

State of New Mexico CHILDREN, YOUTH and FAMILIES DEPARTMENT

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Dear Caregiver,

Thank you for your continued diligence in keeping children and youth safe during this public health emergency.

We have received questions about visits of all types from you and we'd like to go through some of our current protections when it comes to visits. Please remember that as this unfolds, your Caseworker is here to help answer any and all of your questions or to forward those as needed to county office staff. Please continue to utilize them as your primary point of contact, however, we fully intend to communicate regularly with you all as well, especially when changes occur.

Please also continue to utilize the New Mexico Department of Health's excellent and continually updated website for non-symptom-related COVID-19-related information. That website is <https://cv.nmhealth.org/>. The Department of Health also has an informational phone line on COVID-19. That phone number is 1-833-551-0518.

Caseworker monthly home visits to children and to foster homes are changing for the foreseeable future during the ongoing crisis. We are moving to video conference calls for these visits effective immediately. This is to ensure that caseworkers can see the child. Thus, telephone calls will not be used to replace home visits.

There are some exceptions to video conferencing. These may include:

- When foster homes do not have video conferencing technology;
 - *Federal law does not permit phone visits to replace visual assurances of child safety in this case, thus, these visits will need to occur in person;*
- The child was placed in the home within the last 30 days,
- The child is on a trial home visit;
- The child is in a home where the capacity is over six (6) total children who are in foster care;
- The child is in a home that is provisionally licensed;
- There is an incident report on the foster home within the last 30 days;
- There is a current safety concern or should one arise during a video conference visit.

As of today, visits between children and biological families will continue to take place. These are court-mandated visits. CYFD is implementing some very important modifications to the visit protocol:

- CYFD is working with courts on a protocol for screening participants for COVID-19 safety concerns prior to scheduling in-person visits.
 - If it is determined unsafe to visit in person due to COVID-19 exposure risk or due to illness, CYFD will work with the court to arrange video conference visits or to temporarily suspend these visits due to these health concerns.
 - If it is determined safe for the visits to take place, staff have been given clear direction on conducting those visits safely using hygiene and social distancing protocols.
- Staff are advised to arrange family visits to occur outdoors, such as in parks that do not have playground equipment.
- The exception to meeting outdoors will be when non-COVID-related safety or general health risks are identified.
 - In those cases, CYFD will arrange for visits at our offices and visitation rooms. All waiting, visitation and common areas are being thoroughly cleaned in between visits.

In-person visits between caseworkers and biological families in their homes are temporarily suspended. These will be conducted either by telephone or by video conference.

Beginning Monday, March 23rd, most CYFD offices will be closed to walk-in visitors. In exceptional cases where client visits must take place in offices, those visits will be scheduled with CYFD staff. Staff were instructed to ensure that no two families are in office waiting rooms at the same time. CYFD offices, including lobbies/waiting areas and visitation rooms, are being sanitized and cleaned before and after every visit. Screening for COVID-19 risk factors will occur prior to each visit.

We have received a lot of feedback arguing for more visits because of the risk some children may face by not going to school. We have also received concerns from some people asking for fewer visits. We want to acknowledge these competing priorities and to assure you we are weighing all concerns heavily and considering everyone's needs as we continue to reassess our daily work. We have been balancing the importance of seeing those children in-person to ensure their safety and well-being with the increased restrictions caused by the current pandemic. For all of the above directions, CYFD has consulted closely with the New Mexico Department of Health, the Governor's office, and federal child welfare liaisons and will continue to do so.

Thank you all, again, for all of the many things you do daily to support the children and youth in your care. We deeply appreciate your continued commitment to helping maintain vital psychological and emotional connections for children and their biological relatives during this time of heightened worry we are all enduring.

Sincerely,

Brian Blalock
Cabinet Secretary
New Mexico Children, Youth and Families Department