DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES

ADMINISTRATION FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES
Administration on Children, Youth and Families
330 C Street, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20201

June 7, 2021

Dear Child Welfare Leaders:

I am writing to thank you for your ongoing efforts to serve children and families during these very difficult times and to urge all child welfare administrators to work together with your state and local public health departments to ensure equitable access to vaccinations for all involved with the child welfare system. In particular, youth ages 12 and older[1] in foster care, young adults in extended foster care, alumni of foster care, foster parents, kinship care providers, agency caseworkers, families receiving prevention services, child protective services investigators, and other key staff are all populations that child welfare agencies should assist in securing access to critical vaccines. The health of each of these special populations is critical to the safety of children and youth in care and those who support them and critical to a well-functioning child welfare system.

As a disproportionate percentage of children and youth in foster care are children of color from underserved communities with longstanding barriers to equitable health care, digital technology, and other crucial supports, it is especially important to be proactive and take all measures possible to prioritize access to vaccinations for youth ages 12 and older in foster care, young adults, their families, and other important adults in their lives. Ensuring access to vaccines means that individuals have information to make informed decisions; access to technology to locate and make appointments for vaccinations, transportation referral, transportation funds or reimbursement, or the direct provision of transportation to travel to a vaccination site; child care arrangements; accommodations for individuals including those with disabilities; and language assistance services for individuals with limited English proficiency.

This letter is intended to strongly encourage all child welfare agencies to remain mindful of the following general and population-specific considerations and needs as you craft and implement coordinated vaccination plans across child welfare staff and populations. This includes effective communication with limited English proficient caregivers to ensure that they understand the information, resources, and assistance available. The child welfare agency and system are poised to deliver a coordinated and effective plan to vaccinate youth, families, and other individuals.

[1] At the time of writing this letter, most states have opened eligibility for vaccinations for youth 12 years of age and older, and efforts are underway to study and consider eligibility for younger children. As information is rapidly developing regarding the authorization or approval of specific vaccines for children, it is critical to remain well-informed of the current CDC guidance and to help disseminate that information to all involved with the child welfare system.

The child welfare workforce

Ensuring the health and safety of the child welfare workforce is an utmost priority. On April 17, 2020, the Children's Bureau (CB) issued a letter noting that the purchase of personal protective equipment (PPE) is an allowable cost under titles IV-B and IV-E of the Social Security Act. Letters to child welfare leaders and governors were also sent on this date, encouraging them to work with public health officials to obtain PPE for child welfare workers. We urge similar prioritization and steps be taken now to ensure prioritized access to vaccinations for child protective services workers and case workers that serve children, youth, and families.

Young adults and older youth in foster care

On March 12, 2020, CB issued a letter to the field urging 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. We urge all child welfare agencies to again make such contacts to inquire if young people have received the vaccine, ask if they have questions or need assistance making an appointment to be vaccinated, and to offer to arrange transportation to vaccination appointments. Young adults also value information from other young adults and trusted peers; therefore, we strongly encourage independent living coordinators to work with young leaders and alumni groups to help with outreach, support, and education efforts about the vaccines.

Foster/resource parents and families

Many foster/resource parents and families have more than one child or youth in the home and are juggling a number of responsibilities including work and potentially assisting children with education where schools are operating on remote or hybrid schedules. For these reasons, it may be especially difficult for foster/resource parents to find the time to schedule vaccination appointments and travel to those appointments. CB strongly encourages child welfare agencies to work with public health departments to provide direct assistance to foster/resource parents and the eligible children and youth in their homes in making appointments, offering assistance in locating child care and transportation to appointments, and pursuing opportunities to work with nurse practitioners or public health officials to administer vaccinations during home visits to all eligible family members.

Kinship care providers and grandfamilies

We urge all child welfare agencies to make immediate contact with all kinship care providers and grandfamilies to offer assistance with making appointments and providing transportation to vaccination sites and, where possible, to make arrangements for vaccinations during home visits. We also remind all child welfare agencies that kinship navigator programs and funds can be used to conduct outreach and provide direct assistance to kinship care providers, and that title IV-E kinship navigator expenses may be reimbursed by CB at 100 percent until September 30, 2021.

Families served by the child welfare system

We also urge child welfare agencies to reach out to all parents of children in care, as well as all families being served by the child welfare system, to inquire if they have had a vaccine, have a vaccination plan, or would like assistance accessing a vaccine. The pandemic has been especially hard on parents with children in foster care, interrupting or limiting family time and the ability to see their children and delaying reunification plans. In many places around the country, parents have experienced loss of employment or reductions in income, housing instability, limited access to health care, and other crucial services and supports, any of which can make access to vaccinations more difficult. Many parents may also lack reliable access to the internet, which can be an obstacle to making vaccination appointments. Proactively assisting parents with access to vaccinations should be seen as an important step toward supporting family health, stability, and promoting reunification.

Finally, it is important for child welfare agencies to start to look ahead to when vaccines may be available for children under age 12. The time is now to review existing laws, procedures, and protocols and to solicit input from medical professionals, caregivers, parents, children and youth, courts, and advocates to develop protocols for determining consent to provide a COVID-19 vaccine to children in foster care. Preparing now will ensure that children under age 12 are able to be quickly vaccinated so they can return to full participation in their school and community activities. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) developed educational materials to increase vaccine confidence and ensure equitable vaccine distribution to adolescents who are at increased risk for severe COVID-19, those with limited access to routine vaccination services, and other hard-to-reach populations.

Again, we appreciate all the efforts you have made and continue to make during these very difficult times to help keep children and youth safe and families strong. As a field, you have risen to the occasion and demonstrated great leadership, creativity, and resilience. We ask you to continue demonstrating that leadership and creativity in developing vaccination plans and procedures with the input of families and youth, as we push to ensure that all involved with the child welfare system receive equitable access to vaccinations.

Sincerely,



Aysha E. Schomburg, Esq.
Associate Commissioner
Children's Bureau