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State child welfare worker infected with coronavirus, others ill and awaiting test results

The workers, each based out of a different DCF office, have recently interacted with children and families the agency serves, as well as colleagues.

By [Matt Rocheleau](#) Globe Staff, Updated March 26, 2020, 9:51 a.m.



DCF workers escort a child from the agency's Dorchester office in April 2019. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

One Massachusetts Department of Children and Families social worker has tested positive for the novel coronavirus, and two other workers have fallen ill and are awaiting test results, agency and union officials said Thursday.

The state agency has shut down two offices as they try to assess the potential spread of the virus inside the department and among the people it serves. Union officials said each of the three social workers are based out of different offices.

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Shortly before being tested, the social workers had interacted with children and families, as well as colleagues, according to Megan Piccirillo, spokeswoman for Service Employees International Union Local 509, which represents the workers. Piccirillo said the union was notified Tuesday of one case, and received word of the other two workers who may have the coronavirus on Wednesday.

DCF spokeswoman Andrea Grossman said the department has been in contact with state and local public health officials. The agency immediately closed the Hyde Park Area office in Boston where the worker who tested positive is based, and ordered a deep clean of the building, according to Grossman. The agency also ordered similar measures at its North Central Area office in Leominster.

On the advice of state public health officials, DCF has asked some employees to self-quarantine for 14 days. The agency is also keeping the number of staff in area and regional offices to a minimum.

The agency did not answer a series of additional questions about the cases, and details on the timing and nature of the workers' exposure to the novel coronavirus remain unclear.

Governor Charlie Baker's office did not respond to a request for comment.

DCF, the state's child welfare system, provides services and support to approximately 45,000 children under the age of 18 and their families.

The agency said in a [memo](#) to employees last week that its work has become even more critical amid the state stay-at-home advisory because children "are less visible in the community and therefore, more vulnerable."

"With schools and childcare centers closing and parents experiencing higher levels of stress for a variety of reasons, including potential loss of work, it is increasingly important for us to remain in contact with our children and families

to assess safety and address imminent needs they may have,” the memo said.

Social workers respond in-person to between 30 and 60 emergency cases of reported child abuse and neglect statewide each day, union officials said. They visit homes, work alongside law enforcement, and assess whether a child needs to be removed. If so, social workers bring them to temporary homes until they can arrange placement at a longer-term foster or kinship home.

Union leaders say the COVID-19 cases highlight concerns they’ve been raising to DCF leaders. They claim the agency has failed to provide guidance on what social workers should do when they respond to an emergency call and enter a home where there’s been a known, previous exposure to the virus.

“The people that do this work do it because they care about it. They want to do the work, but they need help and guidance from the agency. People need answers and they’re not getting them,” said Peter MacKinnon, president of the union, which represents some 3,500 social workers at DCF.

“It really is a first-responder-type job,” MacKinnon said. “You have to respond immediately in certain cases.”

Social workers also have been left in a lurch waiting for shipments of masks, gloves, sanitizer, and other needed personal protective equipment the agency has ordered, MacKinnon said.

The department said it began last week delivering bottles of hand sanitizer and protective gloves to its 29 offices statewide.

MacKinnon credited the agency with taking other measures — albeit slowly — to react to the outbreak, including providing workers advice on using technology, such as FaceTime and Skype, to communicate with families rather than

in-person visits, when appropriate.

Union officials said they did not know Wednesday how many workers had been quarantined or how many others may be planning to get tested or awaiting results.

While most DCF workers have been working remotely and offices are closed to the public in the wake of the outbreak, there are still roughly 10 to 30 workers reporting to each of the 29 DCF offices statewide, according to union officials, who want the agency to close the offices altogether.

“They all have the ability to work completely out of their homes,” said MacKinnon, a longtime social worker. “That would mitigate a lot of potential exposure.”

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