

Coronavirus Q&A Webinar #2 with DCFS Acting Director Marc Smith

Video Recording (March 23, 2020): <https://vimeo.com/400333462>

DCFS Acting Director Marc Smith:

Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you all for joining us on this call today. It's incredibly important that we communicate with each other throughout this crisis, as all of us are concerned about COVID-19 and how it impacts the safety of our staff and our children that we're keeping safe. As we begin this conversation, I want to make it clear that every decision we're making is taking multiple things into consideration.

The most and first priority that we're taking is how do we ensure the safety of the children that we serve? And as we're doing that, we're balancing the safety of our staff and your staff because it is critical that they feel supported through this very challenging time. Every decision that we make, we try to make a balance between those things.

As the entity of child protection in this state, it's our responsibility to make sure that we try to have foresight around where our kids are going to be as safe as they can possibly be during this crisis, and where are areas in which they're most vulnerable. And as we're making our decisions, I'm trying very aggressively to have a measured response to both of those areas. As I look at our kids who are at home with their parents, I recognize that this is an extraordinarily stressful time for families. And I think once we have families who we've engaged here at DCFS, and they've been indicated for abuse and neglect, and we made a determination that they should be home with their parents. We know that this is a critical time in their lives, and that our presence in their lives, our presence in their homes, is irreplaceable. Because of the support that we bring to those families, our capacity to maintain our role in child safety in those areas are critical to the mission of this agency.

The work that our partners do in child protection is critical to the safety and well-being of the citizens of Illinois. In those two areas. We are going to do everything we can to maintain a presence to support our children and families. And we have the right staff with the right passion and the right dedication to get that work done. We have foster parents who we trust with the lives of our children and families, and they are our bottom safety net, to ensure those kids are cared for. As we developed our protocols, we took that into consideration and really made an aggressive lean in towards our capacity for tele-visitation. We trust that our foster parents are doing the right thing. And they're supporting and caring for our children. We know that our case management team and our social workers can work with those families through tele-visitation, to maintain support for those families during these challenging times and work to ensure that they're going to be okay with the capacity to go out and support those families as necessary, as needed. If we see a safety concern, ultimately it is our responsibility to make sure that we are present in those homes.

Our decisions around daycare and childcare are consistent with the strategies of the state of Illinois, while still giving us the flexibility to give our daycare partners the support through licensing that they need. The most critical point to make sure that every decision we make is around what's the best model of safety for the children that we serve. I am dedicated to that vision. When I first assumed this role, people asked me what my primary concern was: Safety is it in this challenging time, and that still is my primary concern. The safety of our children, the safety and support of our families, and the safety of our staff. The reason why I wanted to make sure that I spoke about that in this conversation today was so as you think, and receive guidance from DCFS you understand clearly that every decision that we're making is how we are best equipped at this time to make sure we're addressing the safety of our kids.

We know that there are many questions regarding how this virus is impacting operations and yours. All of the health and human service agencies across the state continue to meet daily with the directors and our chief of staff. And we are meeting regularly and closely with the Illinois Department of Public Health and the Emergency Management Agency. These partnerships are critical to our decision making and our work and want to say publicly that I have felt incredibly supported by our sister agencies through this very trying time. And I feel that the information that we receive and the support that we received from our sister agencies has been excellent. And I want to make sure that we continue to acknowledge that level of work.

Last time we spoke, the Governor had just announced that the state of Illinois employees would be moving staff to work from home. Now we are working under an executive order to shelter at home, unless we are performing essential tasks. It was critical for me to ensure that our work and the private and public sector was acknowledged by the governor and by the state of Illinois as essential services. We take our work seriously. We know the level of impact that our staff have with children and families around safety and care. It is absolutely an essential role. And I am very proud that that was put into the language. And all of our hard work was acknowledged, and you should be proud too.

The dynamic nature of this outbreak requires us to be nimble in how we respond. There are changes that are happening every day. And it is critical that as these changes happen, that we as a system are able to respond and be agile in those responses. I have talked to many of you since our last call. I've listened to your questions and your suggestions, and I thank you for your support. And I will continue to reach out to you as this crisis goes on, and even after. Our partnership, our discussions help inform our work. Never feel that this department is not interested in your feedback. I appreciate all of the efforts that ICOY and our individual partners are making to make sure they communicate ideas to DCFS. Many of those ideas we've thought of, and we are working on, and some of the ideas and perspectives are new, and we use that information to move our business forward. So, we appreciate your input, we respect your input, and we support your input, and we thank you for that.

There are over 70 questions that have been given to our agency. We have addressed many of these questions on the Dnet. We have decided that this is the best place for us to make sure that we answer as many questions as possible in real time. We know that in order for us to move forward, you need the best possible information as quickly and as thoughtfully as possible and we feel like putting them in writing and making them available to you on the Dnet meets that mandate. **Today, I will highlight a few of those questions and a few of these answers. Please continue to submit your questions and we will get them answered as soon as possible.**

DCFS has had a COVID-19 page available from the homepage of our website. This content is also mirrored on our Dnet page, as well as additional information. Please take your time and go through that page. There are many links available to our partner agencies with tremendous information regarding how we address this issue, and different policies and protocols and procedures that get into more detail. Please take your time and go through the work that's available on the Dnet.

DCFS puts out updated facts for Child Welfare staff and agencies. The fact document is being updated daily to reflect the new questions we receive every day. We will make every attempt to continue to update documents daily as we receive new questions.

On March 18, DCFS sent out guidance to staff from DCFS Medical Director regarding when staff should decide to stay home. This Department also sent out a guidance memo by email to all DCFS and POS outlining when to replace in-person visits with video or phone contact. It is also provided emergency contacts within the Department of Operations that you can reach out to 24-7 if staff had COVID-19 questions related to delivering services.

Last week, Illinois launched a new website detailing the state's evolving response to COVID-19 and resources available to Illinois' residents and businesses during this challenging time: Coronavirus.illinois.gov.

As you all know, Governor Pritzker issued an executive order Friday afternoon, March 20, requiring all Illinoisans to stay in their homes to prevent the further spread of COVID-19. This executive order exempts all child protection and child welfare staff, both at DCFS and in the private sector. The businesses that provide essential services to the child welfare sector are also exempt. All services necessary for DCFS to provide for or support the health safety and welfare of children and families in the state of Illinois will continue to operate. Immediately following the governor's announcement, I issued a memo to all staff, both private and DCFS, outlining that they are all exempt from this order and viewed as essential staff.

On Friday, March 20, I issued a memo outlining new guidelines modifications to in-person contact requirements for caseworkers in the light of this executive order. This memo is to be used to guide direct service staff in the fulfillment of their work duties, while also ensuring safety and well-being of our staff, as well as the children and families we serve. This email was sent to all POS and DCFS staff, and is available on the Dnet and on the DCFS website.

We are committed to supporting the private agencies who have who have diminished or suspended non-essential services. I designated our financial division has an essential service to ensure that payments continue so all of our agency partners can meet their obligations in maintaining essential services. On March 20, I sent out notifications to all our contracted providers with an important update on budget principles we hope will provide relief and reassurance to you as we move forward. We know everyone is concerned about the shortage and availability of protective gear for staff. DCFS is making every effort to acquire gloves, mask, hand sanitizer, and other protective gear in bulk quantities. DCFS has been able to secure additional gloves that we will be sharing with Foster and Intact partners. We sent out messages today to all DCFS and POS staff outlining the process for the process for requesting gloves and other additional protective gear.

Last week DCFS sent out recommended guidance to teen parenting service network for supporting youth who are pregnant and those who will deliver soon. The message can be downloaded from the DCFS website. On March 20, I issued a memo to childcare providers notifying them that they will not be financially penalized if they slow or stop services during this emergency. From today through mid-April, and longer if needed, in the event that fee for service billing childcare enrollment forms are less than normal, DCFS is committed to providing funding to make up the lost revenues from reduced billing to ensure the preservation of Illinois social service delivery systems and safety nets. Critically, staff who work for your organizations/entities should continue to be paid. The memo can be downloaded from the DCFS website. In response to the unprecedented public health emergency that Illinois is facing as a result of the spread of COVID-19, Governor Pritzker has mandated the closure of childcare centers, childcare homes, and early educational programs. In response, DCFS issued an emergency rule and policy transmittal, allowing emergency daycare programs to serve essential and critical care workers as defined by the governor's executive order. These steps were taken to ensure the continued childcare services for those who provide essential and critical care to our communities. The policy transmittal, and application for emergency daycare programming and related frequently asked questions and an overview of the document, can be reviewed on the DCFS website. For further clarifications, or questions, please email emergency.daycare@illinois.gov.

Today's announcement by the Governor: Essential Equipment Alliance, a group of companies in Illinois retooling their operations to begin working together on mask, gloves, and other protective equipment, is working with IDPH to ensure everyone has the gear that they need. The Governor has also asked places like tattoo parlors and nail salons if they are willing to donate their supplies, since they are closed and have their own stockpiles. This is an indication of the work that we are doing together across the state. We are partners with the private sector. We are one agency.

There is no question that whatever supplies that we have at DCFS we will insure our shared with the private sector to the best of our ability. I am absolutely clear that unless we all work together, children cannot be safe. I want to thank everybody for their time and for their attention to this information. Again, please if you have further questions, reach out to us and we will get them answered as quickly and as thoughtfully as possible.

ICOY CEO Andrea Durbin

Thank you, Director Smith, I appreciate your time. So, to be clear, the answers are posted both on the Dnet and the DCFS homepage, which doesn't require Dnet access. If you have any questions that have *not* been answered, as the Director said, please carefully peruse the Dnet and DCFS website because I know there's been a massive amount of information and FAQs shared on those sites.

If you can't find the answer to your question, use the bit.ly/COVID19-Questions . You can log your questions there and ICOY will send those to DCFS almost daily. Thank you, everybody. **We'll have this call again on Monday, March 30 at 4pm.**

If you have additional field-specific questions for DCFS around coronavirus, please [submit them here](#).

DCFS will hold a standing listen-only webinar every Monday at 4 pm to address submitted questions and deliver updates. The next webinar will be on **Monday, March 30 at 4 pm**. [You can register for that here](#).