



CHILD  
PROTECTION  
ROUNDTABLE

The Child Protection Roundtable is a consortium of more than 50 child welfare member organizations statewide. Members share a child-centered common vision and seek to leverage data, resources and strategy to collaboratively build a better future for the children of Texas.

## The Child Protection Roundtable

March 27, 2020

The Honorable Greg Abbott  
Governor of Texas  
Office of the Governor  
P.O. Box 12428  
Austin, TX 78711-2428

The Honorable Dan Patrick  
Lieutenant Governor of Texas  
Office of the Lieutenant Governor  
P.O. Box 12068  
Austin, TX 78711-2068

The Honorable Dennis Bonnen  
Speaker of the Texas House of Representatives  
P.O. Box 2910  
Austin, TX 78768-2910

Subject: COVID-19

Dear Governor Abbott, Lt. Governor Patrick, and Speaker Bonnen:

The Texas Child Protection Roundtable is the state's leading convener of multi-disciplinary organizations engaged in child welfare and well-being advocacy, research and action. Our membership of more than 50 organizations has statewide reach and includes advocates, academicians, child and family services providers, as well as organizations with special focus on areas such as education, healthcare, children with disabilities, domestic violence and juvenile justice.

The COVID-19 pandemic has added unprecedented challenge to a system that did not lack for challenge already and calls on all of us to elevate our efforts in the spirit of partnership to do our very best for the children and youth who count on us every day. We are thankful to the Abbott Administration, including the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS), Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC), Department of State Health Services (DSHS), Texas Workforce Commission (TWC), and the judiciary for your rapid response, thoughtful guidance to your staff and providers in navigating this new terrain, and your commitment to keeping the children and families of Texas safe.

**Steering Committee**

Texans Care for Children  
*Stephanie Rubin*

Texas CASA  
*Andy Homer*

TexProtects | Texas Chapter of  
Prevent Child Abuse America  
*Sophie Phillips*

Upbring | Faith in Every Future  
*Knox Kimberly*

National Association of Social Workers  
Texas Chapter  
*Will Francis*

These new and enhanced levels of challenge include immediate, near-term and longer-term elements. Conversations with our membership have surfaced a number of immediate concerns and considerations. We recognize the agencies and judiciary are already working to implement many of these efforts, and we request your continued attention, support, and intentional actions toward the following:

***CPS provides essential services to children and families across Texas that must continue throughout the pandemic to protect the physical safety of children and keep families safely together.***

*To continue general functions throughout the pandemic*

1. We support any orders from the governor or local governments to ensure that DFPS and its provider network remain defined as an essential service.
2. We encourage state budget appropriators and the governor to ensure that funding continues for the essential work that DFPS is performing and managing during the pandemic and beyond, as well as making supplemental resources available from federal and Texas sources to cover the substantial added costs that will result from the pandemic.

*To protect children who are in unsafe situations throughout the pandemic when access to children is limited and there are fewer eyes on children*

3. Child maltreatment generally increases with social isolation and heightened stress. Children are also out of sight of people who generally report child maltreatment like teachers, doctors, and childcare providers. DFPS or the governor should consider enhanced efforts to raise public awareness about the likely rise in child abuse and neglect and how to report any suspected abuse or neglect during this time.
4. Many standard functions of DFPS rely on in-person, face-to-face visits to homes across Texas to ensure child safety. DFPS has released good guidance on how caseworkers can temporarily rely on a virtual platform to reduce the spread of the virus. As the pandemic continues to evolve DFPS should continue to rely on its existing guidance and should consider making its guidance publicly available as a model for other states.
5. Non-DFPS professionals involved in CPS cases such as CASAs, attorneys ad litem, guardians ad litem, and service providers should be assured private communication with children, and DFPS and Residential Child Care Licensing at HHSC should adapt its platform and practices to ensure that complaints related to physical health or

safety identified by these individuals are appropriately elevated throughout the pandemic.

*To support parents, caregivers, private providers, and the CPS workforce throughout the pandemic*

6. We appreciate that extensive and evolving guidance is being provided by DFPS and DSHS, as well as by the federal Administration for Children, Youth and Families and local public health authorities, that applies to parents, staff, caregivers, or children who contract COVID-19. While within the formal child welfare system we believe that helpful guidance is being provided through agency staff and the provider network, we believe more can be done to blend all of that guidance in a more organized and digestible manner, and are concerned that more is needed with respect to kinship and other informal caregivers in all settings who face the same challenges without the benefit of direct agency or provider support. Further guidance should apply to:
  - a. Parents with an open investigation, family preservation case, or in a monitored return to have a plan in place to keep children safe and well if a caregiver contracts COVID-19 and is hospitalized, passes away, or is otherwise unable to care for the child(ren) in the home; or to keep themselves and others in the home safe if a child contracts COVID-19;
  - b. Foster and kinship homes to have a plan in place to keep children safe and well if a caregiver contracts COVID-19 and is hospitalized, passes away, or is otherwise unable to care for the child(ren) in the home; or to keep themselves and others in the home safe if a child in foster care contracts COVID-19; and
  - c. Congregate care settings to have a plan in place to quickly identify, manage, and isolate those with COVID-19 if a child or staff member contracts the virus.
7. A heightened risk of maltreatment could lead to an increase in removals and there could be an increase in placement discharges during this time. Additionally, caregivers who contract COVID-19 may need assistance with the children in their placement. This may exacerbate the ongoing capacity challenge at a time when child placing agencies may curtail or discontinue home studies to qualify additional foster homes due to health and safety concerns, or otherwise willing families may be reluctant to accept new placements. We support and encourage the collaborative effort underway between DFPS, HHSC, and Residential Child Care Providers to find creative solutions for how to meet these increased placement demands.
8. As CPS workers, Child Placing Agency staff, and professionals in

residential operations and other congregate care settings sacrificially put their own health on the line to ensure children's safety, we support and encourage efforts to operationalize plans to deal with potential workforce shortages in the event that they are exposed to or contract COVID-19.

***CPS relies on other systems like the courts, the public health system, and childcare to do its job well, so those systems and the services they provide must continue to be accessible as well.***

*Access to Courts*

9. Currently, in courts across Texas there is wide variance in which matters courts are continuing to hear due to their "essential" nature. We support and encourage the efforts of the Texas Supreme Court working with DFPS to provide more concrete guidance on "essential matters" in child protection cases to ensure that CPS is able to do what is necessary and appropriate to protect children and keep families safely together that require court approval throughout the pandemic.

*Access to Ongoing Public Health Services*

10. Children who have experienced maltreatment tend to have higher physical and behavioral health needs, some of which may be exaggerated due to stress caused by the pandemic. HHSC and DSHS should continue to ensure that children involved with CPS have continued access to necessary physical and behavioral health services through telemedicine and telehealth or other means, including robust access to ongoing therapy and mental health supports.
11. Leaving mental illness or substance use disorders untreated increases the likelihood of abuse or neglect and ongoing treatment is critical to keeping families safely together and reunifying families. HHSC has an important role in assuring that parents involved in the child welfare system have continued access to necessary behavioral health services that are ensuring children may safely stay at home or that are helping the family reunite through a virtual platform or other means. We support and encourage state efforts to consider ways for parents to engage in services via telemedicine or telehealth to reduce any delays in screening or treatment.

*Access to Child Care*

12. Many parents, kinship caregivers, foster parents, and CPS workers will continue to need childcare throughout the pandemic because they work in essential jobs or services but need help to assure that their children are not left home without supervision. HHSC and TWC

should make accommodations to help assure that childcare is available for parents, kinship caregivers, foster parents, and CPS workers who are performing essential functions during the pandemic.

Looking ahead, we know there will be additional challenges that will be with us for many months to come. We appreciate all that you, state agencies and the judiciary are doing to respond to this public health crisis and look forward to continuing to work in partnership with you for the common good of children, youth and families across our state.

Thank you for your consideration,

The Child Protection Roundtable Steering Committee

Knox Kimberly  
*Upbring*  
Chair

Sophie Phillips  
*TexProtects*  
Vice-Chair

Will Francis  
*National Association of Social Workers-Texas*

Stephanie Rubin  
*Texans Care for Children*

Andy Homer  
*Texas CASA*

Cc: Phil Wilson, Acting Executive Commissioner, HHSC  
Jaime Masters, Commissioner, DFPS  
John Hellerstedt, M.D., Commissioner, DSHS  
Bryan Daniel, Chairman/Commissioner Representing the Public, TWC  
Justice Eva Guzman, Supreme Court of Texas/Children's Commission