

**Statewide Foster Care Advisory Council
 May 18, 2020
 Conference Call
 12:30 p.m. – 1:00 p.m.
 SPECIAL MEETING MINUTES**

SWFCAC MEMBERS PRESENT	SWFCAC MEMBERS ABSENT	GUESTS	STAFF
Gladys Boyd	Katy Cotts	Diana Blackburn	Janet Ahern
Kimberly Coniglio	Rachel Hoyt	Eileen Curto	Jason Cummins
Arrelda Hall	Ken Keefe	Debbie Freke	Gwenn Eyer
Harriet Kersh	Kellye Norris	Sheila Krogh	Shelle Fecht
Maya Maclin	Susan McConnell	Erin Lessner	Lori Gray
Kate Monte	Samella Taylor-Lewis	Jeannie Masa	Michelle Grove
Mary Savage		Becky Michl	
Carol Sheley		Solange Morissette	
Stephanie Tesreau		Bethany Paternoga	
		Allison Smith	
		Rebecca Thomas	
		Arlene Woods	

Due to the council chairperson’s delay and the absence of the vice chairperson, Gwenn Eyer opened the call, welcoming participants and collecting attendee names as people called in.

Gwenn stated The Statewide Foster Care Advisory Council met on April 17, 2020, via teleconference. She said several concerns re: foster parenting during the COVID pandemic were reported during the regional council reports, and these concerns were further reinforced during the public comment portion of the meeting. Following council discussion, the council chair was tasked with submitting the list of concerns along with council recommendations to DCFS administration. This special council meeting was called to address the outcomes from that communication. Lori Gray, Deputy Director Permanency, and Janet Ahern, State Guardian, met with the council to address their concerns. Lori thanked participants for calling in, noting that Janet Ahern was also on the call to address issues.

Concern: Foster parents are being expected to facilitate visitation for brand new placements without the support of DCFS Child Protection staff.

Council Recommendation: The council recommended that DCP staff continue to be responsible for scheduling and providing visitation through teleconference or video conferencing, etc., and that DCFS continue to use contractual visitation agencies and their staff to continue to facilitate all supervision between children and their birth families.

Outcomes: Lori said that she recognizes validity of the concern. She will take it back to the Child Protection Deputy to ask what DCP can do to better support foster parents, or if there is another avenue of support for them during this time. Janet thanked council for sharing their concerns and noted that this is a moving target, changing every day. She said they are receiving court orders

for in-person visitation and timelines are changing quickly. Once we move to Level 3 she suspects that courts might expect in-person visitation to resume.

Concern: Visitation expectations have been altered without providing guidelines or support to foster parents and visits have not been adjusted to meet the needs and developmental abilities of the children involved.

Council Recommendation: The SWFCAC recommended that each case's visitation plan be amended temporarily to address the expectations for foster families and birth families and that visitation guidelines be adjusted to account for the age and developmental stage of the child involved.

Outcomes: Lori said that they agree. She noted they have seen remarkable work done by the foster parents in finding remarkable ways to deal with that issue. She said foster parents should use the caseworker and supervisor to create appropriate ways to tailor visits to each child's specific needs. Administration is currently revisiting the guidance to look at the visitation issue. Lori asked for a SWFCAC volunteer to participate in this work and Stephanie Tesreau and Kimberly Coniglio agreed to assist.

Concern: Foster families are being placed at increased risk of exposure due to unsupervised visits continuing without safeguards in place.

Council Recommendation: The council recommended that the foster family's risk factors be taken into consideration when determining if unsupervised visitation can safely continue. Agencies should be supportive and recognize the possible risk to the members of every foster family.

Outcomes: Lori said that additional guidance will go out within the next couple of days. These new guides address expectations regarding location, social distancing, masks, etc. Unsupervised visits have never been suspended. The Department should look at the holistic picture – the whole foster family should be considered. They are working to try to individually tailor visitation while staying in line with court orders. Dr. Scottelaro, DCFS Medical Director, and Janet Ahern, State Guardian, have been providing input to localized case-by-case guidance, which would be ideal. The challenge is in making broad policies. This is something they continue to work on.

Concern: Placement disruptions are being threatened due to changes in visitation expectations.

Council Recommendation: The council recommended that it be made clear to agency staff that no child should be removed or disrupted from their placement due to the changes in visitation and the foster family's difficulty in facilitating these changes. Placement disruption should always be a last resort, and, especially during this crisis, extra leniency should be given, due to the challenges being presented to everyone involved.

Outcomes: Lori stated that this should not be happening. She noted that a safety issue might result in moving a child. Foster parents should go through the chain of command within the agency or region to address this. Foster parents should not feel threatened. Janet stated that foster parents have been wonderful, with limited placement disruptions. The State Guardian's office tracks all the COVID-positive youth in care. She noted that even in cases of positive diagnoses, most foster parents continue to provide care. The DCFS Medical Director says allow them to quarantine them together. The courts have been sympathetic to the Department

Stakeholder Comments

- Gladys Boyd questioned why Gwenn Eyer was leading the call, rather than the chairperson. Carol Sheley, chairperson, replied that she had an emergency that kept her

from getting on the call promptly and in the absence of the co-chair, she asked Gwenn to lead, and to continue after she came on the call.

- SWFCAC should be considered a ready-resource when foster care issues arise that require immediate attention. Lori stated that as we move forward they want to more closely involve the council.

Public Comment – none

Carol thanked the council and presenters. She thanked Lori for moving our recommendations forward.