



## **In Troubled Times, Advocating for Children and Young People who are Vulnerable**

As the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic continues to move across this country, the evidence of its impacts on the child welfare system are increasingly becoming visible: Child welfare offices and agencies have been forced to shut their doors in order to prevent staff members from becoming ill or because staff have tested positive for the virus.

Of course, for the tens of thousands of children and families who are involved with the foster care and child protection services, the impact of the virus—and the inescapable feelings of vulnerability that its presence has brought to us all—has long been evident.

Children, families, and communities most likely to need these services started out more fragile due to a variety of issues. They often are experiencing poverty or homelessness, lack concrete resources to meet their basic needs, and have limited access to supports and services that can help them care for their children. The organizations that make up the child welfare system have been worn down over the decades due to a lack of funding and resources. And many social workers, foster parents, and relative caregivers have been physically, mentally, and emotionally depleted by the stress of their jobs and the lack of resources available to do these jobs.

While many other agencies and businesses closed down quickly to protect their workers and those they serve, the child welfare system as a whole cannot close down. Child protection and foster care has a mandate to keep children safe and to protect their well-being, and in the midst of this pandemic that mandate does not go away—rather, achieving it becomes much more difficult.

Like police officers, firefighters, and medical personnel, child welfare workers have to leave their homes and offices to respond to allegations of abuse or neglect. Unlike the other first responders, in many states these social workers are not among those given priority access to protective gear. As many companies use their reserves and borrowing capacity to change their technology and allow their staff to work remotely, child welfare agencies are struggling to meet the costs of changes that could keep children and workers out of harm's way.

We are concerned about other providers and caretakers, as well. The mobilization of a system of “kinship care” providers—grandparents, aunts and uncles, and extended family members who step in to care for children when parents cannot, helping them retain their links to their families and communities—has been an incredibly positive step for children and youth in need. We have long known that the kinship system, as well as the foster care system itself, is fragile; often, caregivers are middle-aged or elderly, typically have fixed incomes, and are managing their own health issues in addition to maintaining the health and well-being of those in their care. Many of these relative caregivers are raising children who have pressing medical needs and other challenges of their own. Now more than ever, these caregivers need access to supports, services, and health care resources.

Additionally, other children and youth are being cared for by a non-relative foster family or live in a group care setting—a residential program, group home, shelter, or independent living setting designed to help young people. What happens if a staff member or young person in this environment tests positive for COVID-19?

With our daily functions significantly impacted by the spread of COVID-19, the child welfare system is working now based on heart. State, local, public, private, and nonprofit agencies and providers need to keep communicating with one another, sharing information and best practices as best we can during this turbulent time. Our nation’s policy-makers must prioritize children and families and recognize that these agencies and related workforces need the same level of protection that other first responders do.

It is critical for our representatives to give voice to these needs and include direct child welfare supports in legislation going forward. The next package must include specific protection and support for the social workers who are now part of the emergency responder workforce, financial support for the agencies that have been the basis for helping and protecting these children and families, and, most importantly, aid for the children and families who are now socially isolated, without work, and lacking basic necessities.

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