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Youth Courts, CPS work to keep parents and children connected

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While COVID-19 has forced most families to spend time together at home, Youth Courts and Child Protection Services have worked to make sure that children in temporary foster care don't experience further separation as safety measures against the coronavirus curtail in person visits with their biological parents.

The Hancock County Youth Court set up virtual visits via computer tablets to keep families connected. It can't replace face to face visitation, but it's the next best thing.

Hancock County Youth Court Judge Trent Favre said, "It is extremely important to maintain contact between the family, the parents and the children."

Parents and foster parents needed to avoid the risks of contracting the virus. Video communications allowed visitation without direct contact. “It’s a good, safe way to maintain contact during this time, and be respectful of the rights of foster parents,” Judge Favre said.

Lisa Wilbourn, director of Brenda’s House Family Center in Hancock County, started the virtual visitation after she saw a webinar. Wilbourn purchased eight inexpensive tablets. Biological families had previously exercised supervised visitation under the direction of a social worker and trained staff at the Brenda’s House facility. The tablets were issued to foster families with whom the children live. Now a Brenda’s House social worker remotely sets up and monitors virtual visits between the children and their biological families.

The children are those who have been temporarily removed from the custody of their parents due to allegations of neglect or abuse. The Youth Courts and Child Protection Services strive to reunite families if parents are able to provide a safe home environment and make changes ordered by the Youth Court.

“The whole purpose behind supervised visits is to allow families to maintain that bond and attachment,” said Wilbourn, a licensed professional counselor. Being able to see their children may motivate parents to make the changes that the Youth Court requires for reunification.

“Obviously with everything that is going on, we had to try to think outside the box to ensure that visitation continued as much as possible,” Wilbourn said. “Even when we go back to normal, this may be a way for parents who can’t make it here due to transportation or other issues” to visit with their children.

The Access to Justice Commission is seeking funding to purchase tablets to assist with virtual visitation in other counties. Access to Justice Executive Director Nicole McLaughlin said the hope is to provide children with devices which could aid them in distance learning as well as allow them to video chat with family. “School age students in foster care are so disadvantaged already. We want to provide them something not only for court access but for education purposes,” McLaughlin said.

Rankin County Youth Court Judge Thomas Broome said many parents and foster parents are using their own tablets and phones to help facilitate virtual visitation. Child Protection Services social workers set up virtual visits using their state-issued cellular phones.

Department of Child Protection Services Director of Communications Lea Anne Brandon said, “Our caseworkers are assisting all of the families on their caseload to facilitate virtual visits with foster children whenever face-to-face isn’t possible or recommended. If technology is an issue, every caseworker has an iPhone and a tablet/computer they can make available. Their phones are Wi-Fi hot spots. They have Zoom, Facetime and Skype apps available on their phones. We have

also shared low-cost cell phone and internet service options with all of our foster parents to facilitate connectivity."

Brandon said visits between children and their families have increased through virtual visitation.

Judge Favre said being forced to use Zoom for court hearings and virtual visitation for parents and children introduced the court to technology that will be useful for the future. He sees potential applications to allow participation in court hearings by parents who have no transportation or who can't take off work.

"Technology has made it easier for people to provide information to the Court so the Court can make good decisions," Judge Favre said. "We may return to our regular way of doing things, but we might find using technology may help more people involved to participate. My philosophy is the more information that I have, the better decision I can make."

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