



### What if I disagree with DCF decisions?

First, tell your social worker and their supervisor that you disagree with the decision. Next, write a letter stating your disagreement and the facts as you see them. Send the letter to the social worker and supervisor and ask that it be added to your file. If you believe that DCF did not follow its rules in deciding that a report of abuse and/or neglect was "supported" after an investigation, you can request a "Fair Hearing." This request must be submitted within 30 days after you receive the notice of the DCF decision. For detailed information or help in completing a Fair Hearing request, please call (617) 748-2030.

If there are other decisions or actions you disagree with, including the decisions after an investigation or Action Plan, you can initiate a "Grievance Process" by sending a written complaint within 30 days to the Area Office. You will need to describe the decision or actions and the reason you are complaining, the date it happened and other information that supports your complaint. For detailed information or help in completing a grievance, please call the Ombudsman's Office at (617) 748-2444.

### Who else can help me when I have questions or need support?

The Ombudsman's Office is available to answer questions about DCF and respond to concerns you may have. The Ombudsman staff can provide information regarding the appropriate steps you can take to address a problem or direct you to additional sources of help or information. To contact the Ombudsman's Office please call (617) 748-2444 or email [DCF0mbudsman@state.ma.us](mailto:DCF0mbudsman@state.ma.us)

#### CONTACT INFORMATION FOR DCF

Name of Social Worker

Name of Supervisor

Area Office or Contracted Provider Agency

Street City Zip

Telephone Number

E-mail

### A PARENT'S VOICE ...

*"I know that a visit from a DCF worker to talk about your family can be difficult. Not having information can make you fearful, confused and sometimes, angry. I hope this guide will answer some of your questions and let you know there are people here who can help when you need it."*

### A PARENT'S VOICE ...

*"I am the parent. I want the agency worker to know that this means I have certain rights. I know that it means I have certain responsibilities also. My major piece of advice - hard as it is sometimes - is to try to make the worker's job easier, not harder, whenever you can. I thank her for special acts like buying my son his favorite candy bar. I give her information. I make calls to the school and others. Then I tell her what I find out. This helps my child and is a constant reminder that I am the parent."*

### A PARENT'S VOICE ...

*"I wasn't really involved in the beginning. I felt like they were talking over my head and I told my worker how I felt. We came up with help to get my kids back. I went to a parent support group and learned how to speak for myself. I found out that I could let others know that I needed help. I worked with a family advocate who was also an ex-addict and had been sober for 13 years. She told me that my kids needed to be with me and that I shouldn't give up. I had to learn how to bond with my baby; she was so young when she left me. I began to feel better about myself and have been clean and sober for 8 years. I've had a job all that time and now have my kids with me and I'm a volunteer advocate for other families."*

## Child Protection Information

For more information about reporting child abuse and/or neglect:

- [www.mass.gov/dcf](http://www.mass.gov/dcf) for general information or to find a DCF Area Office
- **Child-At-Risk-Hotline 800-792-5200**
- **DCF Ombudsman 617-748-2444** (9am - 5pm, weekdays) or [DCF0mbudsman@state.ma.us](mailto:DCF0mbudsman@state.ma.us) for inquiries about DCF programs, policies or service delivery.

## Contact Us

**Massachusetts Department of Children and Families**  
600 Washington Street, 6th Floor  
Boston, MA 02111

Telephone: 617-748-2000  
Fax: 617-261-7435

## DCF Area Office Directory

### WESTERN REGION

- Greenfield 413-775-5000
- Holyoke 413-493-2600
- Pittsfield 413-236-1800
- Robert Van Wart Center/ East Springfield 413-205-0500
- Springfield 413-452-3200

### CENTRAL REGION

- Whitinsville 508-929-1000
- Leominster 978-353-3600
- Worcester East 508-793-8000
- Worcester West 508-929-2000

### NORTHERN REGION

- Cambridge/Somerville 617-520-8700
- Cape Ann, Salem 978-825-3800
- Framingham 508-424-0100
- Haverhill 978-469-8800
- Lawrence 978-557-2500
- Lowell 978-275-6800
- Lynn 781-477-1600
- Malden 781-388-7100

### SOUTHERN REGION

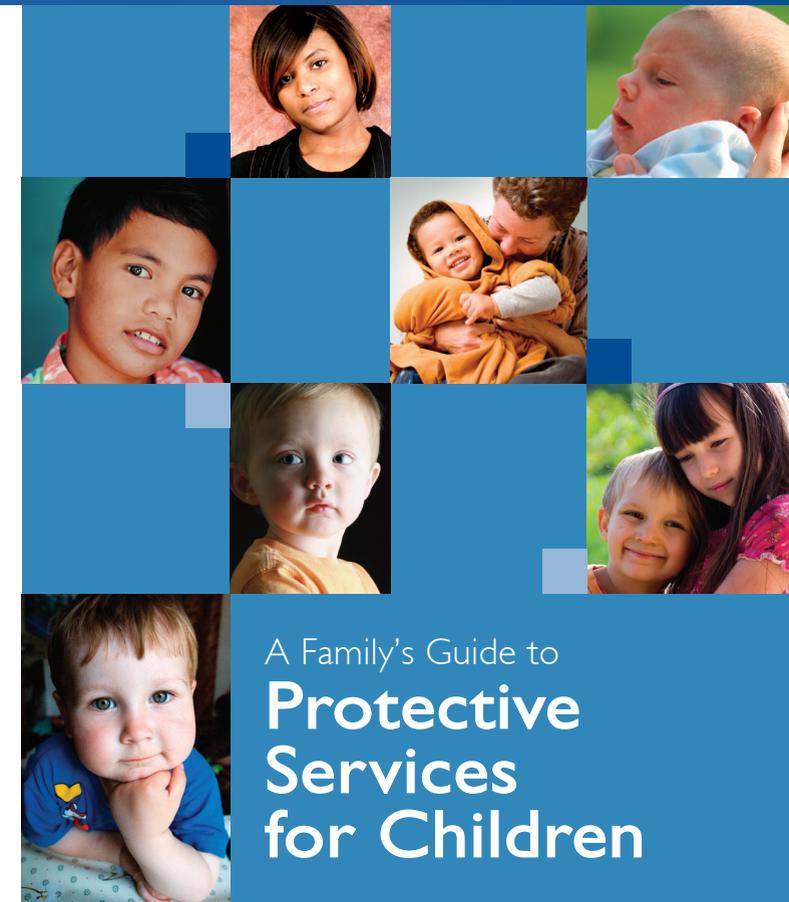
- Arlington 781-641-8500
- Braintree 781-794-4400
- Brockton 508-894-3700
- Cape Cod & Islands 508-760-0200
- Fall River 508-235-9800
- New Bedford 508-910-1000
- Plymouth 508-732-6200
- Taunton/Attleboro 508-821-7000

### BOSTON REGION

- Dimock Street, Roxbury 617-989-2800
- Harbor, Chelsea 617-660-3400
- Hyde Park 617-363-5000
- Park Street, Dorchester 617-822-4700



## A Family's Guide to Protective Services for Children





# A Family's Guide

## The Department of Children and Families

The Department of Children and Families (DCF) is a state agency that provides many services to Massachusetts' children, youth, and their families. Our primary responsibility is to keep children and youth safe from abuse and neglect and, in partnership with families and communities, strive to ensure they are able to grow and thrive in a safe and nurturing environment. DCF supports and improves child and family well-being by strengthening and preserving families.

This guide is intended to help you understand your family's rights and what you might expect during your involvement with DCF. It will also help you to understand DCF's role and responsibilities as they pertain to you and your family.

Massachusetts General Law Ch. 119, Section 51B, requires DCF to investigate all reports that meet the criteria of suspected child abuse and neglect. It is DCF's legal responsibility to determine if a child has been abused or neglected. Responding to the report and investigating the information reported is the first step in this process. Sometimes the investigation finds that abuse or neglect has not taken place; however, it can also provide an opportunity for DCF to provide supportive services that can help a family. DCF's primary goal during a response and investigation is to determine that children are safe and not at risk of harm. The investigator completes a Risk Assessment to assist in making that decision.

## QUESTIONS & ANSWERS FOR PARENTS ABOUT PROTECTIVE SERVICES

### Why would a report be made?

A report is made when there is suspicion that child abuse or neglect was or is occurring. Anyone, such as a friend, neighbor, family member or stranger can make a report to DCF. "Mandated reporters," such as teachers, nurses, doctors, social workers, mental health counselors, child care providers, clergy and coaches are required by law to report suspected abuse or neglect to DCF. Here are some examples of reasons a mandated reporter would file a report:

- A child has non-accidental injuries;

- A child has physical injuries that do not match the explanation for the injuries;
- A child has a condition resulting from maltreatment, sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, emotional abuse, cruel punishment, or deprivation of basic necessities, such as food, water, clothing, or shelter;
- A child has been neglected, which can include abandonment, being denied proper care and attention, or living under circumstances which harm their well-being; and,
- A child is at imminent risk of serious harm.

### Why is a DCF social worker contacting me?

Once a report has been received by DCF, a decision is made whether there will be further investigation or no investigation at all. Massachusetts law requires DCF to respond to reports where suspected child abuse or neglect is occurring or has occurred. If the report made on behalf of your child(ren) is opened for an investigation, a DCF social worker will be assigned and contact you. The social worker will make an appointment to come to your home to talk to you, your child(ren) and other family members to review the allegations made in the report and determine if your child(ren) is safe.

### What happens when a DCF social worker visits my home?

While not required, you can invite a supportive friend or relative to accompany you for the social worker's home visit. During the visit, you will learn what was reported and you can share your feelings and thoughts about the report. The social worker will ask you for names of your child(ren)'s teacher, pediatrician, school counselor, child care providers, baby-sitters, relatives, neighbors, or other persons who know you and your child(ren). You can also give the social worker names of people you would like them to speak with. There may be certain situations in which the social worker will contact other people without your consent. For example, in instances where sexual abuse or serious physical abuse or neglect has occurred, the police must be contacted. These social worker visits and interviews with you and your family must be completed within 5 working days for an "emergency response" or 15 working days for a "non-emergency response."

### How can I be sure the visitor is really a DCF employee?

Every DCF social worker carries a state identification. You are entitled to see this when they visit your home.

### What if I do not want to talk to the social worker?

You have the right to refuse to allow DCF to visit your home when a report of abuse or neglect has been received, but the Department is still required by law to

see and meet with everyone living in the home. DCF encourages parents to participate and cooperate with the investigation, as it provides an opportunity for parents to tell their side of the story. Our goal is to be sure your child(ren) is safe. If a family prevents the social worker from visiting, DCF will seek help from the police or the court in order to check on the child(ren)'s safety. We believe that by working together we can address safety concerns and build on the strengths of your family so that everyone is safe and healthy.

### Will my child(ren) be taken from my home?

The answer to this question is usually NO. The great majority of children served by DCF remain at home with their parents. DCF's goal is to keep children safely at home and to support families; however, if a child is in immediate danger DCF has the authority to remove them from their home. A child might be removed if they have been sexually assaulted, seriously physically abused or severely neglected by someone in the home. If a child must be removed from their home to be protected, DCF must seek court approval immediately after the removal or on the following business day. If this were to happen, DCF will work with the parents to find a "kinship" placement. This is a family member or friend who can provide a safe home while concerns are addressed. If a kinship placement is not possible, every effort will be made to find a foster home in the same community. When a child must be removed and placed in out-of-home care, DCF's goal is to safely return them home as soon as the family situation is determined to be stable and safe.

### What happens at the end of the investigation?

DCF will write a report that states what the social worker learned from you and/or the other people they have spoken with. DCF will also send you a letter stating one of three outcomes:

1. The investigation finding is "unsupported," meaning there was not enough information to determine that allegations are true. A case will not be opened and DCF visits will stop. You do not have to do anything else. However, if you do want services for your family, you can ask DCF to open a "voluntary case."
  2. The investigation finding is "supported." DCF will identify the person responsible for the abuse and/or neglect in its Central Registry or if the report was referred to the District Attorney, in its Registry of Alleged Perpetrators. DCF may open a case to be sure that your child(ren)'s needs are met and that your family gets the services it needs to keep your child(ren) safe. DCF may also decide to close your case at this time.
- OR
3. The investigation finding is "substantiated concern." This finding is used for situations where there is no immediate danger to the child(ren)'s safety or well-being. DCF will open a case to be sure your child(ren)'s needs are met and that your family gets the services it needs to keep your child(ren) safe. If the finding is a "substantiated concern," your name will not appear in the Department's Central Registry as a person responsible for abuse/neglect.

### What if DCF opens a case for my family?

When a DCF case is opened for your family, a social worker will talk with you to learn more about your strengths and needs and what support might be helpful to you and your child(ren). This will be a different social worker from the one that conducted the investigation. Together, you and the social worker will decide on

an "Action Plan" for your family. This plan will list the services DCF will provide to you and your child(ren). It will also describe the things you, your child(ren) and DCF need to do to help your family. The purpose of this plan is to strengthen your family and keep your child(ren) safe. You should be involved in developing the Action Plan and should make sure you know what is included in it before you agree to sign the plan.

### How can an Action Plan with DCF help my family?

The DCF social worker will help you plan the things you need to make your family stronger. Sometimes the support of friends and relatives and other community resources, like food pantries and child care, may be all that is needed to help you through this difficult time. Depending on what your family needs, DCF can also connect you to people in your community who offer supportive services. Some examples are parent aides, family advocates, family nurturing programs, domestic violence services, mental health services, substance abuse services, housing stabilization services, counseling, programs for pregnant teens, and other services. When possible, families can be linked to services that share their cultural background and language. The Department is committed to accommodating those families and/or individuals who are protected by the Americans with Disabilities Act. If you have a child younger than three years old, your plan will include a referral to an "early intervention program" through the Department of Public Health. These programs help children and their families determine any special needs the child may have and provide services to see that those needs are met.

### What are my rights as a parent involved with DCF?

You have a right to:

- Invite a supportive friend or relative to be with you when DCF visits.
- Ask and have answered any question you might have about what is happening from the time of the report through the end of DCF involvement. If you are a parent living outside the home, your rights may be different. Call the DCF Area Office to find out.
- Speak with an attorney or have one with you at any time. If DCF takes your case to court and you aren't able to pay for an attorney, the judge will appoint one for you.
- Be notified in writing of the Department's decision at the end of the investigation.

### Does DCF share my family information with anyone else?

DCF is required to keep the information on your family confidential. Information is shared only for a few reasons. For example, DCF is required to notify the District Attorney and police if the report about your family concerns sexual abuse or exploitation, serious physical injury, human trafficking, or death of a child. If a court hearing were to take place about this incident or about custody of your child, the information about your family could be used in court. Employers hiring for positions that have direct contact with children can request a background check with DCF. Information is not generally shared with future employers who may conduct background checks, except when a report of abuse/neglect is "supported" and the person being asked about was identified as responsible for child abuse and/or neglect.