



DCF's COVID-19 efforts on behalf of staff health & wellness

On March 9, 2020, Governor Phil Murphy responded to the COVID-19 pandemic by issuing an Executive Order directing all New Jersey residents to stay home, closing schools and non-essential businesses and cancelling all gatherings. DCF was significantly impacted by the shut-down order: we temporarily closed 46 Local Offices, restricted access to nine Area Offices, and moved 16 regional schools and two DCF-operated, hospital-based satellite schools to remote learning. Practices and policies that guide daily contact with children and families, staff, and community providers were modified, and the majority of DCF staff were quickly transitioned to remote work.

Almost immediately following the shutdown, DCF created a COVID-19 web-base and a [specific staff page](#) with resources and information designed to support remote work. In addition, leadership worked with the DCF Office of Human Resources (OHR) to create a [Work from Home Resource page](#) and a [Work from Home Policy](#). Recognizing the stress and anxiety COVID-19 created among the workforce, we also created a [Mindfulness page](#), with links to helpful staff supports. Shortly thereafter, OHR issued [Close/Casual Contact Notification Protocols](#) (Notification Protocols). Collaborating closely with a departmentwide workgroup, that included the Office of Facilities and Support Services (OFSS), OHR also developed and distributed [Building Entry Protocols](#) requiring anyone entering an open DCF work location to undergo a temperature check and answer a series of screening questions. The department procured daily cleaning services to make sure that state vehicles and high touch points, including elevator buttons and door handles are cleaned frequently throughout the day. Each of these policies and practices continues to be revised and reissued as necessary.

As important as our work is, we cannot function in a totally remote environment. Critical functions performed by staff in Centralized Screening, Facilities and Support Services, Information Technology, Human Resources, and others meant that certain staff continued to report to DCF office locations to support the necessary critical mission work of the department. In addition, we established COVID-19 emergency response teams to continue to respond to child protective service investigations and to complete necessary home visits on priority cases. We also developed plans to establish telephone and video conferencing access in lieu of in-person visits between parents and children, children and their siblings, and caseworkers and families. The Children's System of Care (CSOC), which serves children and youth with emotional and behavioral health care challenges and their families, also suspended intakes to its out-of-home settings. Once it was permitted by state legislation, DCF authorized the use of telemedicine and telehealth services by many outpatient, in-home, and community-based programs.

While managing these necessary changes to operations, DCF took steps to enhance and support the safety of families, staff, and service providers by securing Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), contacting congregate care providers to monitor the incidence of COVID-19 among residents and staff, and

disseminating emergency COVID-19 guidance. DCF also issued a moratorium on youth aging out of foster care through December 2020, so they could continue to receive services and funding even after they turn 21.

In June 2020, Governor Murphy lifted the stay-at-home order, and DCF initiated actions to resume in-person contact with children and families. In July 2020, DCF returned to field work.

We have learned a lot in the past nine months and our efforts to keep our staff and the individuals we serve safe continue unabated. We are constantly reviewing the latest information coming from the federal Centers for Disease Prevention and Control and Prevention (CDC), the New Jersey Department of Health (NJDOH), the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and other sources of information to ensure that our policies and guidelines are current.