

For Parents Involved with OCS: Frequently Asked Questions During the COVID-19 Crisis

What is the OCS response to COVID-19?

During this public health emergency, OCS Staff has limited in-person contact with clients and others. With the Governor's phased approach to Reopen Alaska Responsibly, OCS is working to protect the children, birth parents, resource parents, and OCS staff from risk of unnecessary exposure. OCS is continuing in-person contact for the following:

- Responding to reports of harm as well as Provider Investigations.
- Emergency removals and activities related to emergency placements (including safety evaluation of homes or fingerprinting for emergency licensing).
- Emergencies in foster homes or with a foster child.
- Child transports to critical appointments.
- Family contact and family caseworker visits.
- Scheduled appointments at OCS field office.

Additional steps OCS is taking to limit the spread of the COVID-19 Virus include:

- Allowing staff to use video conferencing when appropriate.
- Promoting the continued use of video conferencing and telephone contact when in person contact cannot occur.
- Implementing health screening and temperature checks for OCS staff and visitors.
- Practicing social distancing and universal health precautions when in-person contact is required.

Many OCS staff are telecommuting for work duties when possible. All staff in the office are being reminded to wash their hands frequently, use a face mask when around the public, and ensuring public spaces are sanitized regularly.

All public entry to OCS offices will be by appointment only. All OCS offices must provide pre-screening over the telephone before appointments occur in the office.

Any OCS staff who are showing signs of illness or not feeling well will be asked to go home.

Will an OCS Specialist come into our home?

Caseworkers should be completing their monthly caseworker visits. Also, OCS staff will be coming into your home if there has been a report of suspected abuse or neglect of a child in the house. OCS staff must first use the screening question below before in-person contact and will be required to wear available Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).

Screening Questions:

1. In the past 1-14 days have you:
 - a. Experienced any of the following symptoms that are new to you and have not been evaluated by a healthcare provider?
 - 1) Cough
 - 2) Shortness of Breath
 - 3) Fever
 - 4) Chills
 - 5) Muscle Pain
 - 6) Sore Throat
 - 7) Headache
 - 8) Fatigue
 - 9) New loss of taste or smell
 - 10) Congestion or runny nose
 - 11) Diarrhea
 - 12) Vomiting or nausea
 - b. Traveled outside the State of Alaska?
 - c. Been contacted by a contact tracer with a local or state health department due to possible exposure to COVID-19?
 - d. Been within 6 feet of someone for longer than 15 minutes who tested positive or is presumed positive by a healthcare provider for COVID-19?

If my child is in foster care, how will I have contact with my child, and how can I know how they are doing?

The current public health crisis has been hard for everyone in Alaska, but we know it is especially hard for you. Please know, OCS is doing everything in its ability to ensure safety for your children in care. In person family visitation has resumed in many communities. Starting June 15, 2020, each parent and child who live in the same community should have a minimum of 1 in-person visit per week barring any safety concerns or recommendations to the contrary. Participants are pre-screened and face coverings are required for individuals over 2 years old, with the exception for those with underlying medical conditions who have been advised by their health care provider to not wear a mask. As communities and OCS offices see spikes in COVID-19, certain areas are limited on in-person visitation. Resource Families are asked to provide family contact via Skype, Zoom, or other video technology when in person contact cannot occur. Resource Families have also been encouraged to allow liberal phone contact for children with their families. If this is not what you are experiencing, please contact your OCS Specialist or their supervisor via phone or email. You may also contact your OCS Specialist or the child's Guardian ad litem with any questions about the health or other areas of concern for your child.

Tips for making the most out of your virtual visits:

- Birth to 1 year old: read, sing, talk about simple concepts such as colors, shapes, play "Peek a boo" "Head and shoulders knees and toes," ask your baby questions and wait for them to respond, use eye contact as much as able to do so
- 1-5 year old: read, sing, play go fish with a deck of cards, play tapes and sing along to nursery rhyme songs, use a song you can move/dance to such as I'm a little teapot, going on a bear hunt, establish eye

contact if possible, have both the caregiver and parent read the same book together to your child, learn about a new animal, play “Simon Says,” have a tea party together

- Elementary school-age: read, dance virtually, help with homework, share a family story, play a game such as a card game, checkers, do the same art/craft such as making pinwheels with paper, paper airplanes, charades, bingo, write a letter together for a family member/sibling, write a story
- Middle/high school age: play a dance/workout routine if possible together, play a mutual game such as word games, bingo, apples to apples, write a shared letter to a family member/sibling, tell a family story, learn origami, play “Would you Rather,” write a story or journaling together

What do I do if my child is sick? Does Medicaid cover testing of a child for COVID-19? Can a parent or foster parent get a child tested?

If a child is ill, or you have concerns, call the office of the child’s Primary Care Provider with any questions. The child’s Primary Care Provider will guide you if the child should come to the provider’s office, emergency room, or monitor the child from home.

If a medical professional determines that it is medically necessary to have a child tested, Medicaid will cover the cost for the test. If your child lives in a foster care setting, you will be notified that the child is being tested.

Can children and youth receive the COVID vaccines? Who can consent to the vaccination?

- At this time the COVID vaccines have only been approved for emergency use for adults and youth 16 and older. The CDC states that as the vaccine availability increases, vaccination recommendations will expand to include more groups, see [CDC](#) and [State of Alaska](#) vaccine information.
- The COVID vaccine is considered an elective immunization. This means that the youth’s parent or guardian must consent to the vaccine. Consent would need to come from the child’s biological parents, or from OCS in the case that parental rights have been terminated. OCS would notify the legal parties before consenting to the vaccination.
- Youth 16 and older who are placed in residential settings in Alaska are on the first schedule for vaccines. This schedule is expanding as more vaccines become available. The state of Alaska has current information on the [COVID-19 vaccine status update](#).

What can I do to keep working toward reunification with my child?

It is important to continue to maintain contact with your children and work with OCS on your case plan goals. Though it may be frustrating having to wear a face covering or have visitation with your child virtually, it’s needed to keep our community safe and slow the spread of COVID-19. Please continue to work with the service providers you are involved with. If you are unsure of what to do, reach out to the service provider to discuss how they are providing virtual case management. If you miss any important appointments, please let your OCS Specialist know. Remember, stay positive, and as a community, we’ll get through this together.

- Remember to keep in contact with your assigned OCS Specialist via email, phone, or text and to provide them with updates on your progress. Please allow your OCS Specialist 24 hours to return your call/email. If you are unable to reach the OCS Specialist after 24 hours, you can call the main office number, and request to speak to their supervisor.
- Contact your current service providers and see what they can do to continue to work with you over the phone or through video.
- If you are referred for services during this time, please respond promptly to service providers trying to set up phone calls, or “video” interviews with you.
- If you do get sick, please stay inside, and take care of yourself. Notify your OCS Specialist as soon as you can that that you were ill.
- If you are required to participate in substance abuse testing, communicate any transportation or other issues with your OCS Specialist. Some testing facilities have altered their hours and procedures.

- Keep a written journal of all your electronic contacts with your children and everything you are doing to work on your case plan. This should include dates, times, how long the contact lasted, and what was discussed. Share this journal with your caseworker.
- Please attend all court hearings and maintain contact with your attorney. Do not be afraid to contact the attorney to express your concerns.

What if I don't have access to a smart phone or computer?

If you do not have access to a phone, smart phone, or a computer for virtual or telephonic visits with your child, please call your caseworker about the possibility of setting up an appointment at the OCS office to have your virtual family contact.

- Contact GCI to opt into a lifeline phone program. <https://www.gci.com/mobile/lifeline>
Or call 1-800-800-4800.
- Discuss other options with your OCS Specialist.
- Contact the Service Array unit with OCS for additional assistance at 1-855-603-8637 or email at ocsservicearray@alaska.gov.

Will there be a delay in my child returning home?

OCS encourages all parents to continue to engage in all court hearings and case plan activities. OCS, providers, and others strive to have your child returned home as soon as safely possible. If there are questions about specific case-related information, please contact your assigned OCS Specialist.

What assistance can OCS provide if childcare is an issue with the closure of schools?

OCS can work with parents to find alternative or temporary providers when needed. The Office of Children's Services Childcare team is available at 465-5648 or ocschildcare@alaska.gov, to answer questions and to assist in locating potential childcare options.

Other useful links:

- Help Me Grow Alaska: the go-to place for anything related to parenting your child.
<http://www.helpmegrowak.org/> or 1-833-HMG-ALASKA
- Thread: connections with Early Childhood Specialists
<http://www.threadalaska.org/> or 1-800-278-3723
- Alaska CARELINE: Mental health emergency counseling
<http://dhss.alaska.gov/dbh/Documents/Prevention/docs/Careline-Brochure-General.pdf> or 1-877-266-4357
- Beacon Hill (Safe Families for Children Alaska): Safe Families Helpline is open
info@beaconhillak.com or 907-277-0925, 24 hours a day
- Anchorage Community Mental Health: Crisis line and appointments available
<https://acmhs.com/> or 907-563-3200, 24 hours a day
- Recover Alaska: Substance abuse treatment/information
<mailto:info@recoveralaska.org> or 907-249-6674
- AWAIC (Abused Women's Aid in Crisis): crisis and support line at
<http://www.awaic.org/> or 907-272-0100
- RCPC (Resource Center for Parents and Children):
<https://www.rcpcfairbanks.org/> or 907-465-9099
- Tundra Women's Coalition (Bethel):
<http://tundrapeace.org/> or Crisis Line 1-800-478-7799

National Hotlines:

- NAMI (National Alliance for Mental Health) HelpLine
 - 800-950-6264, 10:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. (EST), Monday-Friday
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
 - 800-273-8255 or Chat with Lifeline
- National Parent Helpline: Parents and caregivers needing emotional support and links to resources
 - 855-4APARENT, 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. (PST), Monday to Friday
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA's)
 - Disaster Distress Helpline: 1-800-985-5990 or text TalkWithUs to 66746, TTY 1-800-846-851
- Postpartum Support International: The PSI HelpLine is a toll-free telephone number anyone can call to
 - PSI HelpLine at 1-800-944-4773(4PPD) or text 503-894-9453
- Crisis Text Line: Crisis Text Line is a global not-for-profit organization providing free, confidential crisis intervention via SMS message. The organization's services are available 24 hours a day, every day.
 - Text HOME to 741741
- Childhelp: They help child abuse victims, parents, concerned individuals
 - 800-4-A-CHILD (800.422.4453)
- Darkness to Light: They help children and adults needing local information or resources about sexual abuse
 - 866-FOR-LIGHT (866.367.5444)
- National Domestic Violence Hotline Phone: They help children, parents, friends, offenders
 - 800-799-SAFE (800-799-7233), TTY: 800-787-3224, Video Phone Only for Deaf Callers: 206-518-9361