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## **Department of Human Services Encourages Pennsylvania Families to Explore Options for School-Age Child Care**

**Harrisburg, PA** – Today, Department of Human Services (DHS) Secretary Teresa Miller reminded Pennsylvanians of options available to working families of school-age children who need flexibilities to balance the demands of work, home and school life during a pandemic.

“The COVID-19 crisis has been a burden on everyone, but it continues to be an especially heavy one for Pennsylvania’s working families with children,” Secretary Miller said. “That’s why the Department of Human Services has introduced some flexibilities into its child care policies that are designed to help families navigate this new world of virtual learning, telecommuting and virus mitigation. School-age child care is a necessity for many Pennsylvania families right now, and DHS is committed to supporting these families with increased options and flexibilities.”

DHS has announced the temporary suspension of some regulatory policies on school-age child care, with the goal of providing flexibilities for families who need safe child care options during traditional school hours for children who are distance learning.

For example, families may create collectives – or learning pods – of other trusted families in their community who can depend on each other for supervised child care during school hours without needing a licensed child care certification. DHS has developed [guidance for families interested in establishing learning pods](#). The [policy document that outlines requirements for learning pods](#) is also online.

Learning pods are specifically designed to accommodate remote learning under parental supervision shared by multiple families on a routine basis. Pods can serve a group of no more than 12 of the same school-age children who may move between various parents’ oversight and homes on remote learning days. Parent/guardian oversight is key to the definition of a pod.

“We want children to be in situations where they are safe and supervised by trusted adults; where they are able to focus on their education; and where their interactions with other people are limited so as to minimize the risk of COVID-19 transmission,” Secretary Miller said. “What we don’t want are parents quitting their jobs to stay home with their school-age children.”

Parents/guardians that want to establish a learning pod of more than 6 (but no more than 12) children are required to:

- Develop a COVID-19 Health and Safety Plan aligned with the Pennsylvania Department of Health (DOH) guidelines and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).
- Develop a plan to address evacuation and family notification in the event of an emergency. Families should also notify local emergency management agencies of the pod so that they know where groups of children are gathering and can respond appropriately in the event of an emergency.

- Ensure that every space where children gather has a functioning fire-detection system on all levels of the facility or residence.
- Ensure compliance with the Pennsylvania Child Protective Services Law. Anyone working with or supervising children must undergo a background check. Also ensure that every adult who supervises children understands that they are a mandated reporter who is required to report suspected child abuse. More information is available at [www.KeepKidsSafe.pa.gov](http://www.KeepKidsSafe.pa.gov).
- Notify DHS of the pod's plan to care for school-age children during the 2020-2021 school year by completing an attestation form, which is available in this [policy document](#). Programs will be subject to monitoring and must allow DHS representatives access if they arrive at the service location and present a commonwealth-issued ID badge.

Because school-age children are expected to be in school for the bulk of their day, there are restrictions on licensed child care for school-age children. Recognizing that families need flexibility right now, DHS has temporarily modified and relaxed these restrictions.

For example, non-licensed part-day school-age programs like summer day camps and sports camps are limited in regulations to operating no more than 90 days per year. This allows short-term programs for school-age children to operate without being required to become a certified child care provider.

DHS has temporarily suspended the 90-day limit on these types of programs so that they can operate throughout the school year and provide the care and supervision that families desperately need for their children. These programs must comply with the same requirements as learning pods, including Health and Safety plans for COVID-19 mitigation and compliance with Pennsylvania's Child Protective Services Law for all adults working with children.

This week, DHS launched [a tool on its website where families can go for information about non-licensed school-age programs](#). DHS will continue to add information to this tool as providers submit it to the department.

When possible, DHS recommends that families choose licensed child care providers, which have routine oversight and must comply with statewide child care regulations. Accommodations for school-age children engaged in distance learning will depend on the individual provider, so families should have that discussion with the provider before enrolling their school-age child.

To find licensed providers in your community, visit [www.findchildcare.pa.gov](http://www.findchildcare.pa.gov) or contact your Early Learning Resource Center (ELRC). Find your ELRC at [www.raiseyourstar.org](http://www.raiseyourstar.org).