FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS: COVID-19

Updated 4/1/20

The Governor issued an emergency order on 4/1/2020. This order provides flexibility for certain child care rules. DPHHS understands the need to balance strict adherence to the CDC guidelines to ensure we are keeping people safe and healthy with the need for child care as a key support for essential workers during this emergency. DPHHS has been working with many partners including: the Association of Montana Public Health Officials, the Montana Advocates for Children, the Early Childhood Project at Montana State University, and Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies across the state.

Closures:

Is DPHHS requiring child care programs to close?

Currently, there is no statewide mandate to close child care facilities. However, local public health agencies have the authority to provide recommendations and can take emergency action. DPHHS is encouraging those child care facilities who choose to remain open to work with local public health to serve essential workers.

Emergency Child Care:

How can communities create a temporary, emergency child care plan?

Communities are already responding to the need for temporary, emergency child care. DPHHS supports these efforts and recommends following local public health and CDC guidance related to health and safety. Recommendations are listed under the section "Guidance for Child Care Programs."

DPHHS is prepared to support name-based background checks, if needed, for these creative solutions. Please contact childcarelicensing@mt.gov.

What if I am currently licensed and I prioritize care only for emergency, medical, and essential personnel?

This is allowable and encouraged. Providers are expected to adhere to basic health and safety requirements and are encouraged to follow public health guidelines related to COVID-19.

Can I increase my licensed capacity during this emergency?

DPHHS will consider increased capacity while adhering to the public health guidance related to group sizes. Please contact childcarelicensing@mt.gov.

If I stay open, what should I do to stop the spread of disease?

The Association of Montana Public Health Officials (AMPHO) and the Montana Advocates for Children (MAC) have created guidance for child care. DPHHS recommends following that guidance, listed below.

Guidance for Child Care Programs:

Child care and early learning serve a vitally important function in allowing parents to continue working, which has essential public health, economic and social impacts. Child care providers currently have the flexibility to make decisions about whether and for how long to operate a child care, but overall child care providers are urged to follow national guidelines from Child Care Aware and consider closure to limit the spread of COVID-19, if not serving families with essential workers.

We recommend the following principles to guide these decisions:

- If a community experiences widespread COVID-19 infections, it is recommended that child care settings close to all families with non-essential occupations.

- When possible, prioritize care for parents or caregivers who work in essential occupations such as health care, first responders, public health, grocery store and gas station workers, and other child care functions.
- Ensure where possible that children are kept in cohorts, keeping the same children together and avoiding groups/cohorts contacting one another.
    - Whenever possible, keep the number of children and providers in each group at 10 or less.
    - Where possible, prioritize keeping family units in the same group (i.e. an infant, 2 yr. old and 4 yr. old from the same family would be in the same group).
    - Where possible, limit the total number of children in any one facility to 24.
- Offer outdoor play in staggered shifts.
    - If multiple groups are outside at the same time, they should have a minimum of six feet of open space between outdoor play areas or visit these areas in shifts so that they are not congregating.
    - Avoid use of play structures. Always wash hands and any items used (i.e. balls) immediately after outdoor play time.
- When possible, communicate with families about ways to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and the importance of doing so to all families and staff involved in the child care provision.
- Take decisive and proactive steps to ensure that children and staff with a fever or persistent cough are sent home. Keep anyone sick separate from students and staff who are well, until the sick person can be sent home, while also ensuring that all children are supervised at all times.

- As children enter the child care setting each day it is recommended that a staff person wearing gloves checks the temperature of each child and adult, and asks if the child or anyone in the home has had a fever, cough, shortness of breath, flu like symptoms or have been around anyone with COVID-19.
    - If the family answers yes to any of these questions, it is recommended that they are required to leave the day care pending assessment by their medical provider and local public health officials.
- Develop a plan to clean and disinfect more frequently; clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces; and wash hands often with soap and water. If soap and water are not readily available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol.
- Wear gloves when changing diapers or wiping noses and ensure that gloves are changed after each individual use and wash hands before putting on the next pair of gloves.
- Always wash hands with soap and water if they are visibly dirty. Remember to supervise young children when they use hand sanitizer to prevent swallowing alcohol.
- Encourage and allow staff who are over the age of 60 or who have compromised immune systems to leave the workplace.
- Advise families and clients to avoid moving child care responsibilities to people over 60 (i.e. grandparents) or other friends and family that are in the high-risk population.
- Adapt drop off and pick up processes (such as signing in and out) to support social distancing and decrease shared surface touches and the spread of infection.
- Families who have been traveling outside of Montana should not bring their child into the child care setting for 14 days after the family last traveled.

Support for Best Beginnings Scholarship Families:

I receive support from the Best Beginnings Child Care Scholarship Program, and I am not attending child care right now, even though my child care is open, what will happen?

Under the emergency order, your children do not have to be in attendance during this emergency time. And if the child care program is open, the Best Beginnings Child Care Scholarship will continue to be paid at 100% of the approved authorization amount throughout the emergency period.

My child care provider has chosen to close, and I still need child care, what do I do?

Contact your local Child Care Resource and Referral Agency to establish a new provider. If a child needs to attend another facility during a month due to closure, DPHHS will not make payments to the closed facility during this time.

My child care provider has chosen to close, or they are following local public health guidance, and I don't need child care right now, but I am worried I will lose my slot when they re-open.

If your child care is closed and re-opens following the emergency, the Best Beginnings Scholarship Program may be able to reimburse your child care provider for the time you were absent, once they re-open.

My wages are different now, will I be able to have my eligibility redetermined?

Yes, wage changes during this time can be considered a change in circumstance and your local Child Care Resource and Referral Agency can assist.

Compliance with state programs (licensing, CACFP, and Best Beginnings STARS to Quality:

What is the state doing related to on site monitoring?

DPHHS will suspend all on site monitoring and inspections at this time, unless there is an emergency need.

Do the same rules apply for background checks?

DPHHS is moving to name-based background checks and is temporarily waiving FBI fingerprint requirements.

Health and Safety orientation training requirements have been reduced and are available online.

Thanks to our partners at childcaretraining.org, they have announced a reduced price for online courses.

Annual training requirements currently remain the same.

The CPR and First Aid training requirement for hands-on training has been revised to allow for online CPR and First Aid training for new staff during the emergency.

What is the state doing related to STARS requirements?

Deadlines are extended for STAR level renewal applications to May 15, 2020.

The state is suspending onsite assessments and coaching visits.

STARS consultants remain available by phone and through email.

Support for child care providers:

Is there funding available to support child care during this time?

Emergency grants are available through the Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies. The state has increased its budget by 10% to accommodate an increase in grant needs. Specific criteria for emergency grants will be updated and available with your local Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies.

What is CACFP doing to support us?

DPHHS has received approval of waivers allowing flexibility in how meals are served and when they are served.

Participating providers could provide meals for children that are grab/go. If there is a food shortage, providers can alter meal patterns.

I am currently enrolled in coursework and eligible for Professional Development Incentive Awards, are there changes as a result of college courses moving to online only?

Please refer to the Early Childhood Project at Montana State University.

What other supports are in place for child care providers at this time?

Child care providers and/or their staff may be eligible for unemployment, small business administration loans, and other federal relief provisions. We will update the FAQ with information as it becomes available.

Additional Resources:

- CCL rules
- Child Care Aware of America
- Child Care Resource and Referral Network
- DPHHS website
- Early Childhood Project
- Montana Small Business Administration

Further guidance may be found on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website.