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Four facts about Child Welfare during the COVID-19 pandemic

(Salem, Ore.) – The COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact daily life in Oregon, yet there are stable foundations and values which guide the work to support children and families during these difficult times.

Much of the way the Oregon Department of Human Services, Child Welfare Program works has changed to keep people safe and well. The pace of information and change is rapid and there have been rumors and misinformation causing confusion in the community about the actions of the Child Welfare Program.

“During this very fluid situation, where there are more questions than answers, we are keeping child safety and wellbeing at the forefront of our work and want to make sure the community knows how we are doing so,” said Rebecca Jones Gaston, DHS Child Welfare Director.

Four facts about the work of the Child Welfare Program during the COVID-19 pandemic follow:

Fact #1: The Oregon Child Abuse Hotline is open and child abuse and neglect assessments are still being done in person.

The Oregon Child Abuse Hotline is still answering calls 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year, and Child Welfare staff will continue to respond to reports of abuse and neglect, and work with community partners to maintain support to families.

The COVID-19 pandemic creates many challenges for families, which could impact child safety, including:

- Economic instability
- Lack of access to medical care
- Limited access to regular meals due to school closures
- Increased mental health issues

The Child Welfare Program encourages Oregonians to check in with families in their community-- including young children, children and adults with developmental delays or

other medical vulnerabilities, isolated children and families, and youth and families with severe emotional/mental health needs – through phone, email, or by safe distance, and provide support and resources when this can safely be done. Dropping off groceries, diapers, or sharing information about 211 can make a big difference in a family's wellbeing.

Anyone with concerns about potential neglect or abuse should report it to the Oregon Child Abuse Hotline at 1-855-503-SAFE (7233).

Fact #2: In-person visits between children in foster care and their biological parents are still happening, even during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Oregon Child Welfare Program is allowing in-person visits to happen in the community with special considerations. These considerations include the health of children, foster parents, parents, and if caseworkers agree there are no health-related concerns around visits and enough room to practice physical distancing.

Sometimes, in-person visits are not able to occur. In these situations, Child Welfare is modifying plans to allow frequent and meaningful phone and virtual contact between families of origin and children; as well as siblings that are not together.

Children of all ages, even babies, benefit from seeing their parents via videoconferencing hearing their voices by phone. Parents also greatly benefit from this contact. When frequent and meaningful contact is maintained, even virtually, parents are more motivated to stay engaged in their case plan and children do better.

On March 24, 2020 in-person visits at DHS offices were suspended. Since then they have been allowed in the community when possible. The decision regarding in-person visits at DHS offices will be reconsidered in June.

Fact #3: Oregon Child Welfare will not place children in foster care because their parents or caregivers are diagnosed with COVID-19.

There are times when a caregiver is unable to care for their child due to severe illness. In these cases, if the caregiver requests it and when there is no one else who is able to provide a safe environment for the child, it might be necessary for the child to enter foster care until the caregiver's health allows them to care for the child again.

This would only be done on a voluntary basis and if the caregiver needed and requested it. The Oregon Child Welfare Program would first work with the caregiver to identify any potential friends or family that can provide a safe and caring environment for the child before making the decision that entering foster care was necessary. This type of voluntary placement does not affect a caregiver's custodial rights and does not involve the child dependency legal system.

A parent or other primary caregiver having a severe illness, including COVID-19, would never be the sole reason for removing a child in Oregon.

Parents or other primary caregivers are encouraged to plan ahead and identify a circle of support made up of friends, family, and their community who can provide assistance in case of emergency.

Fact #4: Not following Governor Brown's Stay Home, Save Lives executive order or not following physical distancing guidelines would never be a reason for a Child Protective Services (CPS) assessment.

When the Oregon Child Abuse Hotline receives a report of suspected abuse or neglect, that report is screened, and then if assigned for a CPS safety assessment, case workers will visit the family and do a safety assessment.

This assessment is very thorough and involves assessing all the factors within the family that can impact the safety of the child. Our caseworkers do a thorough assessment of who is in the home, parenting practices, vulnerability of the child, and much more.

Political activity, protests or beliefs are never a reason to assign a CPS assessment. Additionally, refusing to follow physical distancing guidelines or the Stay Home, Save Lives executive order are never reasons to assign a CPS assessment.

For additional resources and information:

- Need food right now? Visit needfood.oregon.gov
- Oregon Department of Human Services COVID-19 Information and Resources: <https://govstatus.egov.com/or-dhs-covid-19>
- Oregon Child Welfare COVID-19 Resources: <https://www.oregon.gov/DHS/CHILDREN/Pages/COVID-19.aspx>

- 211info.org (also by dialing 211) offers connection to local and regional resources for food banks, housing assistance, and mental health services
- Lines for Life, a nonprofit dedicated to substance abuse and suicide prevention: 1-800-273-8255 or text '273Talk' to 839863
- Oregon Health Authority - COVID-19 Updates: <https://govstatus.egov.com/OR-OHA-COVID-19>

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