

CASEWORKER VISITATION

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IV. CASEWORKER VISITATION WITH THE CHILD AND FAMILY CONNECTIONS

The likelihood that children in out-of-home care can return home is linked to the frequency and meaningfulness of case worker visits with children and their families. Federal Child and Family Service Reviews find a strong correlation between frequent caseworker visits with children and positive outcomes for these children including timely adherence to permanency and other indicators of child well-being. In-person caseworker visitation policy was developed and refined to meet the safety, permanency and well being needs of children. The Department is committed to having worker/child visits with each child in care every month the child is in out-of-home care.

A. Children Covered By this Policy

Public Law 109-288 passed by Congress in 2006 established national requirements for caseworker visits with children in foster care. The legislation affects all children in the care and responsibility of a state and defines these children as the “foster care” population. This includes, but is not limited to, children placed in foster family homes, homes of relatives regardless of whether the relative is approved as a foster home, group homes, emergency shelters, residential facilities, child care institutions and pre-adoptive homes. This encompasses children in ICPC placements and children who have been placed for adoption and are awaiting the final adoption decree. (Refer to *Interstate/Intercountry Services to Children*, Section V. and *Adoption Policies and Procedures*, DHR Placements Section E).

Exceptions:

Two exceptions have been made to the monthly visit requirement because these children are not in the care and responsibility of the Department. The exceptions are:

- Children in the custody and/or planning responsibility of another agency who are placed in residential settings **and** payment is made by DHR;
- Multi-needs children in placements where DHR participates in shared funding for the placement, but DHR does **not** have custody and/or planning responsibility.

B. Meaningful and Quality Worker Visits

Meaningful worker visits are professional consultative visits that are expected to provide opportunities for private discussion with the developmentally verbal child. Additionally, worker visits are to be of such substance and duration as to promote the following outcomes:

- monitoring of children’s safety and well being;
- assessment of the ongoing service needs of children, families and foster parents and the provision of these services in a timely manner;
- engagement of birth and foster parents in developing ISPs and being involved in ISP meetings;
- assessment of permanency options for the child;
- monitoring family progress toward ISP goals; and
- helping children perceive that their well-being is a priority to the social worker.

It is therefore critical that worker visits are consistently made monthly with each child in order to allow the worker to develop a trusting relationship with each child and assist the worker in being better able to assess the strengths and needs of the child.

Quality visits include, but are not limited, to the following:

- Scheduled, in most cases, for children in out-of-home care to meet their needs and to meet the required monthly visits' requirements;
- Unannounced, in most cases, with the parents/primary caregivers where reunification of the family is the permanency plan so that an accurate assessment of the family's living environment can be made;
- Held primarily where the child lives and may be scheduled or unannounced;
- Planned in advance with issues noted for exploration and goals established for the time spent together;
- Open enough to offer opportunities for meaningful consultation with the children and caregivers, including parents if child remains in own home;
- Individualized in that visits provide separate time for discussions with children and caregivers;
- Focused on the goals set in the ISP and the completion of actions necessary to support children and families in achieving those goals;
- Exploratory in nature, examining changes in the child's or family's circumstances on an ongoing basis;
- Supportive and skill-building, so that children and families feel safe and families feel equipped and prepared to deal with challenges and change and able to take advantage of new opportunities; and
- Well documented so that the worker can follow up on commitments and decisions made during the visit. Documentation of worker visits is discussed in more detail in Section G.

C. Caseworker Visits With Children In the Department's Care and Responsibility

Children in the Department's care and responsibility must be seen by their social worker monthly in the foster home/related home, pre-adoptive home or facility where they live or more often if directed in the ISP. These monthly visits may be scheduled or unannounced and it is recommended that some be unannounced to have a more accurate assessment of the child's care and whether the child's needs are being met. Public Law 109-288 requires that ninety percent of children in out of home care be seen monthly and that a majority of these visits occur in the residence of the child. Furthermore, Public Law 109-288 requires states to have standards for content and frequency of caseworker visits for children in out-of-home care which, at a minimum, directs that the children will be seen on a monthly basis and that the caseworker visits are well-planned and focused on issues pertinent to the plans for the child and that the visits ensure the safety, permanency and well-being of the children.

Children may benefit from meaningful worker visits and support in settings other than where they live but such visits do not replace the monthly visit to the residence of the child. Telephone contacts are also encouraged, but do not take the place of in-person

visits. Opportunities for private discussion with his or her social worker should be made available to each developmentally verbal child during the visit.

D. Worker Visits with Children Placed in Intensive Placements

When children are placed in intensive level programs, the child's caseworker must visit a minimum twice per month where the child resides. While visits may need to occur more often in some situations in order to manage an individual child's needs, twice per month is again the required minimum. In addition, the two required visits cannot be made consecutively and should be made at least eight calendar days apart. Caseworker visits should be well-planned to promote a strong assessment to help children understand their welfare is our priority and to ensure awareness of their safety and well-being

E. Worker/Parents/Primary Caregivers Visits

Reunification of children with their parents or other caregivers is most likely to occur when consistent and goal directed caseworker visits are made with the parents or caregivers. Visits in the home of parents and primary caregivers provide opportunities to assess the current living conditions, family dynamics as well as provide an opportunity to interview individual children or family members together or privately. **When the permanency plan is reunification, workers shall visit parents/primary caregivers of children in out-of-home care on a monthly basis and where the parent/primary caregiver lives. In order to form a more accurate assessment of the family's environment, visits to parents or primary caregivers are to be unannounced in most situations.** Families may be seen in additional settings as directed by the ISP, but these contacts do not take the place of the monthly in-person visit to the parents' home. Child welfare workers must be able to identify the on-going strengths and needs of a family. If the permanency plan is reunification, either a return home or a continued stay in foster care must be justified. In order to make this justification, the child welfare worker must be able to speak to the on-going conditions and circumstances in a family's home. If the permanency plan is other than reunification, frequency of contacts with parents/primary caregivers and plans for child/parent/primary caregivers' visitation must be established in the ISP.

F. Worker Visits to Foster Homes/Related Homes/Pre-Adoptive Homes/Other Providers

Visits to foster homes, related homes, pre-adoptive or other providers by child welfare staff serve to support children and their care givers and enable the Department to observe conditions and circumstances in which the children live and ensure the safety and appropriateness of placements. **Child welfare workers must visit with the providers at the providers' location at least once a month.** Visits may be scheduled or unannounced. This may be accomplished when the child welfare worker visits children placed in the home.

G. Documentation of Caseworker Visits

There must be careful documentation of monthly caseworker visits with children in the care of the Department. Documentation of the purpose of visits, the content of the

discussion during visits, the location of visits and the date of visits must be included in the narrative. If the visit cannot occur in the child's residence/placement, the case

record narrative must reflect why the visit could not occur in the child's residence. The narrative documentation is reviewed during the Federal Child and Family Service Reviews to assure that visits include those items addressed in Section B above. If a child is not developmentally verbal, documentation must include information gathered from the caregiver. ICPC cases must have a narrative entry regarding the monthly contact that is requested to be made by the state in which an Alabama ICPC child is placed. With the passage of Public Law 109-288, all states are required to make monthly visits with children in out-of-home placements and counties shall make visits with other states' ICPC children placed in Alabama and send to the other states information on monthly visits made with ICPC children placed in Alabama from other states.

Worker visits with children in out of home care settings are tracked on FACTS, including pre-adoptive children and ICPC children. Each month the caseworker must document in FACTS information concerning the "worker to child visit" which includes the date of the visit, location of the visit, who participates in the visit, purpose of the visit and narrative to record the content of the monthly visit. If this is not done each month, exception reports are generated. The dates of visits entered into FACTS must coincide with the dates in the narrative, i.e. if FACTS data shows that a visit to the child's residence was made, there must be a corresponding entry into the narrative screen in FACTS.

In addition to documentation of "worker to child visits," other visits related to a child in the Department's care are also tracked on FACTS. These include "worker to parent/relative" and worker visits to foster homes/related home/pre-adoptive home/other providers. If this is not done each month, exception reports are generated.