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The Listening Place

Howard County Child Advocacy Center

COVID-19 Action Plan

Drafted: 03/18/2020

Notification and Guidance from National Children's Alliance

The NCA has encouraged local CACs to follow the guidance issued by local and state authorities pertaining to COVID-19 response. This should be done bearing in mind that the mission of the CAC is to provide safety to the children we serve, which in this circumstance includes keeping them safe from not only from abuse, but also from exposure to COVID-19. While children continue to be a low-risk group, their caregivers may be at an enhanced risk and measures will be taken to reduce the chances to person-to-person transmission of the virus.

Notification and Guidance from Howard County Government

The Howard County Government has mandated that non-emergency County offices and facilities will be closed to the public as of 8:00am March 18th, 2020. The Howard County Child Advocacy Center addresses both emergent and non-emergent cases of child maltreatment and does so in conjunction with the Howard County Department of Social Services. As such, the CAC has drafted the following plan to address the inflow of child maltreatment cases during this time so that cases may be triaged and addressed to meet the needs of our clients and to maintain compliance with COMAR regulations.

It should be noted that while this action plan is tailored to the CAC, it will also serve to provide guidance to the Howard County Police Department's Domestic Violence Section. The Domestic Violence Section works in partnership with the Child Abuse / Sexual Assault Section and is housed within the same location as the CAC. This plan is meant to help the CAC and DV sections maintain services while also reducing the traffic / contact within the building.

CAC / DV Staffing Plan

- The Howard County Department of Social Services will continue to staff the CAC with call screeners and investigators until otherwise notified. In the event HCDSS is directed to telecommute, HCDSS will notify the public that reports of child maltreatment should be made by calling 911. 911 dispatchers will first send patrol officers to conduct child maltreatment investigations. Patrol officers / supervisors will be able to contact a CAC supervisor for consult to determine if immediate intervention by a detective is needed. Joint police / DSS investigations will be achieved by following the normal DSS call-out procedure.

- The CAC police supervisors will work together to create a rotating work schedule to provide minimum staff one (1) detective from each section and one (1) supervisor from the division Monday – Friday from 0900-1700hrs. All other detectives working from home will be considered “on-call” and should maintain a state of readiness should their assistance be required. The exception will be the “regular on-call” detective who will only be utilized for cases coming in between 1400-0700hrs as normal. Detectives who are on-call will check their e-mail and voice mail on a regular basis throughout the day to ensure items of immediate concern are being addressed.
- The division supervisor will handle case screening and make determination as to whether or not a case should be handled as an emergency. If the case requires immediate response from a detective, the detective on duty will respond.
- If the case is not an emergency but requires a 24hr response per COMAR regulations, the supervisor will determine if such response can be made over the phone. During that phone call, the supervisor will follow the protocol for screening clients for illness before arranging interviews at the CAC (Attachment A). These questions asked in this screening process mirror the questions asked by 911 dispatchers for screening individuals for possible COVID-19 exposure / infection. If there are no COVID-19 risk factors present, the supervisor will schedule the interview and assign an on-call detective to the case for follow-up. If there are COVID-19 risk factors reported, protocol in “Attachment A” should be followed.
- Supervisors should take care to ensure no more than one family is scheduled for interview within a particular time block. When possible, supervisors should limit interviews to one case family per day. Supervisors should also request that family members attending only be those members absolutely necessary (i.e., children being interviewed and the non-offending caregiver).

Interview & Evidence Collection Procedures

- Detectives will make their best efforts to have clients come to the CAC for video recorded interviews. When families arrive, the detective will greet them and assess the family for signs of illness, to include asking screening questions per protocol. If a family member report recent respiratory illness or contact with a person presenting respiratory illness symptoms, the interview will be rescheduled. If a detective must respond to a home for investigation and determines there are risk factors for respiratory illness, he / she will advise the family that the interview will have to be rescheduled.
- If a detective has to respond to Howard County General Hospital (HCGH) for investigation, extreme caution should be taken. This should include precautions listed in *HCPD Safety Bulletin SB-01: 911 Call Procedures and Officer Response* (Attachment B). Detectives should only respond to the hospital for emergency cases where an immediate presence and investigative intervention would prove beneficial to the

investigation (i.e., cases of maltreatment / abuse that just occurred and immediate intervention is needed for the safety of the victim and potential arrest of the suspect).

- In limited circumstances, it may be possible for detectives to conduct interviews via phone. In these cases, detectives should use audio recorders to capture the interview and ensure all parties on the call are aware of the recording.
- Evanescent evidence should be collected as normal utilizing a forensically sound process. Crime Lab technicians should only be called out where their expertise is necessary for evidence collection. In cases where it is possible to request the preservation of evidence to be collected at a later time (i.e., surveillance videos) detectives should make such arrangements only after verifying that the evidence will be properly preserved until collection.

Multidisciplinary Services

- A phone list has been compiled to allow members of the multidisciplinary team (MDT) to contact each other for consult on investigations (Attachment C). MDT members can also be accessed by email.
- Pediatric medical exams
 - Emergency exams in acute cases are typically seen at HCGH. An exam with the CAC pediatrician can be scheduled under the following circumstances:
 - Nature of the alleged abuse makes findings more likely (i.e., allegations indicate acute trauma would be present, report of obvious trauma / pain / bleeding)
 - Parent and / or child may articulate a sense of urgency to schedule the medical evaluation
 - Acute vs. late reported trauma (i.e., abuse alleged with in past week vs. two months ago)
 - Detectives should call and / or email the CAC pediatrician for consult before scheduling an exam.
- Trauma therapy
 - Per Family & Children's Services, out trauma therapy provider, therapy appointment will be provided through telehealth. Therapy appointments will not take place at the CAC until further notice. FCS will continue to accept referrals but will not be starting new sessions at this time. Detectives can contact the trauma therapist to provide client information for follow-up and can provide clients with the direct number to FCS.
 - In cases where there is an urgent need for trauma therapy intervention / services, detectives can contact the Mobile Crisis Team (MCT) at Grassroots. MCT is operating under a "3 tier system" and will respond as appropriate per their protocols. (Attachment D)

- Victim Services
 - The CACs Victim Services Liaison will be available for consult via phone. Additionally, clients can be referred to websites for the Maryland Coalition Against Sexual Assault (<https://mcasa.org/>) and Hope Works Howard County (<https://wearehopeworks.org>) for non-emergency referral services.
- State's Attorney's Office
 - The ASAs assigned to our cases will be available by phone and / or email for case consult.
 - The District and Circuit Courts will be open for the review and signing of search and seizure warrants.
 - Any search and seizure warrant service should be done only where it is critical to an investigation (i.e., evanescent evidence, suspect presents danger to the community, etc.). Regular search warrant risk assessment procedures should be followed. However, these procedures factor in typical risks (weapons, suspect criminal history) and do not include risks assessment for COVID-19 exposure. The commander of the tactical section will consider this additional factor when deciding whether or not the tactical section will assist with search and seizure warrant execution.
 - When the tactical section declines to assist with search warrant execution, detectives in FCSAD should only execute these warrants where it is critical to case investigation and public safety.

Facility Maintenance and Security

- The standard security procedures for the CAC will be followed. The only additional layer of security will be the illness screening conducted by supervisors and detectives prior to conducting interviews.
- The facility will continue to be cleaned as scheduled by contractors chosen by the HCPD. As practicable, detectives and supervisors will conduct additional sanitizing of interview and waiting rooms with provided disinfectants. All CAC staff will continue following CDC guidelines pertaining to hand washing, use of hand sanitizer, and social distancing. These procedures are outlined in a document provided by the National Children's Alliance that will be posted in various locations within the CAC. (Attachment E).

Sex Offender Registration Unit

- The Sex Offender Registration Unit (SOR) received notification from MOSOR / Offender Watch that an administrative registration process will be used until further notice. SOR detectives will follow the protocols set forth in that email(Attachment F).
- The SOR Unit will continue to operate as necessary to accommodate homeless / weekly registrants who are required to register in person.

- Should a registrant arrive and exhibit signs and / or symptoms of upper respiratory illness, they should be referred to HCGH for assessment.
- Any verification checks should be done as needed to ensure compliance of sex offender registration laws. Personal protective measures should be taken when making checks of homes and businesses.

Protocol for Possible COVID-19 Exposures

- Any CAC staff member feeling ill should NOT come to the CAC or engage in work activities.
- If a CAC staff member believes he / she has been exposed to COVID-19, they should immediately report the exposure via phone to their immediate supervisor. Exposure protocols as outlined in *General Order OPS 43: Airborne and Bloodborne Pathogens* should be followed.

Updates and Changes to Protocols / Procedures

- The local, state, and federal governments are actively providing updates and guidance to the public and to emergency services agencies. This action plan will be updated as necessary to keep up-to-date with changing recommendations.