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April 20, 2020

Ken Schatz, Commissioner
Department for Children and Families
280 State Drive, HC 1 North
Waterbury, VT 05671-1080

Dear Commissioner Schatz,

As you know, the House Committee on Human Services has spent considerable time in the last few weeks taking testimony and engaging in discussions regarding compliance with parent-child contact orders regarding children in need of care or supervision during the current declared state of emergency.

The Committee understands the tremendous pressure you and your staff are under and the extraordinary steps you are taking to see that children who are in the custody of DCF are safe and well-cared for during the COVID-19 outbreak. While our committee believes that the safest approach for everyone during the state of emergency is to replace in-person contact with remote or virtual visits as recommended by Vermont Department of Health Commissioner Levine on March 25, 2020, we understand there may be some instances, taken on a case-by-case basis, where in-person contact may be critical to staying on the path to family reunification and can be effectuated in a safe manner.

To this end, we ask that DCF use the Vermont Department of Health's most recent guidance regarding COVID-19 best practices to develop specific written guidance for DCF staff, foster parents, natural parents, and others who may participate in or facilitate in-person parent-child contact during the declared state of emergency. Guidance should address, at a minimum, social distancing, use of protective gear, and safe transport of children to and from visits. We hope that this guidance can create uniformity throughout the State among child protection workers and the courts regarding the safest way to protect children and families during this vulnerable time. The guidance should be widely available and revised frequently in accordance with the latest guidance from DOH.

Again, thank you for everything you and your staff are doing to keep Vermont's children and families safe during this unprecedented time. Please let us know how we can aid in this common goal.

Sincerely,

Representative Ann Pugh, Chair
House Committee on Human Services