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Coronavirus: What Child Welfare Systems Need to Think About

March 11, 2020 John Kelly and Kim Hansel

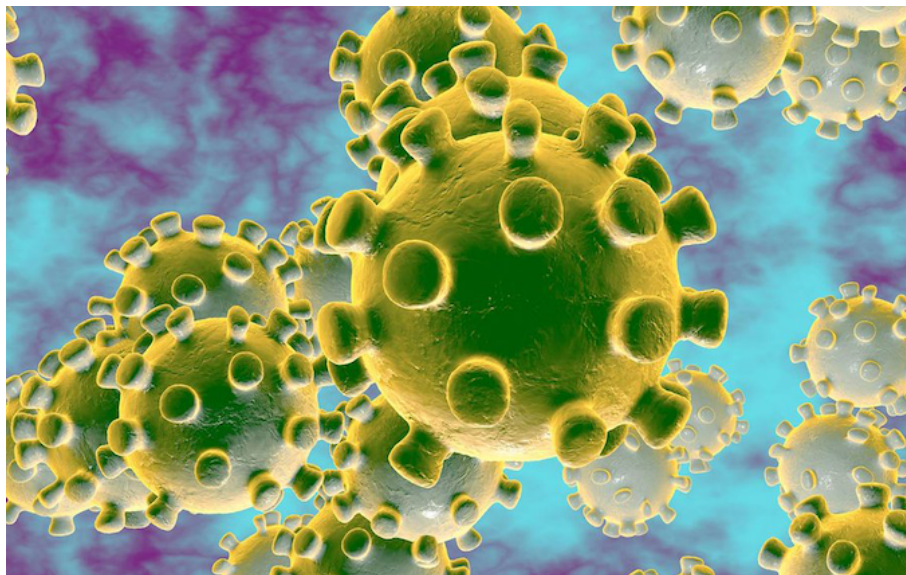


Diagram image of coronavirus. Image: Phila.gov

The coronavirus has dominated headlines across the country as the federal government and state leaders scramble to pull together

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broad plans of attack for testing, quarantining and treating those with severe symptoms. This week, the World Health Organization named the virus a pandemic, and leading U.S. virologist Anthony Fauci said of the spread in America, "**it's going to get worse.**"

Child welfare agencies will not be immune to the spread of this virus. Many state agencies have started to post basic information about health and reporting suspected cases, but the collateral consequences for these systems will go far beyond that.

The Chronicle of Social Change is soliciting information from key stakeholders in these fields – youths, parents, foster and adoptive parents, caseworkers, probation officers, judges, and others – about how the spread of coronavirus is affecting these systems' ability to function.

The goal is to help inform leaders about what is happening on the ground. Because a frequent response we have heard thus far from child welfare providers and foster parents is that there has been little in the way of guidance at this time of uncertainty.

We want to hear from the field and continue to update this thread! Share your thoughts and observations with us over email at tips@chronicleofsocialchange.org.

This is presented in a linear fashion, starting with prevention work through to the "deeper" end of systems. We will continue to update this document as we collect different ideas, or thoughts about different subjects.

Investigating Maltreatment

As of March 12, more than 10,000 schools have closed for some period of time, decisions that affect almost 5 million kids. All of the schools in Kentucky, Ohio, Maryland and Michigan will shutter for now.

For mid- to upper-class households where all the adults work, finding child care options could be a costly and onerous task. But it will be the working poor, who are disproportionately involved in the child welfare system, that will struggle the most to have children looked after.

This cannot become a funnel to child welfare cases, where leaving kids at home during work shifts becomes a basis for a surge in

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neglect cases. The government response must be to find free or very low-cost child care options for those parents who need to work and can't take days off.

Nutrition

Free- and reduced-price lunch programs, and similar breakfast programs, are a major benefit to low-income families – nearly 22 million students receive school meals. If schools close, this will present another fiscal challenge for strapped households that can generally rely on help with the cost of meals throughout the week.

UPDATE: U.S. Reps. Suzanne Bonamici (D-Ore.) and James Comer (R-Ky.) have **introduced a bill** that would establish a nationwide waiver allowing schools to deliver school meals in different community settings.

“This bill is a critical step toward ensuring that our students maintain access to the school meals they rely on for their health and well-being,” said Comer, in a statement announcing the legislation on March 11.

The bill has been folded into the broader **“Families First”** package being negotiated by House leadership.

In-Home Services

The vast majority of children involved in child welfare cases live at home. Parents are often ordered to participate in certain programs (or requested to do so voluntarily), while caseworkers make regular visits to check on the situation in the home.

Systems must assume they will experience staffing challenges in the coming months, and have a plan to ensure that there are “eyes on” children. Contingency plans, if court-ordered services aren't available because of a quarantine, will be an even tougher problem to solve.

Youth Villages, one of the largest private child welfare providers in the country with operations in 21 states, has established a screening to protect its community-based workers. From CEO Patrick Lawler, who sent out a statement outlining the Tennessee-based nonprofit's plans:

Beginning today, our community-based staff will perform a health assessment screening over the phone before conducting

an in-person session. Based on that assessment, we can help families or young people make appropriate health decisions and plan for safe sessions for our staff.

Substance Use Disorders

Many parents involved in child welfare cases are in treatment to fight drug addiction. Systems will have to determine safe and just contingency plans if traditional elements of court-ordered treatment, such as urine tests and group counseling sessions, become untenable with public closures.

Many system-involved parents are in treatment for opioid and heroin use, and some of them received methadone or other medication to help them recover. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) recently **sent out guidance** stressing that any symptomatic patients should not have to attend programs, and that take-home orders of the medication be used for anyone eligible. SAMHSA also recommended that opioid treatment programs facilitate “appropriate alternatives” to program attendance for those patients who are not authorized for unsupervised doses of methadone or similar medication.

Methadone Maintenance Therapy was recently approved as an evidence-based treatment for funding under the **Family First Act**, which opened up the federal IV-E child welfare entitlement to help states pay for efforts to prevent the use of foster care in some cases.

Visitation and Reunification Services

The primary goal once a child has been removed from home is to get them back to the parent or parents. A major part of that effort is continued visitation while the child is in foster care.

The centers used for supervised visits will need to be deep cleaned on a daily basis, and agencies should arrange Facetime or other video options between foster homes, group homes and parents.

Systems must also be creative in figuring out how to ensure that reunification services continue despite any travel restrictions or quarantines. It is grossly unjust to prolong the time a family is apart because of unavailable services.

Court Appearances

A huge looming question will be whether dependency and juvenile courts continue to function at a normal pace, or if the docket will slow down tremendously. As with the above point on visitation and reunification, it would be truly unfair to have court slowdowns delay children from being reunited with their parents.

Protecting Youth with Pre-Conditions

A high rate of youth in foster care have acute medical needs, some of which put them at increased risk of complications from coronavirus. These children need to be identified and targeted for increased monitoring. Their caregivers must be given a direct line to instant support in a crisis.

Foster Parent Employment

Many foster households work during the day, and most will continue to do so. Systems should expect that there will be a spike in the need for respite and child care during a prolonged period where schools are not in session.

The House **"Families First" bill** includes an emergency paid leave benefit that would be available to foster parents who had to stay home as a result of school closure. The benefit would pay two-thirds of salary up to a maximum \$4,000 monthly benefit.

Possible Spike in "Re-Placement" Needs

One foster parent, using the Twitter handle @Fosterhood, **shared that** she is aware of some families served by the same agency who will ask for placement changes if kids are not going to school during the year or in summer school.

Those families "return [kids] for respite the only 2 weeks they're home in August," the tweet said. "This could be a mess."

Systems should anticipate that the cancellation of school could be a serious disruption in this way, and discuss how to handle higher-than-usual requests for transfers of children.

[Note: This section was updated to identify the handle of the foster parent who posted this comment on Twitter].

Elder Caregivers

Research on kinship care out of California suggests that about half of relative caregivers are grandparents, most of them single or widowed. Many of these caregivers, based on their age, are in the group most at-risk of severe complications from coronavirus. Systems should line up contingency plans and supports for any children living with an elderly caregiver.

Outbreaks at Institutional Settings

Residential settings such as group homes and institutions, where many young people live in relatively close quarters, are at heightened risk with a virus this easily transmitted. This is especially dangerous for children with pre-conditions such as heart disease, diabetes or any chronic respiratory condition.

Systems and agencies that operate these facilities must have plans in advance for dealing with the need to quarantine youth or staff; be prepared for large relocation of children; and have agreed-upon medical centers to take children to in an emergency situation.

The national child welfare provider Youth Villages operates residential treatment programs and group homes in Tennessee and Georgia. Lawler said in his statement yesterday that the organization would temporarily suspend all volunteer-based activities, which include embedded programs like mentoring or spiritual programs and individual events like birthday parties for youth on campus.

Youth Villages will also limit off-grounds excursions for the time being, and will pre-screen family members coming to visit.

Foster Youth on College Campuses

The statistics on college graduation for foster youth are dire – less than 3 percent get a degree from a four-year college – and the decisions made by colleges during coronavirus can make the lives of these students even harder.

Thus far, most college campuses that have limited in-person classes have kept residence halls open. But if dorms and campus apartments are shuttered, while most of their classmates head home to wait out the pandemic, many current and former foster youths will struggle to find another place to live. And some will likely lack the necessary computer and Wi-Fi access necessary to continue classwork in an online setting.

myself are routinely displaced throughout our childhood. In times of crisis we must take care to protect the most vulnerable. Marginalized groups will always be disproportionately impacted by decisions made hastily without our voices at the table.

I support closing schools to reduce the spread of coronavirus, but there needs to be a plan in place to support all students. Universities must issue refunds for room and board as well as meal plans particularly [for] students who will struggle to meet these needs. They should provide support to obtain emergency foodstamps and the government should reduce barriers to access for students especially during this crisis.

There has to be a clear plan to house students who have no other choice including international students who may be impacted by travel bans and foster youth who simply have nowhere else to go. When classes are canceled, universities have been creative with using online modems to ensure learning endures. We must channel that same creativity for foster youth who cannot return to families during this time.

The university must be that family. Take care of all of your students. Remember the foster youth who are already pursuing their educational goals against most odds. We seem to be nobody's responsibility but I write to remind you we are everybody's responsibility. See us. Hear us. Remember us."

UPDATE: Jerry Milner, associate commissioner for the U.S. Children's Bureau, issued a letter to state child welfare directors asking them to reach out to foster youth and young adults "who may need assistance finding and securing housing while their college or university is closed.

"We urge child welfare agencies to work with colleges and universities, urging them to continue to provide housing as appropriate to meet the special needs of youth in foster care/formerly in foster care," Milner's letter said.

Backing up Pokempner's assertion that federal Chafee funds could help, Milner affirmed in his letter that 30 percent of the funds a state receives each year can be used "to provide room and board assistance" to those between the age of 18 and 23.

A message from Dr. Jerry Milner, Associate Commissioner, Children's Bureau

Dear Child Welfare Leaders,

In the last 24 hours the Children's Bureau has been made aware of the closing of colleges and universities to protect the health and well-being of students. Unfortunately, for many youth in foster care or formerly in foster care, on-campus housing is their only housing option. For many of these youth and young adults, there is no place to go once the school has closed their dormitory or on-campus housing, resulting in the real-time potential for homelessness for many of these youth.

The time to act is now. We urge all child welfare agencies to immediately contact all youth and young adults in colleges or in other settings who may need assistance finding and securing housing while their college or university is closed. Some schools and universities are offering the ability to remain in campus housing due to unique circumstances. We urge child welfare agencies to work with college and universities, urging them to continue to provide housing as appropriate to meet the special needs of youth in foster care/ formerly in foster care.

For those youth and young adults who are not able to stay at their colleges or universities, the child welfare agency should be prepared to offer assistance to young people in identifying housing. This could be through foster homes, assisting young people to contact relatives and other caregivers, or identifying other settings so that no young adult is without housing.

In all circumstances, we encourage child welfare agencies to be attentive to youth and young adults affected by these circumstances. Youth may require assistance not only with housing, but also accessing food, health care, and emotional support. We ask child welfare agencies to act with a sense of urgency to reach out to and support youth/ young adults at this moment.

As a reminder, up to 30 percent of a state's or tribe's annual allotment under the Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood may be used to provide room and board assistance to eligible youth ages 18 – 21 (or up to 23 if that option has been exercised in the Chafee plan). Please direct any questions on allowable use of Chafee funds to your Children's Bureau Regional Office.

Thank you for your efforts on behalf of young people in or formerly in foster care.

Jerry Milner
 Associate Commissioner
 Children's Bureau

UPDATE: Lupe Ortiz-Tovar, manager of the National Youth in Transition Database for JBS International, shared the following over email after Milner's letter was circulated:

I...heard from someone personally connected to me that by just sharing the guidance from Dr. Jerry Milner, Associate Commissioner for the U.S. Children's Bureau, their university is going to support their students...residential housing will remain the same along with their access to food, and access to counseling services (or tele-counseling should that option be needed).

It's important that during this unknown time for those in leadership, that we keep in mind that our young people deserve for us to be daring and bold in our efforts to ask the questions that they need answers to or to educate other fields that support the in their goals about their needs and the needs of other populations in need.



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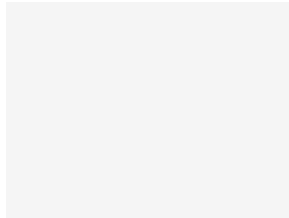
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Jenny Pokempner, a senior attorney for the Juvenile Law Center and an expert on extended foster care policy for young adults, recommended that states consider using their federal funds from the Chafee Independent Living account to help support any youth experiencing housing instability during school shutdowns.

UPDATE: On March 12, U.S. Reps **Karen Bass** (D-Calif.) and Danny Davis (D-Ill.) **held a press conference** on Capitol Hill to encourage colleges to consider the needs of foster youth as they made their decisions about closures on campus.



Congressional Caucus on Foster Youth was Live • [Follow](#)

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UPDATE: The young woman on the left, Shay House, shared the podium at the press conference with Reps. Bass and Davis this morning. House, a master's student at American University in Washington, D.C., shared her personal story about the stability of the college dorm room with Katarina Sayally, a Youth Voice correspondent for *The Chronicle*:

"Dorm closures will effectively render foster youth, low-income, and some international students homeless for an unknown length of time. Although I am not personally impacted right now, the way universities are handling this is close to my heart.

During my time in college, I called the dorms home. Today, I am a young professional, pursuing my masters degree, in large part due to the stability I gained in the dorms as an emerging adult. Campus life provided me with a sense of calm and stability that I did not have the luxury of having when I was growing up. The looming feelings of anxiety and uncertainty are all too familiar for foster youth who like