship care applications typically require an in-person walk-through of the home. These walk-throughs can be completed virtually, if possible. The application can be completed over the phone. A home visit should be scheduled as soon as practicable after the public health emergency has passed.

Court hearings

- The federal requirement is to have a judicial finding of reasonable efforts to achieve permanency every 12 months. Although the permanency hearing is generally the mechanism by which that finding is made, it doesn't have to be.
 - For counties that make judicial finding every 6 months, the federal requirement is every 12 months so there is likely a longer time window before a new finding is required.
 - Permanency hearings can be held via technology.

Findings of reasonable efforts can be made outside of a court hearing. There is no requirement that the judicial determination be made at a permanency hearing. The court may make such a judicial determination, based upon evidence presented to it by the title IV-E agency, without a formal hearing.

- A short delay in making findings of a month or two could be reasonable in this circumstance if none of the above options are available.

Youth Justice Intake Inquiries

- There is not a statutory requirement that youth justice intakes be done in person.
- Technology is encouraged to complete youth justice intake referrals.