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## MEMORANDUM

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*June 16, 2020*

*To:* Governors' Offices  
*From:* National Governors Association  
*Re:* Addressing the decline in child abuse reports and supporting child well-being

### **Background**

Many governors have noted widespread concern about reduced reporting of child abuse and neglect during stay-at-home orders related to the COVID-19 pandemic. With schools closed and other mandatory reporters of child abuse and neglect operating with limited capacity in many states, some states have seen [reports of child abuse decline by 20-70 percent](#). In addition to children being less likely to encounter mandated reporters, families may be experiencing increased stress due to wage or job loss and may be spending additional, unstructured time together. Many governors have raised concerns that child abuse or neglect may go unnoticed by state agencies while schools and businesses remain closed. However, little is known about the types of cases that are currently being reported to state child welfare agencies.

Governors are invested in ensuring the safety and well-being of the children in their state. [Research supports](#) that children are best served in their families and home communities. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for supports for families and communities to ensure the wellbeing of children. Many of the communities that are most impacted by the spread of COVID-19 are the same communities where additional supports can help ensure that families are able to remain safely together. As states move toward reopening and recovery, governors have many opportunities to leverage state and federal funding to prevent child abuse and neglect and support the well-being of children, youth, families, and the communities where they live. These include expanding concrete supports, targeting supports and services toward families and communities with the highest needs, providing support for the child welfare workforce, and ensuring cross-agency collaboration to meet the needs of children and families.

**Expanding concrete supports.** Concrete supports, like healthcare and food, housing and cash assistance, can help families meet basic needs, mitigate family stress and support family resiliency. The CARES Act and the Families First Coronavirus Relief Act included many provisions to support states in helping families meet these concrete needs.

- **Food assistance:** 39 states and the District of Columbia have [approved Pandemic-EBT \(P-EBT\) waivers](#) from the Food and Nutrition Service. Under P-EBT waivers, states may issue temporary emergency standards of eligibility and levels of benefits to families whose children received free or reduced-price meals through their schools. In addition, all 50 states received [COVID-19 waivers](#) to issue emergency allotments to households receiving SNAP, and 31 states have acknowledged extensions through June.



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- **Housing assistance:** Many governors have issued temporary moratoriums on evictions, foreclosures, and utility disconnections, and others are using state and federal funding to expand emergency rental and mortgage assistance programs. For example, **Iowa** Governor Kim Reynolds [allocated CARES Act funding](#) to provide short-term relief to income-eligible renters and homeowners at risk of foreclosure or eviction.
- **Cash assistance:** Many states have increased flexibility in the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) by temporarily suspending work and education participation requirements for current TANF recipients. In addition, many states including [West Virginia](#), [Virginia](#), [Tennessee](#), [California](#), [Maine](#), and [Washington](#) extended short term emergency cash payments to families not already receiving TANF.

**Targeting supports and services toward families and communities with the highest needs.**

With decreased hotline calls due to business and school closures, governors can use data to direct supports and services toward communities with higher historical levels of abuse or neglect. Federal funding for prevention services is available through both the [Family First Prevention Services Act \(FFPSA\)](#) of 2018 and the 2019 [Family First Transition Act, and Title IV-B of the Social Security Act](#). FFPSA provides federal funding for essential prevention services to children and parents through evidence-based mental health services, substance use prevention and treatment services, and parenting skills building to prevent children from entering foster care. Funding is also available through the [Community Based Child Abuse Prevention \(CB-CAP\)](#) under the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act to support community-based organizations focusing on child abuse prevention. Gubernatorial leadership and coordination of funding can build state capacity to help support and strengthen families within their communities.

- **Using data to identify communities:** States may consider directing caseworker staff to provide services in communities with the highest levels of need. For example, [Michigan](#) conducted check-in phone calls with families that had received a Child Protective Services investigation at the start of the year whose cases were deemed low to moderate risk. In addition, the state redirected child abuse hotline workers to provide supportive services to the six zip codes in the state with the highest historical substantiated child abuse reports.

**Providing support for the child welfare workforce.** Many states have prioritized child welfare agencies to ensure access to personal protective equipment (PPE) and other safety measures. Designating child welfare staff and providers as essential workers may expedite safety precautions and allow access to specific federal funds. In addition, technology and equipment such as laptops and cell phones can help support workers in safely managing their caseloads. [Executive orders](#) in Alaska, Arizona, California, Connecticut, Delaware, the District of Columbia, Guam, Hawaii, Idaho, Indiana, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Montana, New Hampshire, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, West Virginia, and Wisconsin list state child welfare and child protection agencies as essential government functions that are to remain in operation during the current coronavirus pandemic.

**Ensuring cross-agency collaboration.** Many states have prioritized cross-agency collaboration to ensure the health and well-being of their residents during the COVID-19 pandemic. By coordinating across the state child protection agency and other systems including health, public health, substance abuse, mental health, domestic violence, housing and others, states can help ensure the coordination of essential services to holistically support families and maximize the use of federal, state and local resources. For example, **Tennessee** Governor Bill Lee created a [COVID-](#)



[19 Child Well-being Task Force](#) chaired by the Department of Education and charged with supporting local leaders and communities in caring for students, particularly those who are vulnerable or most at risk.

**Additional opportunities for governors to support child and family wellbeing.** In addition to working to prevent child abuse and neglect throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond, many states are working to meet the needs of children and families who are already involved in the child welfare system. Strategies include supporting virtual and safe in-person visitation among families whose children are in foster care, leveraging technology so that family courts may continue proceedings, supporting older youth, and limiting the use of group care facilities.

- **Visitation:** For many children and families in foster care, COVID-19 has led to limited, virtual, or temporarily suspended visitation, which can be especially difficult for families with young children and can cause delays in family reunification. Many states are maximizing safe, frequent and meaningful contact for children in foster care with their parents and siblings to reduce trauma for children. For example, [California](#) required family visitation to continue based on a case-by-case approach and issued a rule prohibiting blanket suspensions of family visitation.
- **Supporting family courts:** In many states, court closures due to COVID-19 have caused delays in reunification of children with their families or movement to other permanent families, and have created backlogs that threaten to overwhelm judicial and child welfare systems. Several state courts have worked to connect parties virtually for hearings, avoid continuances, communicate and coordinate with child welfare agencies, and adopt technology and protocols for remote hearings. For example, [Arkansas](#) [offered court hearings through videoconferencing](#) and distributed phones to local state offices with videoconferencing capability for parents to use on state-provided Wi-Fi so that parents are able to participate in court hearings with limited in-person contact.
- **Supporting older youth<sup>1</sup>:** Young people who age out of foster care often face significant challenges in meeting their needs for health care, education, employment, housing, and emotional support. This transition is difficult at any time but is especially difficult with the closure of many businesses and institutions of higher education due to COVID-19. Many governors have temporarily allowed extended foster care services to youth during and beyond the pandemic, as well as extending additional housing and other supports to young people who age out of foster care. For example, [Alaska](#) extended services to youth aging out of foster care including assistance with housing, food, unemployment, mental health and medical care and casework support.
- **Limiting group care:** Young people who are confined in group care remain disconnected from their families and at greater risk of coronavirus spread. [Research shows](#) that congregate care is not only the most expensive type of care, but also that inappropriate or prolonged placements in congregate care can be harmful and place more youth at risk of physical abuse, dropping out of high school, or exposure to sex trafficking. By expediting reunification with family or placement in family-based care for children in group settings during COVID-19, states can

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<sup>1</sup> The CARES Act provided \$14 billion for colleges and universities, with nearly half of the funding to be given to students to help deal with expenses such as food, housing, technology, and health care caused by campus disruptions due to COVID-19 closures. Funding through HUD's Family Unification Program, Foster Youth to Independence Initiative, the Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood, the Runaway and Homeless Youth Program, and FEMA can support rental and housing assistance along with other purposes.



protect their health, minimize the harm of separation, and re-invest spending to less restrictive care and services.

**Additional Resources**

[NGA Memo Tracking State Human Services Actions and Initiatives on COVID-19](#)

[NGA Memo on Addressing Food and Financial Insecurity](#)

[NCSL COVID 19: Child Welfare Resources](#)

[Virtual Case Management Considerations and Resources for Human Services Programs](#)

[COVID-19 and Child Welfare Cases](#) (Webinar recording)

[Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Information, News, & Resources for Child Welfare Professionals and Others](#), Child Welfare League of America

[Child Welfare Information Gateway](#)

*For questions or concerns related to the contents of this memo, please contact NGA staff:*

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