

Pennsylvania Family Support Programs Guidance during the COVID-19 Pandemic

November 18, 2020

The Office of the Governor, Pennsylvania Department of Health and Department of Human Services (DHS) has issued guidance to Pennsylvania businesses and Medical Assistance-enrolled providers to safely operate in ways to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 through reduced person-to-person contact between professionals and Pennsylvanians.

The following addresses the delivery of Family Support services during the COVID-19 pandemic. Guidance issued below will assist the Family Support community in delivering home visiting and group-based services dependent on the severity of COVID-19.

Strategies to Deliver Family Support Services:

What service delivery strategies are possible when supporting a Family in the program while also mitigating COVID-19?

The Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL) recognizes that maintaining the safety of the Family Support workforce and families is essential during the COVID-19 pandemic. The use of virtual home visiting/tele-intervention/ virtual group-based strategies to implement the Family Support Program(s) is recommended as Pennsylvania continues to implement mitigation efforts as issued by the Pennsylvania Department of Health (PA DOH). In addition to the guidance within this document and the applicable orders all Family Support Programs should follow all guidance issued by their respective model developers to ensure home visiting and other Family Support Programs are being delivered with fidelity.

While there is not a right or wrong answer to the decision on how to deliver Family Support services, the local program needs to determine what is best to both meet the needs of the family and mitigate the spread of COVID-19. Considerations related to community spread should be on the forefront of the decision to provide in-person Family Support services.

Use the [COVID-19 Dashboard](#) to review transmission risk in your community. While in-person strategies may be safer in Moderate or Low Risk communities, it is recommended that when a community is in [Substantial Risk](#) of transmission of COVID-19, virtual home visiting/tele-intervention/ virtual group-based strategies are used to implement the Evidence-based Home Visiting or Family Support Program(s).

Family Support Programs are encouraged to develop plans for safely re-establishing in-person Family Support services within their community. OCDEL encourages all Family Support programs to collaborate with their neighboring programs to assure expectations for services are being provided consistently.

In addition, all Family Support Programs should ensure that they communicate the requirements for in-person services to all families and that all staff understand the Family Support providers safety plan so that it can be consistently communicated with families. The health and safety plans should be individualized and based upon the needs and design of the program. Family Support Programs are required to share their health and safety plans in a way that stakeholders (including families) can access. This may be on a website, provided in writing as part of a parent handbook, through social media, etc.

Health and Safety Procedures:**What health and safety procedures should be followed regarding Personal Protective Equipment?**

Family Support professionals must turn to their employing agency for access to personal protective equipment (PPE) to include but not limited to; face masks and disinfecting products. There are many companies featured in this [link](#) who are able to supply PPE. Grant funds may be used to support the purchase of PPE for use by the Family Support workforce. If families request the provider to use additional PPE (gowns/face shields) beyond what is established in provider health and safety practices, the provider agency may offer virtual home visiting/tele-intervention strategies/virtual group-based service to implement the program as an alternative to in-person strategies.

What health and safety procedures should be followed regarding face coverings for Family Support providers?

Family Support providers must always wear masks when working in-person with a family, regardless of the ability to practice sustained physical distancing. A mask is a face covering that covers the nose and mouth that is secured to the head with ties, straps, or loops over the ears or is wrapped around the lower face. All Family Support providers must wear a face covering that covers the nose and mouth during the entirety of service provision, regardless of physical distance when indoors or in an enclosed space and outdoors when unable to maintain sustained physical distance.

Masks can be challenging to incorporate into the relationship with a young child, so careful planning and preparation with the family supporting the child may be needed in advance of delivering the first in-person session. Many mask designs are available that allow the child and family to see the mouth of the Family Support provider. The Office of Developmental Programs has guidance available in the [use of clear face masks to facilitate communication](#).

Face coverings can be a barrier when Family Support providers are communicating or seeking to communicate with someone who is deaf/hard of hearing or has another disability where the ability to see the mouth is essential for communication. All alternatives to wearing a face covering, including the use of a face shield, should be exhausted. This can include, alternate strategies to implement Family Support services, such as virtual home visiting/tele-intervention or demonstrating a strategy using a recording during an in-person session. When in-person strategies are necessary, Family support professionals may use an alternative to a face covering which may include a plastic face shield that covers the nose and mouth, extends below the chin and to the ears, and leaves no exposed gap between the forehead and the shield's headpiece. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has advised there is currently not enough evidence to determine how much protection a face shield provides to individuals around the person wearing the face shield, because of gaps where respiratory droplets may escape.

If a mask becomes soiled, a new or laundered mask should be used when visiting another family in the same day. Cloth masks should be laundered each day as per CDC guidance.

As a reminder, follow the CDC and PA DOH guidelines regarding the use, type and style of face mask for a non-healthcare provider. A face covering can be made of a variety of synthetic or natural fabrics, including cotton, silk, or linen. A face covering may be factory-made, sewn by hand, or be improvised from household items, including, but not limited to, scarfs, bandanas, t-shirts, sweatshirts, or towels. While procedural and surgical masks intended for health care providers and first responders, such as N95 respirators, meet those requirements, these specialized masks should be reserved for appropriate occupational and health care personnel.

What health and safety procedures should be followed regarding face coverings for families and children?

On November 18, 2020, the Secretary of the Pennsylvania DOH announced an updated [Order Requiring Universal Face Coverings](#). The order, signed under Secretary Levine's authority under the Disease Prevention and Control Act, outlines the situations when a mask must be worn and includes limited exceptions to the face-covering requirement.

Based upon PA guidance regarding universal face coverings; it is required that adults and children over 2 who are present during an in-person service wear masks in their home or other setting where the family is receiving services. Children under the age of 2 should not wear a mask at any time. Families should be prepared to supply their own face covering(s) during the in-person Family Support services. If a family indicates the adults will not wear any face covering, the provider agency will offer virtual home visiting /tele-intervention strategies/ virtual group-based services to implement the Family Support program as an alternative to in-person strategies.

Exceptions to mask wearing:

All alternatives to wearing a face covering, including the use of a face shield, should be exhausted before any child over the age of 2 or adult, not including Family Support personnel, is exempt from the face covering requirement. This includes any child over the age of 2 or adult, not including Family Support personnel, who cannot wear a mask because it would either cause a medical condition, or exacerbate an existing one, including those with respiratory issues that impede breathing, a mental health condition, or disability. If a child 2 years old or older is unable to remove a face covering without assistance, the child is not required to wear one. Additionally, sustained physical distancing between non-household members must be in place for the duration of the in-person Family Support service.

At this time there are no exceptions to mask wearing for religious reasons.

What health and safety procedures should be followed regarding screening prior to an in-person visit?

Prior to an in-person visit, the provider of the Family Support service will contact the family to ask the health screening questions found on the COVID Screener for in-person Family Support Services. The provider should document the responses to the screening on a form or within a session note. A family is not required to respond to health screening questions to receive Family Support services. Families who choose to not be screened will be offered virtual home visiting/tele-intervention strategies/ virtual group-based services. The health screening template includes three screening questions and two additional considerations that must be used. If additional questions are desired, the questions will need to be approved by the local Family Support program with collaboration with the BEISFS. Family Support Programs should first reach out to their designated Family Support consultant regarding the request to add additional questions.

What health and safety procedures should be followed regarding the use of a waiver?

Providers of Family Support services may develop waivers of liability to be signed by the family participating in in-person Family Support services. Waivers developed by a provider agency should be done in conjunction with their legal counsel. A family is not required to sign a waiver of liability to receive Family Support services. Virtual home visiting /Tele-intervention strategies/ virtual group-based services to implement the program should be offered if the family chooses to not sign a waiver of liability.

What health and safety procedures should be followed during an in-person visit?

Family Support Providers should refrain from bringing outside items into the home or community setting. Providers shall have protocols in place to disinfect any personal items used in the home or community setting and used by the provider and/or family. Providers should wash or disinfect their hands before entering and after leaving each home and in addition to wearing a mask, make every

effort to maintain a sustained physical distance from the family and child(ren) when direct contact is not needed for the service. When possible, providers and families should take advantage of outdoor spaces that support the family's routines for the delivery of in-person services. The use of outdoor spaces still requires the use of a face covering when all participants of the Family Support service are unable to maintain sustained physical distance.

Strategies to Deliver Group-Based Family Support Services:

The following addresses the delivery of Family Support in-person group services during the COVID-19 pandemic. Guidance issued below will assist the Family Support community in delivering in-person group services.

The Order of the Secretary of the [Pennsylvania Department of Health Directing Mitigation Measures](#), effective July 16th, 2020 under Section 3: Events and gatherings other than those in businesses in the retail food services industry defines "event and gathering" as:

A temporary grouping of individuals for defined purposes, that takes place over a limited timeframe, such as hours or days. For example, events and gatherings include fairs, festivals, concerts, or shows and groupings that occur within larger, more permanent businesses, such as shows or performances, within amusement parks, individuals showings of movies on a single screen/auditorium within a multiplex, business meetings or conferences, or each party or reception within a multi-room venue. This term does not include a discrete event or gathering in a business in the retail food services industry addressed by Section 1 of the order.

The order also specifies that indoor events and gatherings of more than 25 persons are prohibited. Outdoor events of more than 250 persons are prohibited.

Family Support Providers are required to develop health and safety plans. These health and safety plans should be individualized and based upon the needs and design of the program. Family Support Programs are required to share their health and safety plans in a way that stakeholders (including families) can access. This may be on a website, provided in writing as part of a parent handbook, through social media, etc.

Although each Family Support Program is required to develop its own health and safety plan, there are elements required to be addressed within their plans. These requirements are:

- Face Coverings or Face Masks;
- Cleaning, Sanitizing, Disinfecting, Ventilation;
- Social Distancing and Other Safety Protocols;
- Monitoring Families, Children, and Staff Health;
- Transportation if applicable; and
- Other Considerations for families, children and Staff.

Family Support Providers should also utilize the [Family Considerations for Classroom and Group Settings During COVID-19 For Children Receiving Early Intervention Services](#) as a resource.

After reviewing the requirements listed within this document, Family Support Programs should also use [CDC's Events and Gatherings Readiness and Planning Tool](#)