

MAFF NEWS

MAFF IN ACTION

OUR FAMILIES TODAY

We have seen much of the world change since our last issue of MAFF In Action. The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly altered our lives as Foster, Kinship, Adoptive, and Guardianship (FKAG) families. We've also witnessed pain, protest, change, and growth for our country as a whole.

Progress has been made at the state and federal level to ensure vulnerable communities, like children in foster care, feel safe and supported, both during the pandemic and after. We are thankful to Governor Baker for providing foster families with enhanced financial supports during this time. As we navigate these upcoming months, continued advocacy will be critical as we work to ensure the health and well-being of children in foster care is prioritized.

As summer begins, concerns loom about the availability of summer camps and child care options, and we still await guidance on what the return to school will look like in the fall. While these uncertainties impact all families, FKAG families are especially vulnerable. Because the majority of us are engaged in out of home employment, our families rely heavily on summer camps, child care, and school. These programs also bring a sense of routine and safety to the children in our homes.

We've also witnessed a decrease in child abuse and neglect reporting rates and are deeply concerned that the absence of summer camp for all children

means that there will continue to be few opportunities for outside adults to intervene when a child is at risk.

For FKAG families, other issues also present significant challenges, including:

- A lack of adequate financial resources
- Reduced access to behavioral health and other speciality services, including services for children with disabilities.
- Access to masks and other forms of protective equipment

SUPPORTING EACH OTHER

Securing support to address these pressing issues has been core to MAFF's advocacy during this time, and we have been working tirelessly to ensure that your voices continue to be heard.

MAFF has been seeking the input of FKAG families to develop a set of legislative priorities that reflect our current needs and, in partnership with MSPCC, bring them to the attention of the Administration and the Legislature. For more information, you can find our most up to date fact sheet at mspcc.org/maff.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also put a spotlight on the need to develop new strategies for providing enhanced support to foster families. To that end, we are pleased to join DCF, the FaCESClinic at UMass and others

to partner in a collaborative effort spearheaded by MSPCC with the support of The Health Foundation of Central MA, to identify and pilot strategies to engage communities, train caregivers to respond to and minimize the impact of trauma, support the unique role of kinship caregivers and strengthen information sharing between, parents, caregivers and DCF. We look forward to sharing more as this project unfolds.

In advocacy there is always more to be done, and we can't do it without you. Your voices are powerful in creating change. We need them now, more than ever.

Stay engaged with us. Find us at our website mspcc.org/maff or @instantfamilies on Facebook to share with us what you need, contribute your ideas, watch our recent conversations with Commissioner Spears, and sign up for our action alerts.



A Letter from the MAFF President



It is during times like these that I am most proud to be a part of MAFF, working with such dedicated members in support of such a fantastic group of foster, kin, adoptive and guardianship parents. With each day bringing significant challenges and pressures on your families, you are still working in support of other FKAG families. It has not gone unnoticed. Thank you.

For our supported families who have added to their already full roles as teacher, therapist, occupational therapist, behaviorist, etc. we appreciate all your efforts. While it is not business as usual, and it is a time of high stress and uncertainty, it is also a moment in time when you are shining your brightest. We watch as you all jumped into the role of teachers finding inventive ways to bring the classroom to life at home. We saw the science experiments, the cooking classes to teach math and fractions, and the highly creative art projects.

MAFF has been and will continue to work on your behalf. With the help of our Secretary, Missy Tarjick, MAFF collaborated with Kid's Net and Rise Above to distribute toys and art supplies in the Berkshire area. She also worked to get the word out about EEC grants for toys for infants and toddlers. We will look for more ways to bring this to other areas of the state. As we approach the summer, we continue in our discussions with DCF to prioritize access to childcare and summer camps. We are also working on establishing more behavioral health support.

We will keep up our conversations with DCF in hopes of seeing that the \$100 monthly financial relief payment extends through the summer. Throughout the stay at home order, we have been in continued contact with our Legislators to keep the conversation moving about The Foster Parents Bill of Rights. We will keep working on having that Bill passed. This is where you come in. To accomplish some of these items, we do need your support. MAFF's Vice President, Kelly Lamb, has done a great job of continually updating our Facebook page. Kelly recently posted asking for you to contact your legislators, adding your name in support of our efforts. Please check out our page, you can find us at @instantfamilies, and use the link to contact your legislator asking for their support of our plans. If you can share it as well, asking your friends and families to do the same, we would appreciate the help. You do not need to be one of our supported families to add your name to the list of supporters.

While you are all beginning the process of returning to the outside world, know that MAFF is here to support you in any way we can. We will continue to work with DCF and MSPCC to find ways to make your family time easier. Please stay safe and feel free to contact me at any time.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Cathie Twiraga".

Cathie Twiraga
MAFF President

“MY EXPERIENCE IN FOSTER CARE.”



I don't often think of myself as an adopted child. Sometimes, I am amazed that I had a completely different life before foster care. To be honest, I don't

remember much from before I was placed in foster care. I do remember the instability, the moving around, staying at aunts' or uncles' houses, not really having a place to call home. My move into foster care was abrupt. My siblings and I were picked up after school and brought to the Francoeur's. To be honest, I don't remember much of that day either. We lived with the Francoeur's for five years before Jessica and I were adopted by them.

From the moment we got there, it just seemed natural that we belonged. We got two older sisters, and one younger sister. We were just family. Most importantly, we were taken care of and loved. My parents worked hard to keep us connected with our biological siblings. I don't really like the term biological because it feels so alienating to me. All of my siblings are just siblings, whether we grew up together or not. It can get complicated describing who's who to people. The word *family* is the best description I can give. I mostly think of my family as blended. We are all there for each other, regardless of the label. I am incredibly lucky to have such a large blended family. I couldn't imagine my life any differently and I don't remember it being any other way.

I'm so lucky to have been adopted into such an accepting family, not only did they accept Jessica and I, but they accepted my siblings who were adopted into different families. We all had so many amazing times together, vacations, sleepovers, birthdays, we were all there-- blended and together and family.

--Loretta Francoeur, Missy Tarjick's sister

COVID-19 MEDICAL INFORMATION



Dr. Heather Forkey, a renowned pediatrician and trauma expert, has been keeping our community updated on the latest COVID-19 information. To view her full webinar, originally recorded in May 2020, visit youtu.be/hrg2M7FbTqk.

Dr. Forkey's presentation addresses some of our biggest questions regarding the virus and its spread:

What is COVID-19?

COVID-19 stands for the name of the virus (COronaVirus Disease) and the year it first appeared in humans (2019). Coronaviruses are a family of viruses that are not related to the flu. Most coronaviruses are mild like the flu, but some like SARS and COVID are more serious.

What are the symptoms in kids?

Respiratory symptoms, fever, and fatigue are common in adults and kids, while infants also often show GI symptoms such as nausea, vomiting and diarrhea. Kids often show little to no symptoms. The list of possible symptoms for adults and children is changing, and we recommend going directly to the CDC website to get the latest information.

What can you do to keep your family safe?

The best things to do are simple, wash your hand for at least 20 seconds, avoid touching your face, cover a cough with a tissue and immediately dispose of it, and do your best to social distance (6 ft apart). You should also wear a mask in public to prevent you from releasing your respiratory droplets onto surfaces or other people.

It is important for your family's overall health to continue seeking medical care during this crisis. Hospitals and doctor offices have taken many precautions to keep non-COVID patients safe. Mental health, early intervention and other services are being done virtually. Young children still need to go into offices to get their vaccines, pre-existing conditions still need to be treated, and emergencies can be safely seen in your local emergency room. **Please make sure you are continuing to seek care as needed.**



The Kid's Net program continues to support foster families during this unprecedented time. We are available to support you and your family. More information on these resources is available on our website: mspcc.org/kidsnet.

Helpline: We are continuing to staff our Helpline when DCF offices are closed, and we are also monitoring the Helpline during the business day. If

you cannot reach someone directly, please leave a voicemail. Your call will be returned promptly by Kid's Net staff. 800-486-3730

Respite: We continue to process respite payments as usual. Please continue to make arrangements through your family resource worker.

Emergency Childcare: We are working closely with our partner, Child Care Circuit, to identify which of our contracted providers will be reopening and when. In the meantime, we have been approving 10 hours per month of emergency childcare when foster parents opt to utilize other foster parents or DCF approved caretakers as babysitters. Please reach out to your Regional Kid's Net Directors or family resource workers for further information.

Family Resource Liaisons (FRL's): FRL's remain available to support foster parents with resources and referrals. Please continue to reach out to them for assistance! Find their contact info at mspcc.com/kidsnet.

Training & Support: Kid's Net has been running regular training and support groups via Zoom and we will continue to offer statewide virtual groups and trainings throughout the summer and into the fall. We will continue to evaluate when it is safe and appropriate to re-start our in person meetings.

FROM DCF COMMISSIONER LINDA SPEARS

To our valued foster parents,

Thank you to Kid's Net and MAFF for the opportunity to reiterate how grateful DCF is for our foster parents in these unprecedented times. It's just not possible to put our appreciation into words. You've been with us since day one of this crisis, going above and beyond, doing whatever we asked of you and then some.

The pandemic stood to intensify the uncertainty and fear the kids you care for already know too well. They'll get through this because of the security and stability they found in your home and the children old enough to remember will never forget you for it.

As many of you know, May was National Foster Care Month when we traditionally celebrate our foster parents with special events like area office gatherings, dinners, and brunches. Although this was not possible this year, I was delighted to receive many emails throughout the month with videos and photos of our staff finding creative ways to say thank you, including customized candy wrappers courtesy of the Metro North office!

We are at a point where everyone either has a personal experience with COVID-19 or knows of someone who has experienced loss or illness. Some of you are caring for or grieving loved ones. Or you may be the rock for your family, friends, and neighbors because you are a caregiver at heart and it's just what you do. We know your plates are piled high and have been for the last few months.

We also know you have questions about the coming summer. We will be reaching out to you very soon with more information and to find out how we can best support you as the school year winds down. All of the Department's decisions about moving forward will prioritize safety and will align with "Reopening Massachusetts," the four-phase plan that Governor Baker announced last week.

Speaking of the Governor, he is one of your biggest fans. I hope you will all have chance to read his Proclamation recognizing May as Foster Care Month in the Commonwealth: <https://www.mass.gov/news/foster-care-month-2020>

With deepest gratitude,

Linda Spears, DCF Commissioner



MSPCC KID'S NET FOSTER CARE CONFERENCE



In these uncertain times we are continuing to review our plans for our biannual conference, originally planned for October 16, 2020. We are monitoring the situation closely and will provide updates as we have them. Details, once confirmed, will be mailed and will also be posted on our website and social media outlets.

MAFF Representative Spotlight

STEVE MESITE, LOWELL



I have been a foster parent since 2015, when a beautiful 14 month old girl named Cali was placed in our home. It took 3 years for the adoption to be finalized. This time was an extremely stressful time for all those who were involved. All we wanted was to provide a stable place for her to live and the stress involved with this process made it difficult. I believe there is a lot that can be done to make this process smoother and less painful for the families, but in my mind it's even more important because for the kids who are in the system.

I joined MAFF because I'm committed to making the process of adoption from foster care less uncertain and less stressful. I believe that when the legal process is delayed, and permanency is not established within a reasonable amount of time, it severely affects the ability of the child to form bonds. I want to advocate for fair laws and processes for foster children, who can't advocate for themselves.

MICHAEL KRAMER, NEW BEDFORD

Michael and his wife Susan have been foster parents for over fifteen years. For the first 7 or 8 years they focused their fostering efforts on long-term placements where the child's goal was unification. After they became guardians to a teen, they refocused their work on hot line and respite care.

Michael and Susan are active in the Greater New Bedford area with the Partners for Foster Care Support. This group, supported by Community Connections and the United Way of Greater New Bedford, works collaboratively with the area office to help and support foster children, foster parents, and the department. It was through this work that Michael was introduced to MAFF.



Michael joined the MAFF board in September 2018. His goal in joining the board was to find new ways to support children in care and foster parents. Michael has been active on the Policy Committee as well as the Foster Home Safety & Support Workgroup. Going forward Michael wants to help MAFF leadership and the board make meaningful changes to make the Massachusetts foster care system among the best for children in care, foster families, kinship families, and adoptive families.

We want you! Maybe you have thought about becoming a MAFF representative before or perhaps this is the first time you are considering it. Either way, we want to talk to you! We have area office MAFF board representative vacancies to fill and we are looking for foster and adoptive parents from across the state to join us in addressing the barriers foster, kinship and adoptive families face. MAFF meets quarterly and there are opportunities to join subcommittees depending on your area of interest. We believe MAFF is most effective with representation from every area of the Commonwealth. Please consider filling a vacancy and reach out to us with questions today! maff@eliotchs.org

MAFF OFFICERS

President: Cathie Twiraga

Vice President: Kelly Lamb

Secretary: Missy Tarjick

MAFF AREA REPRESENTATIVES

Brockton: Rebecca Hally

Cape Ann: Laura Pacheco

Cape/Island: Melissa Anderson

Coastal: Carol Fitzgibbon

Greenfield: Dondi and Shirley Mitchell

Fall River: Cynthia Ruest

Framingham: Mary Robbins

Holyoke: Tracy Collins

Hyde Park: Vanesa Morales

Lawrence: Joean Serrano

Lowell: Steve Mesite

Lynn: Elise Caputi

Metro North: Laura Gaughan

New Bedford: Michael Kramer

Park Street: Juanita Grant

Pittsfield: Jennifer Leggett Strange

Plymouth: Laura & Paul Taberner

Springfield: Marianna L. Litovich

Worcester-East: Jill Cummings

Worcester-West: Gina Doyle

WE ARE YOUR STATE FOSTER PARENT ASSOCIATION.



ABOUT US

The Massachusetts Alliance for Families (MAFF) is a state-wide association of DCF foster, adoptive, and kinship caregivers. The MAFF Board is charged with ensuring that MAFF's work is informed by a statewide perspective and addresses existing regional disparities. MAFF events are open to all DCF foster, adoptive, and kinship caregivers and other supporters are welcome and encouraged to participate in advancing MAFF's advocacy agenda.

OUR PRIORITIES:

MAFF's advocacy is focused on ensuring that children in DCF care and their caregivers have access to services and resources to support healthy physical and emotional development and enable them to succeed academically and socially. This includes recruitment and retention of well-trained and supported foster families and resources to enhance placement stability and help youth prepare to lead successful adult lives. For more detail about our current advocacy efforts go to www.mspcc.org/maff.



Follow us
@InstantFamilies



Like us
@InstantFamilies

Visit us
mspcc.org/maff