

## **MASSACHUSETTS DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES DISASTER PLAN (2020-2024)**

### **Disaster Plan**

This report is submitted as part of the plan of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts for compliance with title IV-B of the Social Securities Act (the Act). The report includes the Disaster Plan as required by Section 422(b) (16) of the Act.

#### *Summary of disasters during 2020 – 2021, and DCF responses*

During the past year, Massachusetts experienced three occurrences of severe weather that resulted in the activation or partial activation of DCF's Continuity of Operations Plan (COOP) and Virtual Coverage Plans. They were both successfully utilized during these events.

Massachusetts also activated and continues to employ its COOP and Virtual Coverage Plans to sustain operations within the context of the global pandemic, COVID-19. These plans have been effective in helping the Department of Children and Families (DCF) perform its essential functions and carry out its mission to keep children safe from abuse and neglect. However, the expansive nature and duration of this public health crisis presented the Department with unique challenges that were not sufficiently addressed in its plans, forcing the Department to make adjustments. These adjustments, which were reported in last year's APSR update, have proven successful in helping the agency deliver its critical services.

As the last year has progressed, further adjustments were made to account for the ever-changing landscape of the global pandemic and our efforts to make the Department's work safer, easier and more effective during this public health crisis.

#### *Severe Weather:*

In the late afternoon of August 4, 2020, severe weather passed through New England due to Tropical Storm Isaias. Heavy rains and high winds created dangerous travel conditions and caused widespread power outages throughout the Commonwealth.

Due to this weather event, all staff who were not already teleworking were advised to return home immediately, if safe to do so. Staff were instructed to pay close attention to changing weather conditions and be prepared to seek shelter immediately. Messages were disseminated via the Department's AtHoc emergency messaging system, which sends alerts via email and phone to multiple devices.

DCF's Virtual Coverage Plan was successfully implemented, with Incident Command Center provided by the DCF leadership, to sustain essential operations through the end of the business day, until the Department's after-hours operation could take effect.

**Overall, the winter of 2020-2021 was fairly mild in respect to inclement weather and snow, with the exception of two substantial snowstorms.**

From Wednesday, December 16 through Thursday, December 17, 2020, Massachusetts was hit with a significant snow event. Blizzard conditions were reported in many areas of the state. Travel by automobile became treacherous and snow accumulation was significant in several communities across the Commonwealth.

From Monday, February 1 through Tuesday, February 2, 2021, Massachusetts was hit with another significant snowstorm that resulted in blizzard conditions and heavy snow accumulation in many areas of the state. This storm also caused widespread power outages in certain parts of the Commonwealth.

During both of these winter weather events, the Governor directed that all non-emergency Executive Branch employees not report to their workplaces on Thursday, December 17, 2020 and Monday, February 1, 2021 respectively. In each instance, DCF immediately initiated its Employee Notification Plan.

While DCF offices were closed on these two dates, the DCF Child-at-Risk Hotline was activated to receive any incoming reports of abuse and neglect. The Department's Virtual Coverage Plan was implemented, with Incident Command Center provided by the DCF leadership. All staff with the ability to telework from home were instructed to do so in accordance with the Commonwealth's telework policy.

Despite challenges posed by the weather during these storms, the Department was able to ensure a child protective response capability for emergency reports of abuse and/or neglect. The DCF Incident Command Center operated throughout these weather events to ensure communication with management and employees, as needed.

#### *COVID-19:*

First identified in December 2019 in [Wuhan, China](#), COVID-19 has resulted in an ongoing pandemic throughout the world. The virus began to impact Massachusetts most significantly in March 2020. On March 10<sup>th</sup>, Governor Charlie Baker [declared a state of emergency](#). On March 15<sup>th</sup>, notices were sent to staff, activating DCF's Virtual Coverage Plan for both March 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> as more aggressive strategies were developed to limit the spread of the virus while maintaining critical agency operations. Effective March 18<sup>th</sup>, agency staff were directed to maintain virtual operations and to telework, moving forward – with emergency responses and critical child protection visits still being addressed by staff in person.

Within just a few weeks of in the declaration of a state of emergency in Massachusetts, DCF had completely redesigned the way in which it functioned. The agency successfully identified new and creative solutions to address the many complex problems posed by the virus.

Massachusetts activated and continues to employ its COOP and Virtual Coverage Plans to sustain operations within the context of the global pandemic, COVID-19. The core elements of these plans have largely been effective and have served as a strong foundation for sustaining essential functions. However, the expansive nature and duration of this public health crisis presented the Department with unique challenges that were not sufficiently addressed in its plans, forcing the Department to make adjustments.

These adjustments to DCF's Disaster Plan, reported in last year's APSR update, have proven successful in helping the agency deliver its critical services. Since the Department's last report, further adjustments have been made to account for the ever-changing landscape of the global pandemic and our ongoing efforts to make the Department's work safer, easier and/or more effective during this public health crisis.

#### **The DCF 2020 – 2024 Disaster Plan**

Due to the expansive nature and duration of the COVID-19 public health crisis, the Department has had to make some adjustments to its Disaster Plan in order to successfully deliver core services. The Department continues to closely assess and make necessary revisions as appropriate to ensure continuity of essential operations and services. Please see below for more detail.

#### *Overview of Adjustments Made to the DCF 2020-2024 Disaster Plan in Response to COVID-19*

The Department's COOP (est. 2006 in its current form) and Virtual Coverage (est. 2012) Plans have been instrumental to its operation throughout Massachusetts' response to COVID-19. These plans have been refined and updated in the years since their initial implementation and have only been strengthened by the Department's significant efforts in recent years to create a more mobile workforce.

In many respects, DCF was well positioned to respond to this public health crisis and maintain its operations in a virtual environment. However, even with these recent advancements, a few key challenges presented by COVID-19 required that adjustments be made to DCF's strategy. The pandemic required that we do more to stand up many of the Department's administrative and management functions that have not been so heavily impacted in past activations of these plans.

Adjustments made and reported on in last year's APSR update included actions taken in the following areas:

#### **Management Structure**

- Created virtual forums for agency leadership to convene, brainstorm solutions and problem-solve.
- Developed a communication process and schedule that allowed DCF to gather information and solve problems in a way that expedited change; shifted our management structure to facilitate more communication and consistent check-ins with leadership staff.

#### **Enhanced Allocation of Technology to Support Virtual Work**

- Additional iPads and mobile phones were issued to DCF that needed them to perform their duties remotely.
- Additional laptops and Virtual Private Network (VPN) accounts were issued to administrative staff, so that they may execute tasks that require access to DCF's secure network.
- Agency-wide distribution of WebEx accounts was implemented to facilitate virtual meetings, trainings and supervision of staff.
- Large distribution of Microsoft Surface Go's to foster parents that required devices with videoconferencing capability to facilitate virtual parent-child visits.

#### **Resources and Systems for Testing and Infection Control**

- Activation of a COVID-19 reporting and tracking structure, led by our DCF medical staff.
- Acquisition and distribution of PPE to account for DCF staff needs and to support congregate care providers in emergency situations.
- Facilitation of medical consults between DCF medical staff and congregate providers to prepare for and manage infections in residential programs, including supporting access to relief staff to help programs maintain ratios when staff test positive or to stand up COVID-19 Isolation and/or Quarantine Units.
- Coordinating access to rapid testing, via mobile testing units and free testing sites that prioritize first responders and essential employees.

#### **Preparing for Intake/Screening in Environment of Potential Widespread/Prolonged Office Closures**

- Creation of a new daytime virtual call center for emergency back-up of 51A reporting that allows offices to take abuse/neglect calls during business hours without having to go to an area office (initial operation during COVID-19 had required the transfer of calls from area office switchboards).

#### **Emergency Child Care Program (ECCP)**

- Emergency childcare program was launched by the state's Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) for children of first responders, healthcare workers and those served by DCF.

**Since submission of last year's APSR update,** DCF's Disaster Plan and the adjustments outlined above have served the Department well in ensuring essential services continue to be delivered. The Department has made some additional modifications to its Disaster Plan in response to the ever-changing landscape of this global pandemic. These modifications fall under similar categories, as those outlined above, and they include:

#### **Enhanced Allocation of Technology to Support Virtual Work**

- Statewide rollout of Surface Pro devices to all staff, including upgrades to Windows 10; the installation of Microsoft Teams to improve collaboration; and activation of Cloud/OneDrive, to facilitate access to and the saving and sharing of documents from anywhere in the state. This effort has helped advance DCF's transformation to a modern work environment by providing the computing resources required for sustainable and location-independent work, further strengthening the Department's response to the pandemic.

#### **Resources and Systems for Testing and Infection Control**

- Implementation of Rigorous Surveillance Testing Program for Residential Congregate Care Residents and Staff
  - The Commonwealth launched an initiative to support agencies, providers and programs in performing routine testing of asymptomatic individuals for the purposes of identifying those with asymptomatic or mildly symptomatic COVID-19 infections, in order to prevent viral transmission.
- Participation in EOHHS' Congregate Care-Commonwealth Medicine Initiative Strengthening Infection Control/COVID Management Support
  - Developed to help congregate care providers and staff evaluate site specific risks and be better prepared to stop the spread of COVID-19 within their programs.
  - Broadly defined, Commonwealth Medicine's engagement fell under two distinct phases:
    - Site-specific self-assessments to establish a baseline of infection control practices and identify risk areas.
    - Education and training in infection control practices for congregate care staff, modeled after a train-the-trainer approach.
- Implementation of Abbott BinaxNOW Rapid Point of Care COVID-19 Testing in DCF Area Offices
  - Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, many congregate care facilities and foster homes have required that asymptomatic children and youth obtain a negative COVID-19 test prior to placement.
  - Earlier in the pandemic, staff would sometimes wait several hours, often at night, for COVID-19 test results, before they could place a child in a foster home or residential congregate care program.
  - In order to address this need and facilitate placement, DCF implemented Abbott BinaxNOW rapid testing in the Department's area offices.
  - Results of the rapid test are produced in 15 minutes and have significantly reduced the amount of time between a child's removal and his or her placement.
- Vaccination Coordination and Logistics
  - In January 2021, as part of a larger statewide effort, DCF launched a focused, hands-on initiative to get as many age-eligible youth and staff, who live and work in residential congregate care settings, vaccinated. Supports included facilitating access to vaccine, setting up dedicated vaccine clinics for DCF providers/programs, and problem-solving

any unique challenges that may be present for specific populations (providing educational resources and materials for the vaccine hesitant, arranging for support from a mobile vaccine unit, etc.).

- In February, DCF also participated in a work stream devoted specifically to vaccinating all of the 16- and 17-year-old youth served by the Department, living in residential congregate care settings. Although many of these youth were vaccinated in the Commonwealth's initial push, access to the Pfizer vaccine at that time was more limited. A deliberate effort was needed to target this age group to ensure that all youth (who wanted to be vaccinated) had access to the Pfizer vaccine, either through existing resources in their local communities or dedicated clinics set up for them to attend.
- Efforts to support the vaccination of all age-eligible youth in DCF care are ongoing, including youth who live in DCF foster homes, independent living programs and other settings.