

**Guidance on Conducting Foster Care/Kinship/Adoption Licensing Studies,
Reassessments, and PALS During COVID-19 Outbreak for Family Resource
Workers and Adoption Social Workers
Effective Date: May 18, 2020**

The novel coronavirus, COVID-19, poses an unprecedented challenge to the day to day operations of the Department of Children and Families (DCF) and the children and families we serve. In order to meet care, safety, and wellbeing needs of children and mitigate the spread of COVID-19 during this state of emergency, we need to be innovative in the ways we approach completing licensing studies, reassessments, and PALS, while limiting in-person interactions as much as possible. These guidelines address issues that may present challenges during the time of social distancing, issuing “approval” rather than licenses, and requirements for post-social distancing verification of certain requirements and qualifications.

**Approval VS.
Licensing**

During the COVID-19 outbreak, DCF will temporarily approve foster/kinship/families pending future license completion in order to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 and comply with the limitations imposed by social distancing. In these instances, the Department has outlined an approval process which addresses key areas of the licensing requirements.

**Talk to the
Applicant(s)/
Caregiver**

Reach out to applicant(s)/caregivers (foster, kinship, pre-adoptive, and/or adoptive currently caring for children) and their household members. It is important to spend time discussing how adjustments to the licensing, reassessment, or PALS process will help to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and, at the same time, promote the approval of foster and kinship families to serve as safe and supportive resources for children. Be sure to fully explain fully how the process during social distancing differs from the usual licensing practice. Make sure that applicant(s)/caregivers understand that verification will be required before licenses can be issued after social distancing concludes.

Fingerprinting

Federal guidance allows for delay of fingerprinting during the COVID-19 emergency. In keeping with that guidance, Massachusetts will allow temporary approval without fingerprinting, postponing fingerprinting until services are available, provided that:

- CORI and DCF background checks have been completed on each applicant and required household members;
- Background checks have been completed in any other states in which the applicant(s) lived within the past 5 years; and

- CORI and other background checks do not indicate criminal background that would exclude the applicant(s) from caring for children.

Certificates/ Official Documents

Since state, county, and city offices holding records may be closed due to COVID-19, it may be difficult or impossible for applicant(s)/caregiver(s) to obtain necessary documents such as birth, marriage, and death certificates. Temporary approval may be granted without official documents, provided that:

- The applicant/caregiver provides the date, identity, and description of the information included on each certificate or official document;
- Issuance of a license will be contingent on DCF's receipt of each required certificate/official document after social distancing concludes; and
- Adoptions may not be finalized unless such documents have been received by the Department.

References

During social distancing due to COVID-19, personal and employer references may be obtained by email or telephone.

If school personnel are not available to provide official references while schools are closed, applicant(s)/caregiver(s) may provide a copy of each child's last report card (which indicates attendance) and/or an email from each child's current teacher that speaks to the child's school participation and educational progress (as outlined in DCF Family Resource Policy, 7/8/2008, p.15, Licensing Study section).

Medical Examinations

Since many medical practices are closed due to COVID-19, it may be difficult or impossible for applicant(s)/caregiver(s) to obtain current physical exams. If a current medical exam cannot be completed temporary approval may be granted without physical exams/medical statements, provided that:

- The applicant/caregiver provides the date of the most recent physical exam and a summary of the exam for each person;
- Evidence of a current telehealth screening with a medical professional for each person; and
- The scheduled future date for a physical exam for each person.

Issuance of a license will be contingent on DCF's receipt of physical exam/medical statement after social distancing concludes.

**Kinship
Orientation**

In lieu of in-person Kinship Orientation, applicants may attend a DCF-approved web-based orientation.

MAPP Training

In lieu of in-person MAPP training, applicants may attend a DCF-approved virtual MAPP training.

**Discuss Virtual
Visits with the
Applicant(s)/
Caregiver(s)**

Reach out to applicant(s)/caregivers (foster, kinship, pre-adoptive, and/or adoptive family currently caring for children) and their household members. It is important to spend time discussing how video conference visits help to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and help ensure that applicants and caregivers have the information they need. Be sure to fully explain the video conference process to the family and obtain written permission to proceed with a virtual assessment. You may encounter situations where applicants or caregivers would prefer an in-person visit. Talk with your supervisor and manager about this. Together you can devise a plan to work through any challenges and determine whether an in-person visit is needed.

Depending on the type of phone/computer/tablet applicant(s) or caregivers have and their comfort level in using technology, discuss their needs and provide instructions and/or coaching in advance of the video conference. Assist them in downloading [WebEx](#), (or other secure platform), if necessary.

To ensure video conference visits go smoothly, schedule an initial telephone call with applicant(s)/caregivers beforehand to discuss:

- What the process will be for each virtual visit;
- Who should be present during the visit;
- That the virtual visit will cover the same content and protocols as you would cover during an in-person visit;
- That you will be asking them to do a video walk-through of their entire home and outdoor area near the home;
- The need to meet virtually with each person individually, utilizing a quiet space in their home for discussions, if possible;
- If there are children living in the home, explain that they should prepare the child(ren) to participate in an interview on video with you as well;
- How long the process will take and that every member of the family should be present to participate;
- The documents you need from them, and how they should submit them (for example, request that they be ready to provide PDFs of financial statement, paychecks, medical records (if needed), school records, and any other documents

- you would normally collect as part of the licensing, reassessment, or PALS process; and
- Any case specific considerations, if applicable.

For applicant(s)/caregivers with previous licensing experiences, this type of visit may feel different. If they are caring for children, talk to them in advance about ways they can engage and interact during a virtual video visit, and the kinds of interactions you would like to be able to observe.

Ask the applicant(s)/caregiver to submit measurements of each room, and written descriptions of sleeping areas. Ask them to take photos of the entire home and outside areas and to e-mail those to you. You can include these in your report and verify them during the virtual tour of the home.

Video Conference Visits

Use your WebEx account (or other secure platform) for virtual visits. Schedule the visit in advance and provide the link and meeting ID to the applicant(s)/caregivers so that they can join the meeting at the appropriate time.

Do the virtual visit. In general, the visit will be identical to an in-home visit and you should not change your process simply because it is being done remotely.

During each virtual visit, request a virtual tour of the home. Visit each room. Ask to view everything that you would view during an in-person visit. View the yard and exterior of the home. Physical requirements will be verified during an in-person visit after the emergency protocols have ended.

Ask to view the house number, mailbox, or apartment number in order to confirm that the residence you are viewing matches the applicant(s)/caregiver's address.

Talk with each household member as you usually would during a visit.

If you would usually schedule multiple visits, you should schedule the same number of virtual visits.

Collect all the documents and photos you need to include in the report and upload them with dictation. (See Documentation section below.)

Write the report as usual, adding that visits were conducted virtually.

Documentation of Virtual Visits

Document the event as a virtual visit in the event dropdown list in iFamilyNet.

In the event, check off each box for the 15 requirements for physical standards. In the comments section for the first box, indicate that physical standards were evaluated during a virtual visit. Document who completed the virtual visit.

For each additional virtual licensing, reassessment, or PALS visit, include in dictation that physical standards were reviewed again. Note any observations that are not consistent with submitted measurements and/or previous virtual visit observations.

Upload submitted documents and photos with dictation.

In-Person Visits

You may identify situations where an in-person visit is requested or needed. Talk to your supervisor and manager and together you can develop a plan.

If you identify that an in-person visit needs to occur, talk with the applicant(s)/ caregiver and anyone who will be participating in the visit. Ask the following screening questions regarding the household:

- Are you or anyone in your household sick with fever (Higher than 99.9 F) or a newly developed respiratory illness such as cough, shortness of breath, or sore throat?
- Have you had close contact with a person diagnosed with COVID-19 in the past 14 days?
- Have you or has anyone in your household been [directed to self-isolate or quarantine](#)?

If someone in the household answers yes to one of these questions, talk with your supervisor and manager. and reach out to the DCF Regional Nurse to discuss the situation further before scheduling an in-person visit.

Safety Precautions to Take During Visits

When visits occur, make sure all participants have been asked the screening questions listed above. Talk to participants about universal precautions they can take before and after the visit, like washing your hands and not touching your face. Whenever possible, have visits occur in rooms with adequate space to ensure social distancing (of 6 feet) is practiced. Utilize personal protective gear, when appropriate.