

FAQs: Foster Care in the Time of COVID-19

During the COVID-19 pandemic, responsibilities regarding placement practice continue. This includes the duty to provide active or reasonable efforts to prevent placement, and when placement is necessary, ensuring that parents and children receive culturally appropriate and available services to meet identified needs to eliminate the need for removal at the earliest possible time. Given the economic and health impacts, families are stressed and may have specific needs arise due to COVID-19 that need to be considered and incorporated in practice.

Social service agencies are encouraged to proactively share [Make a Plan, Minnesota](#) with families they are working with, and the general public. These resources help guide families through a process to identify possible caregivers, collect vital family and child information, and share their plan with others in case of emergency, such as illness with COVID-19.

What if a parent is diagnosed with COVID-19 and is too sick to care for their child?

If a county social service agency receives a report that parent/s are sick with COVID-19 and not able to care for their child, the agency's role may be helping to think through resources and options, including:

- Informal family arrangements

For children who are [not involved in a Child in Need of Protection or Services petition](#), agencies may provide information and assist a parent to establish a [delegation of parental authority](#) with an individual the parent identifies as a temporary caregiver for their child. This agreement is not foster care, but provides the caregiver with temporary authority to make decisions for child, including accessing education and medical services.

The [Emergency Family Planning and Information Kit](#) is a resource to help families document important information about their children that can be shared with alternate caregivers designated by the family.

- Parent Support Outreach Program (PSOP) services

PSOP program requirements were modified during the COVID-19 response. Direct funding may be provided to help with a variety of needs, including child care. See [COVID-19 Response: Parent Support Outreach Program and Family Assessment Response Allocation](#) for details.

- Respite

When a parent is unable to identify an individual to provide care for their child, agencies may arrange for respite. Respite care is a service, not a placement, and fiscal supports are not available. Respite care can be arranged for up to 30 days.

- If no informal resource or respite is available, a parent may enter into a voluntary placement agreement pursuant to Minn. Stat. 260C.227. First consideration for placement is a child's relatives or individuals who have had significant contact with or cared for the child. Agency staff must consult parent/s, child, and child's tribe if the Indian Child Welfare Act applies, to identify and notify relatives.

What should be considered when a report is received about child maltreatment that occurred during the stay-at-home order?

Reports of non-current child maltreatment must be documented and screened according to the [Minnesota Child Maltreatment Intake, Screening, and Response Path Guidelines](#) (see pages 34 - 35). Reports meeting criteria must be screened in and assigned a response path and timeframe based on the nature of allegation(s) and safety for a child. For reports of a non-accidental physical injury, a visible injury at the time of receipt of a report is not necessary to screen in reports under physical abuse. See bulletin #20-68-13 [Modify timelines and face-to-face requirements for child protection responses and alleged maltreatment](#) for policy modifications related to COVID-19 precautions.

How to respond when safety concerns are discovered during an assessment/investigation?

During the COVID-19 response, child welfare practices continues. This includes the duty to provide active/reasonable efforts to prevent placement, including:

- Providing comprehensive assessment of protective factors keeping a child safe from harm
- Working with families to develop and implement a safety plan, and planning for ongoing monitoring [Minn. Stat. 260.012(d)]
- Involving informal and formal safety networks to support families
- Assessing non-custodial or non-adjudicated parent's willingness and capability of providing day-to-day care for their child [Minn. Stat. 260C.219]

If needed, the comprehensive relative search outlined in Minn. Stat. 260C.221 includes notifying relatives of the option to become a placement resource and opportunity to participate in care and planning for child. Relatives may be available to support a child and parent/s, including:

- Participating in case planning
- Identifying strengths and needs of parent/s and child
- Supervising visits
- Providing respite and vacation visits for child
- Providing transportation to appointments
- Suggesting other relatives who might be able to help support the case plan
- Helping to maintain child's familiar and regular activities, to the extent possible
- Contact with friends and relatives.

Engaging family members and other natural supports through a Family Group Decision Making meeting may help to plan for parent/s and child. Contact dhs.csp.rapidconsult@state.mn.us for Rapid Consultation requests related to child protection responses.

What are requirements for an emergency relative placement?

In an emergency, the responsible social services agency may place a child in an unlicensed emergency relative placement. Relatives include persons related by blood, marriage or adoption; the legal parent, guardian, or custodian of a child's siblings; or an individual who is an important friend with whom child has resided or had significant contact. Relatives of an Indian child include persons who are members of an Indian child's family as defined in the Indian Child Welfare Act.

Relative placements can be immediately arranged in Minnesota; current access to online education and telehealth may support a child placed with a relative outside of their community.

Minn. Stat. 245A.035, details requirements for an unlicensed emergency relative placement that includes an initial inspection prior to or within three days of placing a child in the home of a relative, providing information for initial background checks through the Social Service Information System (SSIS) and Minnesota Government Access (MGA)/Minnesota Court Information System (MNCIS), and submitting a child foster care license application within 10 days. If any household member or person who is otherwise subject to a background study has a disqualification that is a permanent bar to set aside, placement may not be made. [Waivers for licensing requirements](#) apply to unlicensed emergency relative placements; the time to complete an application for licensure for an emergency relative placement is extended from within 10 days of placement to within 30 days of placement. The initial home safety inspection may be conducted virtually with providers using video technology.

Placement decisions are based on the best interests of a child, including an individualized determination of their needs and how the selected placement will serve their needs. [Minn. Stat. 260C.212]

Minnesota has a new formalized process for requesting services, including foster care licensing for a relative in another county. See bulletin #20-68-18 [Intrastate Process on Child Foster Care Placements in Another County](#) for information on Minnesota Intrastate Referrals.

It is important that relatives are aware of local resources in place or being developed for families to support the needs of children and caregiver/s during the pandemic.

Contact dhs.csp.fostercare@state.mn.us for questions and consultation on relative search and placement.

How can caregivers reduce the risk of COVID-19 infection?

Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) [Coronavirus Disease 2019 webpage](#) provides information about COVID-19, including how parents can protect themselves and family members, strategies to slow the spread of the virus, other materials and resources, and a guidance library.

Consult with the public health department regarding daily care concerns, how to prevent spreading the virus, and local efforts and resources to respond to COVID-19.

What if a child has suspected or known exposure to COVID-19?

When a child enters, or has a placement move, the responsible social services agency should inquire about potential COVID-19 exposure and disclose answers to potential placement providers.

It is good practice for agencies to know which families may be open to placement of a child with suspected/known exposure, or presumed/confirmed positive for COVID-19.

MDH has an [online screening tool](#) to help decide whether someone should be tested for COVID-19 and a map with available [testing locations](#). Families should call their health care provider if they have questions and to inquire about testing. If a family experiences challenges accessing testing, call the MDH COVID hotline (651-201-3920) for assistance.

If a child in foster care has suspected/known exposure or presumed/confirmed positive for COVID-19, and their foster home is not able to continue to care for them during a period of quarantine, arrangements can be made for a child to quarantine elsewhere in an unlicensed setting, if in their best interest, for up to 14 days (entered as a location). Whenever possible, arrangements should be made with relatives and others in child's support network; see [Children in Foster Care: Using relative visits and alternative child care arrangements](#). In accordance with Minn. Stat. 256N.26, subd. 8, when a child is temporarily absent from the foster home for up to 14 days, and their placement continues with the same caregiver, that home may be paid for the entire month, and preserve Title IV-E eligibility.

How has the foster care licensing process been modified during the COVID-19 response?

The latest information about COVID-19 and licensing is available [here](#).

In accordance with the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act (Stafford Act) and [Proclamation on Declaring a National Emergency Concerning the Novel Coronavirus Disease \(COVID-19\) Outbreak](#), the [Children's Bureau has approved flexibility to meet specific Title IV-E requirements](#), including the opportunity to issue a provisional license for a foster family home that is provisionally or conditionally approved or licensed, if the declared major disaster precludes full completion of the licensing process. The Title IV-E agency must complete as many of the requirements for licensure as practicable, taking into account local requirements related to physical/social distancing guidelines, shelter in place orders, and ensure that a foster family home is safe for children. The Title IV-E agency must complete any remaining licensing requirement as soon as it is safe to do so, in accordance with local and state health authorities. When an otherwise eligible child is placed in a home with a provisional license due to COVID-19, Title IV-E claiming is allowed.

The Minnesota Department of Human Services (department) has not created a separate provisional license, however, has approved peacetime emergency waivers to facilitate completion of the licensing process, as follows:

- Orientation training may be condensed to less than six hours. Training about reducing the risk of sudden unexpected infant death and abusive head trauma is online.
- Child passenger restraint systems training is not required during the peacetime emergency. Caregivers must review online information on the federal [National Highway Traffic Safety Administration website](#), and watch the “How to choose the right car seat” video, as well as car seat installation instruction videos for each type of car seat they will be using, based on age and size of child/children they are transporting.
- At least one license holder in the home must complete two hours of mental health training prior to the nonemergency placement of a child in a foster home.
- If it is not possible to complete the home safety checklist in person, remote technologies may be used.
- In-person interviews may be conducted virtually using remote technology.
- [Background studies requirements have been modified](#). Minnesota criminal history record checks and Child Abuse and Neglect Registries, including out-of-state maltreatment checks, will be completed. Emergency background studies can be completed without the fingerprint and photograph requirement.
 - Bulletin #20-68-23, [Title IV-E and Background Studies during the Peacetime Emergency](#) provides information for claiming Title IV-E foster care maintenance payments and background studies during the peacetime emergency.

Applicants/license holders who have emergency background studies should be aware that they will need to complete a fingerprint-based background study when the peacetime emergency ends, as well as any waived training.

Contact dhs.fostercarelicensing@state.mn.us for questions and consultation related to foster care licensing.

What resources are available to help foster parents?

MN ADOPT has a [COVID-19 Family Resource page](#) and provides personalized support and resource connections for foster, kinship and adoptive parents through the [HELP program](#).

The [Get help](#) webpage provides links to the general public for immediate needs such as: Worker support, financial assistance, housing support, child care support, food support, mental health, education, health care, safety, and travel restrictions. Many mental health providers are able to complete assessments and provide ongoing therapeutic services via online platforms.

When case managers learn from foster parents that their children’s needs and subsequent parenting responsibilities increased due to COVID-19, an immediate step is to complete a Minnesota Assessment of Parenting for Children and Youth (MAPCY) reassessment to capture changing needs of children and parenting. Contact Jody McElroy at 651-431-4730 or jody.mcelroy@state.mn.us for questions.

What are the current recommendations for modifying visitation and case plan services?

Minnesota's Children's Justice Initiative (CJI) provided [guidance during COVID-19](#), including considerations and recommendations.

Child protection agencies must continue to make reasonable [Minn. Stat. 260.012, 260C. 001, subd. 3, 260C.178] or active efforts. [Minn. Stat. 260.762] Agencies may need to reassess the needs of children and parents and make modifications to case plans to ensure they are provided what they need to meet needs.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, routine preventative health care is not readily available and the [requirement for a physical exam within 30 days of placement has been suspended](#).

For children placed in facilities licensed by the Minnesota Department of Corrections, each facility is required to have an approved plan for visitation based on COVID-19 concerns, including any restrictions. Contact the facility for its plan.

Contact dhs.csp.fostercare@state.mn.us for questions and consultation on case and permanency planning.

Can we finalize an adoption or transfer of permanent legal and physical custody (TPLPC) during the peacetime emergency?

Efforts towards permanency continue and adoptions and TPLPCs may be finalized if all requirements are met. The [emergency background studies waiver for licensing does not extend to adoption or Northstar Care for Children statutes](#); department staff cannot approve Adoption Placement Agreements, Northstar Adoption Assistance eligibility, or Northstar Kinship Assistance eligibility when emergency background studies are used. Courts were advised to not finalize adoptions or TPLPCs with emergency background studies. Contact northstar.benefits@state.mn.us for questions on adoption and kinship policy and consultation.

What flexibilities are available for youth in extended foster care not able to meet eligibility criteria due to the impact of COVID-19?

The Children's Bureau identified education and employment conditions for youth ages 18 and older as an administrative condition that may be modified under the Stafford Act authority for youth unable to fulfill this requirement as a direct result of the pandemic. Criteria for extended foster care include:

- 1) Completing secondary education or a program leading to an equivalent credential
- 2) Enrolled in an institution that provides post-secondary or vocational education
- 3) Participating in a program or activity designed to promote or remove barriers to employment
- 4) Employed for at least 80 hours per month, or
- 5) Incapable of doing any of the activities described in (1) to (4) due to a medical condition.

[\[Minn. Stat. 260C.451\]](#)

Department staff encourages agency staff to consider how COVID-19 impacts the above criteria, and determine continued eligibility as follows, youth:

- Meeting criteria under provisions (1) and (2) who are on break from school, continue to meet eligibility requirements.
- Continue to meet criteria under provision (3) if there is suspension of programs or activities, and other barriers due to COVID-19 as long as they locate on-line activities that meet criteria
- Are not able to meet criteria under provision (4) due to temporary closure of businesses, or lack of hours, should be encouraged to apply for unemployment benefits, and consider meeting criteria under provision (3).

Contact dhs_csp_adolescents@state.mn.us for questions and consultation regarding extended foster care.