



## Keeping DJS Families Connected During COVID-19

In these uncertain times, the Department of Juvenile Services has leveraged technology to keep clear communications between staff, partner organizations, and families. When the COVID-19 pandemic began, DJS immediately enacted other communication strategies to assist families, which included a COVID-19 Informational Family Live Stream. This monthly virtual meeting features a panel of DJS executive staff and co-hosted by DJS Chief of Staff Jay Cleary and Candace Harris of the Maryland Coalition of Families.

These 30-minute meetings occur on the first Tuesday of every month at 5:30 p.m. Families can contact their case managers for ways to anonymously submit questions and listen to the live stream. The Department schedules similar live streams for staff to receive feedback too. The videos remain online, for those who missed the live event or want to view it again.

These events are for all families throughout the DJS system, including families that have youth in the community and for youth that are placed in out-of-home placements. Parents and guardians can send their questions to a special DJS COVID email address or bring them directly to their case managers. The live stream format really allows for an interactive conversation between DJS top-level staff and families.

Harris, a peer support specialist at the Maryland Coalition of Families, moderates the talk to help put families at ease. She said viewers with questions or concerns can get “answers and hear someone speaking about it, instead of through hearsay or the news.”

Those answers come from the agency’s subject matter experts, who are also responsible for policy. Families benefit by getting a direct answer from the people making the decisions and the Department benefits from getting direct feedback from families to the policy makers, who can then take action in addressing any concerns. Topics from previous live streams included COVID-19 testing, visitation, safety protocols in the facilities, and meetings with community case managers.

“When we went virtual with families, we realized that we could interact more effectively and timely with one of our most important stakeholders,” said DJS Secretary Sam Abed. “I appreciate the feedback we receive from families as the safety and well-being of youth is our top priority, as well as looking for opportunities to improve the services we provide to our young people.”