DCFS Acting Director Marc Smith:

Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you, Andi and everyone at Illinois Collaboration on Youth (ICOY) for hosting this call today. It is incredibly important that we communicate with each other. Throughout this crisis, I'm grateful that we have an association that represents so many of our providers that can act as a conduit at times like this.

Like all of you, I'm concerned about the presence of COVID-19 in Illinois. We're working around the clock to protect Illinois’ child welfare staff across the state, including the kids in our care, and the families and the communities that we serve and work with every day.

Let me be clear at this point. The safety of your staff and the safety of the children and families that we serve is and always will be my top priority.

We know that there are many questions regarding how this virus is impacting our operations and yours. Contingency planning has been underway and continues on a number of fronts as the situation evolves. As many of you know, we have assembled a COVID-19 emergency planning teams at DCFS made up of staff from various divisions across the department. They are planning and coordinating our plans, our preparation, and our response efforts. The planning team is in contact daily with the Illinois Department of Public Health and the Illinois Emergency Management Agency, as well as other state agencies experienced and responding to infectious disease outbreaks. Their efforts are aimed at ensuring the plans policies and protocols related to COVID-19 will sustain the continuation of our operations, services, and the safety of our staff and those who we serve.

Central to their planning is the impact that this will have on all of you in the private sector. As many of you heard me say before, when it comes to this work we’re doing, there is no difference between us. We are serving the same children and provide the same services and we cannot do this work without you.

The dynamic nature of this outbreak requires us to be nimble and how we respond. We know today's situation will change tomorrow, so we must be prepared to adjust the course when necessary.

The governor announced over the weekend that the state of Illinois would be moving to have as many employees as feasible work from home. DCFS is no exception. Our team has drawn up plans for our staff to work remotely whenever possible. Some non-essential staff will simply be staying home at this time.

As of today, we continue to take hotline calls, run background checks, conduct investigations, visit children and support families as we always have. The services we are providing remain unchanged.

We are still knocking on doors and ensuring that children in our care are safe. We expect the same from you. Babies are still being born. Abuse and Neglect is still happening. Families that were already in crisis before the virus
now have new stresses and are especially at risk. And for all these reasons, we need you to continue your organization's work more than ever.

I know this crisis is putting a huge burden on you and your staff and their families. I know we are stretched to the limit. You have our admiration, our respect, and our commitment to do everything we can to help keep you safe and enable you to do your jobs. You and your staff do heroic work. And we need that to continue. The children we protect and the families we strengthen, need that work to continue. I am asking you, despite facing unprecedented health crisis, to work with us and each other and to continue to protect our most vulnerable Illinois children.

Many of you have submitted questions to ICOY prior to this call. I'm going to try to answer those questions as best I can based on the information we have today. Thank you for joining us and we're all in this together.

**QUESTION 1: Will DCFS provide POS agencies with protective gear and additional supplies needed to combat the virus?**

*Smith:*
Protective gear is very short supply right now. While we have ordered additional supplies such as hand sanitizers, additional cleaning agents, many of these items are on backorder and won't be available for more than a month. Protective gear or equipment is not available from the state of Illinois to anyone other than first responders at the moment. Our staff does not have gear and we won't be able to supply it. We won't have supplies to provide to your agencies. If the gear becomes available, we will have conversations about how to make those supplies available to staff that have to receive PMP training and know how to use the equipment within OSHA guidelines.

**QUESTION 2: Can we have guidelines and expectations in writing? Because until then practice will not be consistent across the state.**

*Smith:*
DCFS sent out guidelines on Sunday to our providers. We will continue to update those guidelines as situations change. As I mentioned earlier, we have set up a new site within the Dnet and will continue to make recommendations and guidance available there as well as a Q&A from providers online.

**QUESTION 3: What decision would DCFS take on POS contractual obligations that will be unable to be met due to the COVID-19 fallout?**

*Smith:*
The expectation for POS obligations are the same as DCFS obligations. Every agency needs to develop and implement plans consistent with the guidance provided by the Department on Mach 15, 2020 titled “Guidance for Purchases Service Agencies, Corona Disease 2019”. The safety and protection of children remain unchanged during this crisis and planning to ensure essential services continue to be at the forefront of any POS agency planning effort. The department recognizes the staffing challenges ahead and that performance metrics during this period may need to be accessed differently.
For permanency and Intact, for children in foster care, contacts should be made monthly. Staff should make a pre visit phone call and determine if the child or others in home are exhibiting symptoms. If so, direction should be given to seek medical screening, and video and phone contact will suffice. If a family or child has a medical isolation due to exposures, and a worker would not make contact with the families outside of to assess safety, then the worker is to make contact via video and phone. If there are immediate concerns on the safety of a child, the hotline, police, or EMS depending on the issue, should be contacted

Contact with parents are visitations with their children and care can be completed via video visitation if possible. Worker contact with parents should be completed via phone or video. Workers should not make in-person contact with medically complex children. Contact should be via phone or video.

Children should not be given permission to travel out of state at this time.

**QUESTION 4: What is the guidance from DCFS if all schools and daycare centers are forced to close?**

**Smith:**
As all of you are aware at this point, all k-12 schools have been closed across the state. DCFS and ISBE issued a joint communication to all 852 School District foster parents and care liaisons on Friday asking for notification if the district is going to do a e-learning or paper packets. If the district is one on one with computers, we have notified liaisons that our youth may not have access to internet. And we do not want the student going to a public place to get access.

Our students are protected by a protected class and regards to e-learning and will not be penalized for incomplete work. We have asked that our youth receive a paper option. All districts were given this current and complete list of youth in care in their specific district on Fridays. This was given to the district foster care liaisons and others at ISBE.

ISBE shut all non-public therapeutic/residential schools in Illinois. These facilities are not one on one with computers. It is up to the residential schools whether they will be providing paper packets. This will be reevaluated on March 30.

All post-secondary students have been contacted about living arrangements. In case students may not stay on campus. Our youth, along with homeless and international students, are allowed to stay on campus.

If the youth does not feel comfortable staying on campus, we have had one student where this was the case, we are working with the students to find housing during this time.

Our post-secondary education specialists have also let our colleges know that we will assist with money for food and provisions during this time. If day care decides to close their operations, we have no authority to ask them to remain open. They are a private business and how to operate open close hours and day of operation is their decision. We are monitoring compliance of licensing standards while they operate on a pending application.
However, we can inquire about notices to parents, transition plans of if any, and whether they will contact other daycares nearby to accommodate those children, and whether they offer their staff to those day cares who are willing to operate.

**QUESTION 5: What protection from liability are there for community providers? If COVID-19 disrupts the service delivery process for private agencies resulting in inadequate staffing, resources, etc., will POS agencies have protections from negative outcomes that might occur?**

*Smith:*
Your contract does state that they are an independent contractor. They are required under the contract to maintain their own insurance. Additionally, the contract provides that any indemnification by DCFS will be governed by the State Employee Indemnification Act as interpreted by the state of Illinois Attorney General.

The department makes no representation that contractors and independent contractors will qualify or be eligible for indemnification under said Act.

**QUESTION 6: Recognizing that we are already under workforce crisis, and that the need for training a new staff is critical, how will DCFS implement further trainings?**

*Smith:*
The Office of Learning and Development has put forth a contingency plan with which includes converting all current essential trainings to either an on-demand teleconference or webinar format so that all participants can continue forward with essential trainings without physically being gathered together in a training classroom.

Where possible, participants will be redirected to already existing online virtual format retraining, such as caregivers in service or preservice training. Where no on-demand training options currently exist, such as for casework foundation, or where participants have no access to online trainings, such as certain caregiver preservice participants. trainers will be ready to offer current scheduled trainings, but from an adapted telephone conference or WebEx formats. For a very limited number of trainings it will be possible to delay those trainings to a future date when operations return to normal.

The Office of Learning has also put forth a strategy to focus home simulation portions of the investigative preservice training to occur once operations returns to normal.

C-well exams and tests will occur prior to simulations currently and will not directly impact by a delays specifically in simulations. The Office of Learning is also working on a plan for foundations and C-well testing for a virtual testing method for both preservice staff participants, as well as for university partner students who currently also take some foundation testing. The virtual method will include the use of either laptops or cell phones or videos of the participant for identification, room environment, to provide no external unauthorized resources, are in the view of the test takers. And the virtual Proctor will remain watching the video of the test taker throughout the limited testing.
The Office of Learning is also piloting an option to continue the child and family team facilitator training and coaching using phones and or video conferencing. So Illinois remains compliant with DH consent decrees.

Smith:
We appreciate everyone joining us for this call today. Due to the high number of people who are on the call, we would ask that you send any further questions in writing and we will hold this call on a regular basis throughout this crisis. We will use this time to communicate with you about things as they change and as they move forward.

I would like to alternately thank all of you for your hard work and focus during this time, maintaining the understanding that our mission is to care for the safety of our children, and the support of our families. We care immensely about the safety of our staff. And we want everyone to ensure that that message is pushed across our workforce. Thank you for your time, and I look forward to further questions.

*If you have additional field-specific questions for DCFS around coronavirus, please submit them here. DCFS will hold a standing listen-only webinar every Monday at 4 pm to address submitted questions and deliver updates.*

*The next webinar will be on Monday, March 23 at 4 pm. You can register for that here.*