

MEMORANDUM

FROM: Mark A. Levine, MD, Commissioner 

DATE: March 25, 2020

SUBJECT: Recommendation of Vermont Department of Health regarding In-person contact between parents and children in CHINS proceedings

This recommendation concerns in-person contact, as ordered by Superior Court judges, between parents and their children in CHINS (Child in Need of Care and Protection) cases in Vermont's juvenile court.

I am informed that in order for this court-ordered contact to take place, at least four different individuals are involved in the contact: the child, the biological parent, the foster parent, and the contact supervisor. Because contracted contact supervisors have refused to provide in-person contact, all contact requiring supervision now requires oversight from the Department for Children and Families (DCF) Family Services Worker. All those involved in the contact risk potential exposure to the COVID-19 which now has community spread throughout Vermont. This potential exposure could then be passed along to three different households: the foster family's household, the biological parent's household, and the Family Services Worker's household.

Commissioner Schatz has reported to me that over the past week, DCF's Family Services Division has worked with approximately 900 families to try to reach voluntary agreements allowing for remote contact (via telephonic and videoconferencing means) in place of in-person/face-to-face contact. Now, all but approximately 30 families have now agreed to temporarily (for the duration of the State's emergency orders related to COVID-19) have contact with their children through remote means instead of via face-to-face/in-person contact.

Given the Governor's March 24, 2020, "Stay Home/Stay Safe" Addendum 6 to Executive Order 01-20 that further restricts reasons for which most Vermonters may leave their homes, it is imperative that the exposure risk to all of the people involved in the possible continued exposure to COVID-19 through court-ordered in-person parent-child contact be immediately mitigated through measures to replace in-person contact with remote contact.





The Department of Health has already recommended suspending all face-to-face contact for non-essential services, consistent with the intent of the Governor's relevant Orders. Due to the need to protect all Vermonters, I recommend that in-person parent-child contact, as ordered in CHINS cases, be temporarily suspended and that the DCF work with parents and foster parents to provide remote or virtual visit options for those families until such time the Governor rescinds Order 01-20 and its addenda.

