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# CYFD to Increase the Use of Phone, Video Visits with Children The Department Aims to Help #Flattenthecurve of COVID-19 Infection in New Mexico

***For Immediate Release: Melody Wells, Public Information Officer***
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**CYFD Steps Up COVID-19 Precautions Across All Divisions**
*The Department Aims to Help #Flattenthecurve of COVID-19 Infection in New Mexico*

**SANTA FE** - The State's Children, Youth and Families Department (CYFD), in an advanced precautionary step, will conduct more of its visits for youth via phone or video, the Department said Friday. The move was enacted immediately.

"While we know of no increased danger for children, youth or their families as of today, CYFD is pursing every opportunity possible to safely limit physical contact while maintaining connection," CYFD Cabinet Secretary Brian Blalock said. "We will be moving to video visits as our primary visitation tool to strengthen our efforts as an agency to 'flatten the curve.'"

As of Friday, the CYFD Caseworkers' visits with children and youth in foster care will take place via video conference as often as possible, dependent upon safety concerns and the individual families' technological capabilities.

Visits for children and youth with their biological families are court-ordered. CYFD is working with courts on a protocol for screening participants for COVID-19 safety concerns prior to scheduling in-person visits. Staff have clear direction on conducting those visits safely using hygiene and social distancing protocols. If it is determined unsafe, due to illness, to visit in person, CYFD will work with the court to arrange video conference visits or to temporarily suspend these visits due to health concerns.

All visits for youth in juvenile justice facilities will be conducted via telephone. The Department is exploring ways to implement video calls for youth in facilities. In-person visitation at juvenile justice facilities has been temporarily suspended. Juvenile Justice staff that provide services in the community are only conducting home visits in very limited circumstances and will move all other communication to video calls and other technology. Visits in other congregate care facilities, such as youth shelters and residential treatment centers, will be conducted via video conference barring any compelling reasons, such as safety concerns.

Beginning Monday, March 23rd, most CYFD offices will be closed to walk-in visitors. In exceptional cases where client visits must take place in offices, those visits will be scheduled with CYFD staff. Staff were instructed to ensure that no two families are in office waiting rooms at the same time.

CYFD offices, including lobbies/waiting areas and visitation rooms, are being sanitized and cleaned before and after every visit. Screening for COVID-19 risk factors will occur prior to each visit.

The Agency is also making visits with children who are in care out of state an increased priority. "We're making sure our staff are visiting more frequently – the goal is at least twice a week - with children who are in care out of state," Secretary Blalock said. They are working to conduct the first video visits with 100% of children and youth who remain in treatment facilities outside of the state by the end of next week.

For all of the above, CYFD has consulted closely with the New Mexico Department of Health, the Governor's office, and federal child welfare liaisons and will continue to do so. "Many of these steps are ones that other states (that are further along in the virus' spread) have taken in recent days," Secretary Blalock said.

CYFD weighted heavily the input from young people, families, providers and staff members. "We are walking a difficult tightrope with regard to competing priorities - ensuring children and families maintain important and appropriate communication while safeguarding them from both abuse and neglect and the spread of COVID-19," said Secretary Blalock. "Some of our constituents are asking for more visits and an increased presence in the community due to concerns that some children and youth are more vulnerable to abuse, neglect and domestic violence when schools are closed," he said. "Some constituents are asking for less. This situation continues to evolve, and we want everyone to know we take their concerns very seriously and discuss them constantly as we continue to reassess the measures we are taking and our mission as an agency."

"We're in this with every New Mexican," Secretary Blalock said. "And as an agency charged with safeguarding our most vulnerable children, youth and families, we're doing our part in combating this pandemic," Blalock said. "We also urge everyone in our community to stay at home, sanitize your surfaces, continue to wash your hands and take care of yourselves. Together, we can #flattenthecurve and protect those most vulnerable to this virus."

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