



April 8, 2020

What Are Our Most Vulnerable Families and Providers Experiencing During COVID-19?

Policymakers must design their next steps of COVID response at both the state and federal level using information about what is happening to children, youth, and families on the ground. Michigan's Children put in place an on-line survey in addition to our own outreach to network partners about how families and the programs trying to serve them have been most impacted by this crisis. We have collected themes from our conversations and survey responses here to connect their testimony with recommendations for action for relief efforts going forward.

Survey Responses Underscore Need for Decisive Action for Vulnerable Families

We recognize, and providers clearly shared, that families who are the most stressed and who have become most disconnected from services are not likely to respond to a survey right now. These families are bearing the worst effects of "social distancing" – even before this crisis, just [61 percent of all US families had at least \\$400 of emergency savings](#), and research shows that families who experience or are at-risk of mental health issues, substance use disorder, or domestic violence [are at greater risk](#) when there are fewer resources available and fewer places to go safely outside of their home.

Families Are Under Extreme Stress: Parents are struggling with a lot right now, navigating health risks with needed services that may or may not be available.

- **Child Care:** Some daycare facilities are requiring at least partial payment from families to keep their slots, which is particularly difficult for parents receiving only unemployment right now. Parents are worried they will lose slots because they need to pay for basic needs for their family.
- **Education:** Parents of children in PreK-12 are worried about filling their children's days with enrichment and are concerned about academic and behavioral regression.
- **Finances:** Despite some recent actions to extend cash and unemployment benefits, the delay in receiving promised benefits is difficult and some parents with very low-incomes are worried that they still do not qualify for support. Providers worry about their families' ability to avoid evictions and foreclosure.
- **Foster Care Visitation Issues:** Parents with children in foster care are unable to have in person visits with their children during the "stay at home" order and foster and kin caregivers are unsure about what they should and can be doing to encourage these interactions.
- **Online Connectivity:** Parents do not have enough devices to get work done for both adults and children at home, and professionals are challenged with new technology-based work environments that they aren't sure how to work within.
- **Resource Scarcity/Inaccessibility:** Families can't find: food pantries; transportation; baby products including diapers and diaper wipes; cleaning supplies; immunization clinics; and new car seats for parents with whom they work. One pregnant respondent was especially worried about what resources will be available for pregnant women. With delays in financial supports through public and private sources, families are unable to stock up on food and other goods.

- **Stress of the Situation:** Many parents are afraid to go anywhere, even out for basic needs, and are struggling to communicate change and limitation with their children and maintain basic stability in their home. Parents are also experiencing stress from decreased in-person contact.
- **Surviving Domestic Violence:** Providers are getting fewer DV calls, which they interpret to mean that survivors are unable to get away from their abusers due to “shelter-in-place”. Also, current shelter residents are fearful of what happens if someone who is sick comes into shelter.
- **WIC Flexibility:** Parents on WIC would like to access delivery and online ordering but this is currently not an option for them.
- **Health Care:** Parents have reported not being able to find needed vaccines during this time.

Children with Special Needs Aren’t Receiving Services: Parents of infants, toddlers, preschoolers and K-12 students traditionally receiving special education services from their schools have at most been given some mailed activities, but have had little face-to-face contact and some have had no contact at all. Parents are doing their best at home with suggestions from service providers, but often this is not possible, especially the more particular the students’ developmental, behavioral or learning needs. Scheduling is difficult, and respondents know they cannot do what was done in a regular school day. Ultimately, they are worried about their students losing their social and academic skills. No respite care or “special therapy” is really available now to families.

We collected some positive notes from our responses as well. Parents who use mental and behavioral health services have reported some success transitioning or beginning counseling by phone. These parents mostly had children whose K-12 schools were also closed, and some relied on public support for accessing health care. Parents of students in K-12 schools said their schools are providing lunches at mobile locations which is a benefit.

We also heard about specific issues from the perspective of service providers and professionals:

Agencies are Facing Cash Flow Crisis: All agencies providing services to children, youth and families – child care, preschool, fee-for-service, grant-based nonprofits, and independent LLCs who serve children and families, are concerned about keeping their services going. Many programs are unsure whether current income limitations would allow them to remain open after the crisis:

- Child care centers and home-based providers who stayed open (almost entirely to provide care for essential workers) have seen massive drops in attendance.
- Mental and behavioral health providers are concerned with paying bills and keeping staff in order to keep meeting demand for remote services and future need for in-person services.
- Not all GSRP (preschool) programs have funding to cover full salaries of teachers because they operate “blended classrooms” of child care and preschool.
- Youth violence, child abuse/neglect, and substance use prevention programs are concerned because contracts and grants are not set up to pay staff when services are not being provided, but these will be necessary to support young people and families to recover from this difficult time.

Remote Family Outreach is Difficult: Providers maintain that sustained services for families are still needed however possible to prevent future issues, but:

- **Not All Families Have Equal Access:** Many parents or caregivers, especially grandparents, struggle to communicate or engage in services through a device, have older phones that don’t work with newer channels, or have cell minute limits. Tribal mental/behavioral health efforts have been particularly disrupted because video or phone are unavailable to many.

- **Remote Visiting Isn't Ideal:** Many services including home visits, mental and behavioral health, and maternal and prenatal health, are providing remote consultation, but only some work can be done on the phone. Professionals can detect signs of isolation and anxiety, but not conduct full psycho-social assessments. Prenatal care providers cannot conduct weight checks. Infant and toddler developmental specialists are having trouble keeping kids' attention via video and parents are opting out. Group meetings, which are effective interventions for substance use disorder and parenting classes, have all been cancelled, and professionals are not well trained on conducting effective virtual group meetings.
- **Some May Lose Clients from Voluntary Services:** Many families want in-home visits and have not been receptive to remote visits. Others will fall out of programs because other crises will come up that must be dealt with first.
- **Child Welfare, Foster Care and Adoption Services Face Unique Problems.** Because of a lack of court response, many child welfare proceedings have been delayed, and limited supports for foster, kin and adoptive families before the crisis have become even more difficult to access now.
- **School-Aged Children Have Had Access Issues:** Getting curricular materials to students remains very difficult, both in-paper and electronically. Students, especially those experiencing foster care or homelessness, are losing access to additional academic help which means they are more likely for falling further behind.
- **There Is No Guarantee Of Family Response:** Not every family responds to communications. Conducting initial referrals for has been especially difficult if there is limited contact information for a family. Providers are having trouble making individual communications to every family in their service network without direct visits.
- **There are Privacy Concerns:** Respondents are wanting to ensure online referrals comply with FERPA and HIPPA.

Workforce Strain and Security: Agencies across disciplines, and their staff, are concerned about the stability as well as the health and safety of our child and family-serving workforce:

- **Basic Wage and Resource Stability:** Respondents voiced concern for maintaining wages which were often already too low for the value of work done, as well as covering health insurance premiums. Groups are unsure if all of their employees will be eligible for unemployment.
- **Basic Workforce Safety:** Special education, mental and behavioral health, and homeless and foster care services respondents noted that staff feel unsafe providing services with students without PPE, for everyone's protection.
- **Providers are Parents:** Some Home Visiting professionals or other peer providers are balancing care for their own young children, including infants. Respondents voiced particular concern for single parents.
- **Providers are Stressed:** Respondents are also finding it difficult to manage continued work and the demands of constant change on top of long hours and meager resources.
- **Providers Need Services:** Some professionals cannot access the physical and mental health care they themselves had been using (including cancelled therapy and dental appointments).
- **Retention Issues:** Providers are losing employees to retail, shipping, and other industries. Some providers are losing college student employees with school off, which they understand, but have anxiety that their university talent pipeline will close.
- **Workforce Stretched Thin:** Many respondents replied that they held multiple professional roles across different, although often related, work areas. This means that when one individual loses productivity through distancing or reduced hours, multiple systems will feel the consequences.