

Thank you, I am Robyn Sweet, Vermont Foster/Adoptive Family Association Vice President.

The Board of Vermont Foster/Adoptive Family Association, known as VFAFA, is very appreciative of this opportunity to speak to you today.

These are unprecedented times and as NY Governor Cuomo said earlier today, "We need every citizen's full cooperation for social distancing. Everyone needs to do their part. Stay home, Stay healthy, and Stay out of the hospital."

The request has been made to all VT citizens to do our part to stop the spread and flatten the curve for the sake of our healthcare system and those who WILL need higher levels of medical care. This is a war like none other in our lifetime - the medical professionals are our military on the front line.

There is no way to know who is going to get Covid-19 and how each body will respond. Will we be one of the luck 80% with milder symptoms or will we need higher levels of care? Our essential first responders continue to take the necessary risks to help others and what we are asking for is to recognize what risks are REALLY necessary for our foster parents as they perform first responder duties in caring for these foster children.

One risk we feel is not necessary for the biological families, the children, or the foster families is continued physical contact. While we understand the bonds this contact brings, it is just not necessary for it to be done in person but rather these bonds can be maintained with virtual contact.

What we need from you, the law makers of Vermont, is emergency authority given to the Vermont State Governor to act on our behalf to halt all in person physical parent child contact for children who are in the custody of the State of Vermont and living in foster homes.

Some foster families are still accepting new children into our homes. All of us are now managing distance education for the children in our care. We are working through the changes of virtual therapy and disruption of daily routines. We understand what that looks like for the children we care for; we do not take it lightly. We understand that adding virtual family time for the foster home actually may create more work for us, but we know that is the right thing to do for everyone's safety.

Asking for the halt of all foster child physical parent-child contact is not something we take lightly or just want on a whim. **We want this to help stabilize children in the homes where they currently live**, some having joined a foster home just a few months ago and some who have lived in a foster home more than 3 years, while still in the custody of Vermont. Foster homes are voluntary. Currently foster parents have no rights for their own protections, unless they want to withdraw their home from service; which they could do at any time. But where does that leave the children? These children would then be moved from a home they know. DCF, also feeling they have limited options these days are, in some cases reunifying children when this occurs. While for some that is ok and right, it is risky for others with no school, childcare, social workers, or services with eyes on for our state's children.

We need to allow foster families to feel their rights are also protected - the right to protect their family by social distancing and stay home-stay safe orders. We want to continue to care for the children in state custody that are placed in our homes and support them through these uncertain times.

Foster parents do not want to keep the children seeing from their biological parents, it is the opposite in most cases. We feel strongly about the importance for the children in our home to have healthy attachment to their biological parents. We know that is important for their whole life. At this time the

best way to meet this need of continued contact with biological parents AND meet the needs of the foster family for the child's living stability, is to have ALL physical contact change to virtual contact.

While this isn't ideal, it is how we are keeping contact with teachers for education, or therapists and others. The children can understand this message and we can assure them this is only for a period of time. In the majority of cases, digital contact for short term will not disrupt attachment and eventual reunification, if that is the plan.

While DCF has worked with biological families to ask them to change to virtual or video time with their children, under the current court orders, this is voluntary. Many biological parents see this as important for themselves and their child(ren), but some families have been unwilling; meaning the children are leaving their foster family locations, where they are under the stay at home order, to head out to visitations. This causes foster families fear and uneasiness as they can never relax and pass the 14 day incubation period of COVID-19 for their families, as the children may come and go regularly and they have zero control over the exposure the children have while with their biological parent(s).

The protocol Judge Grearson has spoken about regarding emergency motions being filed for judges review on each individual case is not working for everyone. The courts are backed up as motions sit on court clerk's desks as they are not able to process motions while working remote and reduced staff is making it difficult to move even emergencies through quickly, which are not being seen or heard for up to 2 weeks.

The foster families have no option but to wait - and hope the judge will see the order soon and rule to allow virtual time. The volunteer foster parents are at the system's mercy.

It's time to show the value of the foster parent volunteers to stabilize the children's place in homes, especially with new demands of distance learning, AND maintain the foster child's parent-contact through virtual means. We should not feel dispensable. You ARE going to need foster parents to be willing to continue to foster now and in the future.

And this is for the safety of everyone.

Please, give emergency executive authority to Governor Scott of Vermont so that he may make a declaration for Vermont to halt all in person parent child contact for children in the custody of Vermont living in foster homes and initiate virtual parent child contact for foster children.

We are asking this order to follow school closure or the Stay Home, Stay Safe order, whichever will expire later.

Thank you.

Vermont Foster/Adoptive Family Association