



ISSUE BRIEF

PRIORITIZING CHILD PROTECTION WORKERS: TO ENSURE THE SAFETY AND WELL-BEING OF COLORADO'S CHILDREN, WE MUST TAKE STEPS TO PROTECT THOSE CARING FOR THEM

Everyday unthinkable things happen to children. County human service departments respond to 40,000 reports of possible child abuse or neglect throughout Colorado each year.¹ Roughly 100 times a day, child protection workers serve as first responders to these reports, typically by entering families' homes they are not familiar with. Their assessments are intimate. To ensure a child's safety and well-being, a child protection worker may look to see if there's enough food in the pantry, check to make sure the child is sleeping in a safe space, and observe the child themselves for any indication of physical abuse. Workers often encounter families who are trying to make positive changes in their lives, but they also encounter those who pose a safety risk. Despite these dangers, child protection workers continue to enter these homes every day.

As the spread of COVID-19 has overwhelmed Colorado, the reports of abuse and neglect have not stopped, but the dangers child protection workers face when entering homes has increased. These workers are mandated by the state and federal government to provide services to children and their families, both in their homes and to children in foster care.² Today, in the face of potential COVID-19 exposure, child protection workers – like first responders everywhere – continue to care for some of Colorado's most vulnerable citizens without proper personal protection equipment.

Ensuring the safety of child protection workers is synonymous with protecting Colorado's children. As we take the necessary steps to slow the spread of COVID-19, including remote learning and social distancing, we are also isolating vulnerable children from the teachers, therapists and others who serve as vital advocates for their safety. Families face more stress as social distancing is enforced and their support networks diminish, as financial uncertainty escalates as businesses layoff workers, and as their responsibilities grow due to the closure of childcare facilities and schools. These stressors are risk factors for child abuse and neglect. County human service departments know, when family stress goes up, so do incidents of child abuse and neglect. And, child protection workers are at risk of contracting and spreading COVID-19 by entering homes without the supplies they need to protect themselves and others, such as gloves, hand sanitizer and facemasks.³

Colorado has designated child protection workers as "critical" employees to preserving the welfare of our citizens during the threat of COVID-19.⁴ Workers

are required to respond – in-person – to new reports of abuse or neglect needing assessment.⁵ Additionally, they are also required – under federal law and state regulations – to visit all children in foster care placement every 30 days. In rare circumstances, involving serious medical situations, workers are permitted to use video technology to connect with foster children.⁶ To be clear, this is a narrow exception and there are few cases that currently qualify. In short, child protection workers continue to complete in-person visits with children in foster care and provide services vital for protecting children – especially young, nonverbal children.⁷

Presently, throughout Colorado, many county human services departments work without the equipment necessary to protect themselves. These departments are working tirelessly to locate equipment for their staff with little result, and there is always a need for more. Child protection workers are being creative in their efforts to try to protect themselves during home visits. Some are wearing facemasks fashioned out of vacuum cleaner bags. Others are working with local distilleries – who have shifted from the production of liquor to that of hand sanitizer – to ensure they are able to practice proper hand hygiene.⁸ These efforts have been needed because the state is lacking supplies, and the limited supplies coming into the state are being prioritized to other workers.

This outbreak has revealed that our first responders wear many capes. We are indebted to medical professionals and law enforcement who are working tirelessly to serve our state. But we've also learned that first responders work in grocery stores, drive delivery trucks and respond to reports of child abuse and neglect. Supplies might be scarce, but we must not forget child protection workers when prioritizing the distribution of supplies. The interactions that child protection workers have with families and children not only have ramifications on the safety, well-being, and permanency of children, but they also have the potential to affect many throughout Colorado if they contract and pass along COVID-19.

By designating our child protection workers as “critical” employees, the state has recognized their vital role in maintaining the safety and welfare of Colorado’s children. In order for child protection workers to safely fulfill this duty, we must ensure that they are prioritized as first responders and provide them with the equipment they need to protect themselves, so they can protect our children.

¹Since 2014, there have been approximately 40,000 children per year that receive an investigation or alternative response from child protection service agencies in Colorado. (See [Child Maltreatment 2018](#), published January 15, 2020 by U.S. Department of Health & Human Services’ Administration for Children and Families Children’s Bureau.)

²Section 422(b)(17) of the Social Security Act (the Act) requires that caseworkers visit children in foster care on a monthly basis. There are no federal requirements that govern the procedures for conducting investigations of alleged child abuse and neglect. Instead, the state of Colorado specifies the protocols and timelines for contact, safety and risk assessments, and other investigation procedures. Sections 7.103.60, 7.104 and 7.202.1 of the [Colorado Code of Regulations](#) outline requirements for face-to-face meetings.

³See the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s [guidelines for first responders](#) and [guidelines for social distancing](#).

⁴See the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment’s [Third Updated Public Health Order 20-24 Implementing Stay at Home Requirements](#), published on April 1, 2020. The order effectively designates child protection workers as critical employees as they serve at-risk populations.

⁵See the [letter sent to child welfare leaders in March 2020](#) from Jerry Milner, Associate Commissioner at the Children’s Bureau.

⁶See the Colorado Department of Human Services’ Division of Child Welfare policy memo – [PM-CW-2020-0001](#) – published on April 7, 2020.

⁷Per a conversation with the Colorado Human Services Directors Association on April 1, 2020.

⁸Per information shared by select county human services departments.