

Dear Medical Partners,

On behalf of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), I want to thank you for the vital role you play in identifying, assessing, and reporting concerns involving possible child abuse or neglect. Physicians, nurses, hospital staff, and other medical professionals are among the most critical mandated reporters in Illinois, and your expertise is indispensable in helping protect children.

Because you play such a critical role in this work, we want to inform you of an important initiative DCFS is launching in **July 2026** called **Forward Together**. The Forward Together Initiative is part of our efforts to improve and transform child welfare practice in Illinois through stronger engagement, prevention and early intervention.

Beginning in July, DCFS Child Protection staff will implement the evidence-based SAFE Model statewide and begin their engagement with families through an enhanced new process called the **Family Safety Review**.

This change does **not** alter your legal obligations as mandated reporters and if, in your professional capacity, you have reasonable cause to believe a child may be abused or neglected, you should continue to report to the DCFS Hotline as required by law. The Hotline will continue to screen reports using statutory criteria. When a report meets the threshold for a child protection response, DCFS will continue to respond.

What the Forward Together Initiative will change is how DCFS child protection specialists initially engage with families when they respond.

The Forward Together Initiative will require that, when a report is screened in at the hotline and assigned to a DCFS Child Protection Specialist, that specialist will begin by conducting a **Family Safety Review within 14 days**. This **Family Safety Review** is an information gathering and family assessment process that enables staff to evaluate present and impending danger, family circumstances, and caregiver protective capacities to determine whether the matter should proceed to a formal investigation or whether linking the family to supportive resources is a more appropriate response. If the Family Safety Review reveals that a formal investigation is warranted, DCFS Child Protection Specialists will proceed according to our existing investigations protocol.

For medical professionals, this approach is especially important. Many reports from healthcare settings involve urgent safety concerns, newborns, injuries, or complex clinical presentations. The Family Safety Review allows DCFS to engage with greater focus on safety and context, while preserving the Department's authority to act immediately when needed.

Please know that while DCFS works to strengthen our practice with the Forward Together Initiative, the following will remain true:

1. **Child safety is paramount.** DCFS will continue to take protective action when children are unsafe.
2. **Your reports are essential.** This change does not change the threshold for reporting and DCFS will continue to rely on the critical information you provide in making reports.
3. **Medical expertise is critical.** Clinical observations, injury assessments, timelines, and provider judgment continue to be central to DCFS safety decision-making.

DCFS is making this shift to improve the quality and consistency of our decision-making and our effectiveness in engaging with families. We know that when we effectively engage and support children and families early on, our children and families are safer and better off. Our goal is to ensure we provide our children and families with the **right response, at the right time**, while maintaining strong partnership with the medical community.

To learn more about the SAFE Model and DCFS's approach to strengthening safety practice, we invite you to visit the DCFS SAFE Model webpage and view a brief overview video.

SAFE Model webpage: <https://dcfs.illinois.gov/for-providers/safety-assessment-and-family-evaluation--safe--model.html>

QR code to the webpage:



Overview video: <https://vimeo.com/800727846/2e8b774b0c>

QR code to the video:



Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'H. Mueller'.

Heidi E. Mueller
Director