

## Massachusetts Department of Children and Families Disaster Plan (2025 – 2029)

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.

The Department of Children and Families (DCF) Continuity of Operations Plan (COOP) has remained a central component of DCF's strategy to fulfill its mission in the event of a disaster or severe operational disruption. DCF's COOP Plan was developed in 2006 to ensure essential services and functions are operational during and after a disaster event. This plan has been updated and revised to reflect changes and current emergency procedures.

The COOP applies to the full spectrum of threats and emergencies that may affect DCF, its operations, employees and the children and families served by the department. The COOP presents a management framework; establishes operational procedures to sustain essential functions; and guides the restoration of full functions, if normal operations are not feasible. It includes an Activation and Relocation process, Alternate Facility Operations [or Emergency Relocation Sites (ERS)], Leadership and Delegation of Authority, Reconstitution, and Plan Maintenance. The COOP provides a plan for the continuation of services to children, receiving child protective abuse reports, communicating with caseworkers and other essential child welfare personnel, and preserving essential program records.

One COOP Plan responsibility is to comply with the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration Code of Regulations, Subchapter B – Records Management, to ensure the protection and continuous availability of vital records. Vital records are documents, references, and records, regardless of media type, that are needed to support essential functions under the full spectrum of emergencies and disasters.

Increasingly, the majority of DCF's vital records are available electronically and can be accessed from any internet-capable device across the state, whether in a designated Alternate Facility/area office or on a mobile device. Much of the work required of the Department to manage, review, share, update, transfer and/or receive these records can be conducted electronically. Where this is not the case, a detailed plan for vital record access, preservation and maintenance must be adhered to.

All vital records must be protected from damage or destruction. DCF vital records are stored in a properly equipped, environmentally controlled facility that is secure but also accessible when needed for records retrieval. The designated Senior COOP Official is to make certain that databases and other references supporting the essential functions of DCF are pre-positioned at each designated Alternate Facility/Emergency Relocation Site (ERS), carried with deploying personnel, or available through a backup process.

Over time, vital records become outdated and require updating through a process called cycling. Inclusion of cycling procedures in the Vital Records Management Program ensures that vital records are current and accurate, when needed.

<b>Vital File, Record, or Database</b>	<b>Form of Record (e.g., hardcopy, electronic)</b>	<b>Pre-positioned at Alternate Facility</b>	<b>Hand Carried to Alternate Facility</b>	<b>Backed up at Third Location</b>
i-FamilyNet Client Case records	Electronic	Statewide system	N/A	Yes
Vital court documents, birth certificates, etc.	Hard copy/electronic	Local area offices	Yes	No
Contracts, ISAs,	Hard	Central office	Yes	Yes

<b>Vital File, Record, or Database</b>	<b>Form of Record (e.g., hardcopy, electronic)</b>	<b>Pre-positioned at Alternate Facility</b>	<b>Hand Carried to Alternate Facility</b>	<b>Backed up at Third Location</b>
Financial agreements	copy/electronic			
Payment records	Hard copy/electronic	Central office	Yes	Yes
Legal case records	Electronic and hard copy	Local offices/Statewide system	Yes	Yes
MassAchieve - Training Registration System	Electronic	Central Office	N/A	Yes
Foster Care Review Database	Electronic	Central Office	N/A	Yes
AMS – Adoption contract case records	Electronic	Central Office	N/A	Yes
SIU case records	Electronic	Central Office	N/A	Yes

The Department has also fully implemented the National Electronic Interstate Compact Enterprise (NEICE), a national electronic system for quickly and securely exchanging the data and documents required by the Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children (ICPC) to place children across state lines.

DCF's ICPC staff have long been able to perform most of their duties electronically. Case record information and many of the documents required by the process are available in electronic format, but the full adoption of the NEICE Exchange has greatly enhanced our systems and processes for working with other states.

Among other benefits, the work required and time to exchange paperwork with other states is significantly reduced, and as a result, children should spend less time waiting for placement. NEICE allows DCF workers to communicate and provide timely updates to courts, relevant private service providers, and families awaiting placement. They are able to perform a vast array of case functions and oversight; all without the vulnerability of e-mail transmission or the use of paper copies.

DCF updates and maintains a COOP Plan that applies to its entire statewide operation, network of facilities and staff. Individual DCF offices also develop their own dedicated COOP Plans to maintain programs and services in cases where severe disruptions are localized and impacts are isolated to a single facility or community.

In 2012, DCF leadership developed a Virtual Coverage Plan to ensure continuity of essential functions during office closures. The plan allows for staff to operate from their homes; respond to emergency child abuse investigations; and perform other critical functions required of the agency, while limiting travel or unnecessary exposure to an unsafe environment. This has proven to work well during times when a state of emergency is declared and state offices are required to close. The Department's virtual switchboard coverage is activated using Jabber software, allowing DCF's screening staff to continue receiving any incoming reports of abuse and neglect from remote locations. As needed, DCF's Child-At-Risk Hotline can also be activated to operate 24/7 to receive abuse/neglect reports during office closures. A response team is on-call from home to respond to emergencies involving a child at risk of harm. The Virtual Coverage Plan improves the ability of DCF to receive and respond to reports of abuse and neglect during a disaster event. It allows for communication with all levels of DCF through the Incident Command Structure and provides for essential services to be available to families.

DCF's Virtual Coverage Plan has been refined and updated in the years since its initial implementation and has only been strengthened by the department's efforts to create a more mobile workforce. In 2014, DCF issued iPad tablets to all case carrying social workers, supervisors, clinical managers, leadership staff and others within the agency, whose work requires significant time away from their home offices and/or the ability to respond to work issues at all hours of the day and night. In the years since, DCF has continued to upgrade the mobile technology available to staff. Today, these same staff are equipped with Surface Pros and iPhones and will soon exchange their Surface Pros for HP Elite 360 Convertible Notebooks, an upgrade planned for SFY 2025. With DCF's SACWIS system having fully migrated from a server-based system to a web-based system, these technological tools offer enhanced flexibility and access to case record information, work email and other supports to ease communication and facilitate staff's ability to respond in a crisis.

DCF continues to enhance its web-based Social Intranet, allowing staff to access written policies, official agency paperwork, practice guidance, training videos, and various other tools to support their work and communicate with peers across the state via any internet-connected computer or mobile device.

DCF utilizes AtHoc, a comprehensive end-to-end notification system that unifies all communication modalities to alert staff with a single click. Using a single web-based console or mobile device, emergency managers can provide two-way communication across the entire agency to virtually any device with real-time speed and assured reach. The Department has used its AtHoc system to notify staff of severe weather events, office closures, security-related events or other disruptions to daily work activities. In the years after DCF deployed AtHoc, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts launched its own version of this tool called AlertsMA. AlertsMA is built on the Everbridge platform and allows Massachusetts government organizations to notify staff and stakeholders about safety situations and other important events using people's preferred communication methods. DCF takes full advantage of both systems to communicate with staff and stakeholders, when dealing with a safety concern or disaster event.

In addition to the COOP, DCF has also worked with the Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency (MEMA), the Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS), the Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs and other child and family serving state agencies on multiple initiatives related to disaster preparedness and recovery and mitigating the effects of climate change.

### **Summary of Disasters During 2023 – 2024, and DCF Responses**

During the past year, Massachusetts experienced two occurrences of severe weather that resulted in the activation of DCF's COOP and Virtual Coverage Plans. Both plans were successfully utilized during these events.

The Department has also continued its work to further embed and support key elements of DCF's hybrid work model, while simultaneously accelerating the Department's return to holding more in-person events, trainings, and statewide meetings. Many of the lessons learned, policies and practices created, and tools developed during the COVID-19 pandemic have informed this work model and enhanced DCF's ability to fulfill its mission during a crisis situation.

#### **Flooding**

On September 11, 2023, a state of emergency was declared in Leominster, MA, and in surrounding areas due to flash flooding. Local homes, schools, and businesses were inundated with water, flooding basements and yards, damaging roofs, and making many roads difficult to navigate. Although DCF's North Central Area Office facility was not significantly impacted, the condition of the roads required that the office be closed on September 12 and September 13.

While DCF's North Central Area Office was closed during this weather event, the Department's virtual switchboard coverage was activated using Jabber software, allowing the office to continue receiving 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. Virtual meetings/calls were regularly held among local leadership to receive updates from the Leominster Mayor's Office, MEMA, area office staff, and DCF program providers.

DCF leadership also coordinated a plan to check on the well-being of all foster homes and foster children placed in the area, all contracted providers and residential programs located in this part of the state, and the local Family Resource Center. Thankfully, none of these critical partners and DCF resources suffered any serious harm.

Despite challenges posed by the heavy rain during this weather event, the Department was able to ensure a child protective response capability for emergency reports of abuse and/or neglect and DCF staff were able to perform most (if not all) of their typical duties in a telework environment from home. The DCF Incident Command Center remained operational for several days to ensure communication with management and employees, as needed.

### *Severe Winter Weather*

Overall, the winter of 2023-2024 was relatively mild for Massachusetts, with respect to inclement weather and snow. However, on February 13, 2024, the Commonwealth was hit with a moderately significant winter weather event.

Winter storm conditions were reported in many areas of the state during the storm. Snow, ice, and wind began to impact the area during the early morning hours and continued throughout the day. Snow became heavy, at times, creating hazardous travel conditions. Commuting by automobile became treacherous, and many flights in and out of Boston Logan Airport were canceled. Snow accumulation varied across the state with some cities and towns recording as many as 9.5 inches and others reporting fewer than 2 inches. Overall snow totals were less than predicted.

Due to this weather event, the Governor directed all non-emergency Executive Branch employees not to report to their workplaces on Tuesday, February 13, 2024. Accordingly, the Department of Children and Families immediately initiated its Employee Notification Plan. All DCF offices were closed on this day.

While DCF's physical offices were closed during this weather event, the Department's virtual switchboard coverage was activated using Jabber software, allowing all offices to continue receiving 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. Virtual meetings/calls were regularly held with agency leadership to provide updates from MEMA, area office staff, and program providers.

Despite challenges posed by the weather during this storm, the Department was able to ensure a child protective response capability for emergency reports of abuse and/or neglect and DCF staff were able to perform most (if not all) of their typical duties in a telework environment from home. The DCF Incident Command Center operated throughout this weather event to support communication with management and employees, as needed.

### **Information on How the State's Current Disaster Plan Addresses Disparities for Marginalized Groups**

DCF recognizes that issues of identity and diversity are central to children's welfare. The Department is committed to culturally responsive policy and practice in all aspects of our work with families and in all of our agency operations, including disaster preparedness and response.

DCF seeks to heighten awareness of racial equity, inclusion, access, and diversity issues in order to mitigate and address disparities that may exist among people of all cultures, races, ethnicities, languages, religions, sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions, and physical abilities.

Over the next five years, the Department will explore opportunities to strengthen and ensure its preparedness for responding to disasters that impact children and families in foster care. These activities include:

- **Culturally Responsive Leadership** - The Department will continue its engagement with one or more diversity consultants to build capacity/readiness among agency leaders and to support policy/practice development that advances racial equity and inclusion more systematically and strategically within the Department.
- **Continuing to Increase DCF Staff Diversity and Inclusion at All Levels of the Agency** - A DCF workforce that reflects the communities it serves can only strengthen our ability to meet the specific needs of families, including those that emerge during a disaster response. An in-depth understanding of various languages, cultures, religions and disabilities can help inform strategies, facilitate communication, and deliver services to those who need it most in a crisis situation.
- **Developing Culturally Responsive Policies** - DCF's Racial Equity and Inclusion Work Group and the DCF policy team will continue to implement a structured process to examine and shape current, pending and new policies being developed by applying a diversity, equity and inclusion lens. This process will be followed for all new DCF policies, including those pertaining to disaster preparedness.
- **Culturally Responsive Disaster Preparedness Training** - DCF will explore staff requirements to participate in foundational cultural responsiveness training—an essential first step in diversity, equity, inclusion and access education.
- **Language and Accessibility Considerations** - DCF will ensure messaging and services reflect and accommodate a community's language needs in an immediate and clear manner that is consistent with communications distributed to other groups in the community. Also, the Department must ensure that it is prepared to assist multilingual families with applications for government aid, as these programs can be complex and inaccessible, particularly for people whose primary language is not English.
- **Equitable Distribution of Resources** - DCF will ensure equitable and appropriate distribution of resources and aid following a disaster. The Department will assess and plan to address the disproportionate risks and disparate outcomes experienced by children, youth, and families belonging to traditionally marginalized groups.

#### **Additional Goals and Objectives for FFY 2025 – FFY 2029**

In order to ensure a comprehensive and effective response to the needs of the children and families of the Commonwealth displaced or adversely affected by a disaster, DCF will:

- Continue to actively participate with fellow government agencies and other key partners in any initiatives related to disaster preparedness and recovery and mitigating the effects of climate change;
- Update and enhance DCF's Continuity of Operations Plan to reflect recommended changes and/or current best practice in emergency procedures;
- Work to ensure more effective and consistent application statewide of DCF's AtHoc Emergency Alert System (and leverage the Commonwealth's AlertsMA system) to notify staff of office closures or other disruptions to daily work activities, including disruptions that pose a risk to the health and/or safety of DCF personnel, partners and families;

- Offer disaster preparedness guidance and support to foster families and residential providers;
- Leverage technological tools to communicate and share information more efficiently with DCF foster parents throughout the state, including information on training and support for disaster preparedness, using:
  - DCF's Foster Parent Listserv, the department's comprehensive list of foster parent emails that can be used for email communication at the statewide or regional level; and
  - DCF's Foster Parent intranet page, FosterMA Connect, a secure intranet site for foster and pre-adoptive parents to access important information, including policies, documents, resources, contacts, special events and more;
- Partner with EOHHS child-serving agencies to plan for emergency foster care in a mass casualty event in which children may be orphaned;
- Partner with EOHHS Facilities and the Division of Capital Asset Management and Maintenance (DCAMM) to identify, procure and lease new facilities that minimize their exposure and sensitivity to natural hazards and climate change;
- Provide disaster preparedness training and exercise opportunities to DCF staff to improve disaster responses and recovery; and
- Deploy, when safe to do so, DCF's Missing or Absent Social Worker staff, apply the Department's Children Who Are Missing or Absent Policy, and utilize the missing-child clearinghouses to obtain resources and technical assistance to locate missing children and initiate reunification processes, as appropriate, for those impacted by a disaster.