

Operations

Local First Steps Offices should adhere to all applicable guidance from the Centers for Disease Control, South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control, and the Governor of South Carolina. Since mid-March, the SC First Steps State Office is operating full time with a telecommuting policy for all employees; program officers and team members are still available to assist you. When the Governor ordered a stay at home order, April 7th, the SC First Steps Administrative Office was closed to the public and all staff are required to work in the location arranged with their supervisor until further notice. The Office of First Steps recognizes that local partnerships are adhering to a protocol based on their physical location, as many are located on school district properties.

The expectation is that no First Steps employee, contractor, volunteer, etc. place themselves in a position of vulnerability regarding the spread of the COVID 19 virus. The Office of First Steps assumes that local First Steps offices will continue to operate remotely when possible.

What are some recommended actions that local partnerships working from home can take in order to maintain communications with their families and the public at large?

- Forward phone calls from the office number posted on your website to a number that can be answered remotely
- Regularly monitor work email and if using an automatic notice of closure reply, language should indicate that the office is working remotely and still responding to email messages
- Monitor staff operating on a work from home basis and keep records

Where can I get information regarding Emergency Family Medical Leave, and the CARES Act?

- Contact your Program Officer for the best resources regarding HR issues and emergency federal aid that are now available related to the Family Medical Leave Act, Unemployment Insurance, and other relief that may be available for you and your employees.
- [Consult the First Steps Website.](#)

Governance and Fiscal Accountability

The First Steps Finance Office will continue to operate during our normal work hours of 8:00 am to 4:00 pm. Finance staff will have full access to Blackbaud and the ability to process budget reallocations. You may still dial staff office phone numbers to connect with finance staff as our phone system has been set to forward the calls directly. Finance staff and our Finance Manager, Manley Garvin, are working closely to ensure continued services for the Local Partnerships.

Continue to consult with your Board Chair and Executive Committee regarding decisions impacting your Local Partnership Operations. Be sure that meeting minutes reflect decisions made about significant financial changes such as using First Steps state funds to address emergency needs not anticipated in your approved Budget Spending Plan.

The use of 'Docu-sign' or other online signature applications are acceptable for documents that require signatures. If you are having difficulty obtaining a needed signature, contact your Program Officer or Finance Staff.

With your assistance we will continue to monitor and track the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Local Partnership programs and services and the resulting implications for accountability standards and legislative requirements around budgeting and spending. We will be prepared to bring issues such as % requirements for carry forward, match, and evidence-based programs to the state board in a timely and transparent manner.

Community Portal and Convener

Under the current circumstances, the main priority for all First Steps Offices is to ensure that all families seeking assistance from First Steps can be connected to the proper resources when possible. In order to do this, we have heard that local First Steps Offices are continuing communications with community partners in order to best address areas where resources are most needed. For some partnerships, this could simply mean staying connected and assisting families who reach out. Others may elect to conduct special supply drives or engage in activities in conjunction with other partner organizations.

What are some recommendations to consider when a Local Partnership focuses on offering emergency aid or resources to their community?

- Keep record of activities or actions you take - this information will be useful for justification of spending and for later documenting your efforts such as in your Annual Report for 2020.
- Consult with the Local Partnership Finance team when moving funds or significant spending so they can assist you in keeping your Budget Spending Plan on track and adhering to guidelines.
- Continue to keep your local board informed and engaged in all emergency activities.

Partnership and Program Accountability Standards

The FY20 Partnership and Program Accountability Standards will continue in place as the goal for program fidelity, evidence-based results, and legislative accountability. Third quarter data checks will be conducted as scheduled to assess program performance through March 31st. The 3rd quarter data check will serve as a benchmark for future evaluation and as the start of when impacts due to the COVID-19 health crisis changed program delivery and data.

For the 4th Quarter - April 1 to June 30, 2020 - data will be reviewed with the understanding that most programs and services were modified to meet the needs of a severe community health crisis. Current program standards may not be applicable when programs are discontinued or replaced with temporary short-term needed services. There will be no attempt during the grant review to cite partnerships for non-compliance or require corrective action plans for program standards that are no longer relevant.

The Office of First Steps is continuing to monitor the situation and will continue to amend future requirements that are impacted by COVID 19.

Home Visiting Programs

The Office of First Steps advises that home visits should continue on a virtual platform (either video or telephone) until further notice. We understand the challenges across our state regarding access to broadband internet or even cellular service that may impact a partnership's ability to connect with all families.

Efforts should be made to carry out parenting programs to model fidelity. Consult with model developer guidance on program implementation during the COVID-19 health crisis. Ensure that all visits or group activities meet the model guidelines including things such as; planning documentation, target areas of service, length of interaction and documenting the visit.

If a family or home-based child- care provider participating in the pilot program, Supporting Care Providers through Visits, chooses to suspend visits during this time, that request should be documented, and regular check in contact with that family should occur.

Additionally, the National Alliance of Home Visiting Models (NAHVM) is available to access up to date information on approved home visiting practices. NAHVM provides information and guidance from participating evidence-based home visiting models inclusive of several implemented by local partnerships. Those participating models include; Healthy Families America, Nurse Family Partnership, Parent Child + (formally Parent Child Home), and Parents as Teachers. [Click here to access the NAHVM website.](#)

Countdown to Kindergarten

The first decision to be made is whether to conduct the Countdown program (in any form) for Summer 2020. The deadline for completing the Numbers to Serve form is April 15. The deadline for ordering toolkits is April 17 for Lakeshore and April 30 for Kaplan. These forms were emailed to Executive Directors on April 6.

As the end of April approaches and more information and guidance becomes available on summer programming, partnerships that choose to conduct the Summer 2020 program must decide on dosage (number of sessions) and implementation method (face-to-face or virtual).

While implementation methods can vary among partnerships, dosage must be decided collectively. That is, all partnerships must agree on which of the six visits to implement. This decision has implications for toolkit items that will be used in Summer 2020, those that will be saved for Summer 2021, and, therefore, the Summer 2021 toolkit order.

Quality Enhancement and Quality Counts

Local First Steps offices should continue to support child care providers in their community. While many providers have closed, some remain open and are critical to providing child care for emergency and essential workers at this time. For local First Steps offices operating a Quality Enhancement or Quality Counts strategy, efforts should be made and documented to support the child care director and staff that participate in the program. Depending on the operational status of providers, this support may look different from county to county and will be dependent upon the immediate needs of the provider. Some examples of how a Child Care Quality Enhancement Technical Assistant may support providers are the following:

- Routine check-ins with child care providers (via email, phone call or video conference), newsletters with updates on closures and available services in the community.
- Connect child care staff to open positions and/or connect providers to staff willing to work. Palmetto Shared Services Alliance, in partnership with CCR&R, has temporarily opened their job portal to all child care programs and individuals looking for child care positions regardless if they have a PSSA membership or not. Here are the links for:
 - [Child care providers to sign up for temporary accounts](#)
 - [Job offerings](#)
- Help providers apply for small business relief loans ([Click here](#) for information from the [First Five Years Fund](#) and the [U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation](#)) and other financial supports.
- Provide Supplies: For open child care providers, provide sanitizing products, paper goods (paper towels, toilet paper, diapers, wipes), etc. as needed and if you are able.
- Compile and distribute lists, packets, activity kits, etc. of age appropriate at home activities to children and parents from the child care providers that are closed.

Child Care Training

The delivery of the Child Care Training program during COVID 19 will be determined by the operational status of child care providers in a community as well as the training needs of the providers. While face-to-face trainings may not be an option at this time, virtual/webinar-based trainings are a viable alternative. SC Endeavors has recently announced that trainers are temporarily able to schedule webinars for previously approved face-to-face training courses as well as create new webinar training for approval. [Click here](#) for more information from SC Endeavors on their webinar training criteria and instructions for changing training sessions to webinars.

If First Steps local partnerships deliver webinar trainings certified through SC Endeavors, they may enter their trainings into the SC First Steps database. If the partnership feels they cannot currently implement their Child Care Training program, the Executive Director should contact their assigned Program Officer.

Child Care Scholarships

DSS-purchased Scholarships (guidance from SC DSS)

- For parents that are approved for full and half-time voucher, the school age children's half-time voucher will be changed to a full-time voucher during the COVID-19 emergency time period of March 16, 2020 – March 31, 2020. Providers are encouraged to call the SC Voucher Program at 1-800-262-4416 to ensure all services for school aged children are changed to full time when eligible.
- If an ABC Quality child care provider closes during the COVID-19 emergency and a voucher eligible parent needs to move to another provider in order to continue to work, the voucher child will be immediately disconnected from the closed provider and moved to a new provider in order for the parent to continue to have child care.
- If an ABC Quality provider is closed during March 16 – March 31, 2020 and is charging a weekly rate to their private pay parents, then the voucher will continue to be paid. If the provider is not requiring private pay parents to pay weekly rates, then the voucher will not continue to be paid. Provider should call the 1-800-262-4416 line to let SC Voucher staff know if they are charging private pay or not.
- Child care providers that operate private 4K classrooms paid for by South Carolina First Steps through CERDERP funding, cannot be doubled paid by a voucher, private pay, etc. for the same children.
- [For the period of March 16, 2020 – March 31, 2020, the SC Voucher program will not be dropping children after 10 consecutive absences.](#)
- Updates to guidance re: DSS scholarships can be found on their [website](#).
- Most recent guidance for DSS vouchers is available [here](#).

In-House Scholarships

If a First Steps local partnership operates an in-house scholarship program, the local partnership board must determine if and how they will distribute scholarship funding. Some local partnerships have decided to continue to pay all or a portion of child care scholarships to facilities that are closed in order to try to help alleviate the financial burden.

Data Entry

If you are conducting a program where data entry is still possible in the data system, please continue to enter data as usual. If you have data collected but not entered prior to the Covid-19 emergency, it would be important to get this data entered for the 3rd quarter data check.

It is important to track any changes or modifications that you are making to program delivery so that these can be considered later when evaluating program results. Please be sure to make note of when modifications to programs first began.

If you have questions regarding what data you should be tracking for a specific program or service you are delivering, please be in touch with Dione Brabham or your Program Officer for assistance. As we learn more about the ways in which Local Partnerships are responding to the Covid-19 emergency, we will be sharing how your efforts are being recognized and reported.