

**Subject:** NEW!!! OCFS Family Visiting Policy for Children in Foster Care

Earlier this year I shared with you that New York was deemed out of compliance with 6 out of 7 measures on the federal government's 2015 audit of the state's child welfare system (the federal CFSR). As a result, New York was required to submit a Program Improvement Plan (PIP) to address those issues. In response, the NYS Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) created an Ad Hoc Working Group and solicited suggestions for strategies to include in the PIP.

As a member of that group, I suggested that each county be required to have a WRITTEN policy for parenting time (parent-child visitation) that encourages early, unsupervised, liberal and family-centered time for children and their parents. Although OCFS declined to include the suggestion in the formal, government required PIP, they agreed to create a formal, statewide policy to address the issue. In that process, many of you on this listserve reviewed and provided input on early DRAFTS of the policy (too many to name by name – you know who you are!).

I'm thrilled to report that the policy is now a reality! Please see Lucy McCarthy's pithy description of the policy (a copy of which is attached and available on the OCFS website at [http://ocfs.ny.gov/main/policies/external/OCFS\\_2017/ADFs/17-OCFS-ADM-14.pdf](http://ocfs.ny.gov/main/policies/external/OCFS_2017/ADFs/17-OCFS-ADM-14.pdf)). I'd like to acknowledge the important collaboration on this project by Betsy Kramer, Esq., Public Policy and Special Litigation Project Director at Lawyers for Children NYC.

Among many important points are: (1) an initial presumption of unsupervised parenting time; (2) when the agency seeks supervised visitation, "to assist the judge's decision-making, specific evidence supporting the request" must be offered on the record and entered into CONNECTIONS; (3) guidance on factors to consider in determining the least restrictive level of supervision when supervision is indicated; and (4) clarification that the OCFS regulation regarding bi-weekly parenting time establishes a *minimum*, not a *maximum*.

Each county is directed to include relevant stakeholders in developing its policy (that includes YOU!), which is due 90 days from the effective date of the policy (Oct. 5, 2017). I hope you will take the opportunity to reach out to your local DSS about joining this effort. And I hope this new policy will be a powerful tool in your efforts to help separated parents and children maintain and strengthen their connections, thereby improving the likelihood of timely and successful family reunification.

Stay tuned for upcoming training events that will highlight the significance of the policy and explore strategies for implementation.

Take good care,  
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