



Relative Caregiving: What You Need to Know



Purpose of this guide

This guide will provide basic information about resources available if you are caring for related children in foster care. Foster care provides temporary care and supervision for children who are unable to live with their parents. Whether you are a relative caregiver or a licensed foster parent, providing temporary foster care for a child will be challenging. Understanding Michigan's child welfare system will help you meet the needs of the child(ren) placed in your home.

The main goal for children and youth in foster care is a permanent, safe and stable home in which to live and grow with a nurturing caregiver. Relatives play an important role in ensuring the safety and well-being of children in foster care. Relative caregivers provide children with safe, stable care and help keep children connected with their siblings and communities. In many cases, relative caregivers help reunify children and their parents. Relative caregivers can also provide children with stability through guardianship or adoption if they cannot return home.

Your willingness to take a child into your home shows a great deal of commitment and love. We are here to help by offering the assistance you may need in supporting your additional family member(s).



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Important phone numbers

Foster Care Worker

Name _____ Phone number _____

Email _____

Certification Worker

Name _____ Phone number _____

Email _____

Lawyer Guardian at Litem (LGAL)

Name _____ Phone number _____

Email _____

Other

Name _____ Phone number _____

Email _____

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Why is Children's Protective Services involved?

Most children who enter foster care have been removed from their parents or caregivers by Children's Protective Services (CPS).

Children's Protective Services is a state program provided by the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services. Children's Protective Services "has the responsibility to respond to any complaint of child abuse and neglect, sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, or maltreatment by a person responsible for the child's health or welfare." It is the goal of Children's Protective Services to strengthen families by providing services to ensure child safety and allow children to stay in their own home when appropriate. The best place for a child to live is with his or her family when it is safe for the child.

When Children's Protective Services receives an allegation that a child is being abused and/or neglected by their parent, guardian, or person responsible for that child, the Children's Protective Services worker must take steps to find out if the allegations are true by completing an investigation. In an attempt to seek **all** information related to the allegation of abuse



or neglect and determine whether they are true based on facts and evidence, Children's Protective Services investigations may include but are not limited to:

- ◆ Interviews with all children (most often occurring at school for school-age children).
- ◆ Interviews with all parents.
- ◆ Visits to the family's home.
- ◆ Contacts with any other persons that may have information to assist the CPS worker in making an appropriate decision on the case.
- ◆ Requesting the child be seen by a doctor if there are concerns related to the child's physical care or condition.
- ◆ A safety assessment to assess the present or possible danger to a child.
- ◆ A risk assessment on the family, which determines the risk of future harm to the child.

When investigation of a complaint determines that there is a preponderance of evidence (50.5% or more evidence supporting abuse/neglect occurred) of abuse or neglect by a person responsible for the child's health or welfare, the department must:

- ◆ Assess the needs and strengths of the family to determine appropriate services.
- ◆ Provide services to the family until the risk of future abuse or neglect has been reduced.

When Children's Protective Services determines that a child cannot remain safely in his/her own home, Children's Protective Services will file a petition with the Family Division of Circuit Court to request removal of the child(ren) for placement into a relative home or a licensed foster home. Children's Protective Services should explain the process to the parents in full and answer any questions that they may have related to their child(ren) and the process.



What is foster care?

Foster care is temporary care and supervision to meet the needs of children who cannot live safely in their home. The goal of foster care is to provide children a safe, stable home and family to care for them until they can be safely returned home, adopted or placed in another permanent living arrangement.

What are the benefits of relative care?

- ◆ Provides love and care in a family setting.
- ◆ Provides parents with a sense of hope that children will remain connected to their families.
- ◆ Enables children to live with people they already know and trust.
- ◆ Provides children with a sense of cultural identity and positive self-esteem.
- ◆ Helps a child maintain extended family ties.
- ◆ Allows children to continue their family traditions and memories.
- ◆ Supports the child in building healthy relationships within the family.
- ◆ Supports the child's need for safety and well-being.
- ◆ Creates a sense of stability in the life of a child.

What assistance and financial resources are available to help?

Relative caregivers may need additional support services. These services could include day care assistance, support groups, physical and mental health services, educational services and legal assistance to support children in their care.

Michigan requires relative caregivers to become licensed foster care providers unless exceptional circumstances exist.

The benefits of licensure include:

- ◆ Monthly board and care payment between \$517.20 and \$617.70 based on the child's age. Additional assistance is available based on the child's needs and additional involvement required by the relative caregiver.
- ◆ Initial and semi-annual clothing allowances based upon the child's need.
- ◆ Support from other relative caregivers or foster parents through support groups.
- ◆ Professional support provided by your certification worker and foster care worker.
- ◆ Training opportunities.

What are the requirements to be a licensed relative foster parent?

- ◆ Must be at least 18 years of age.
- ◆ Can be single or married (if married your spouse must also apply).
- ◆ Must be fingerprinted for a criminal history record check.
- ◆ Must have CPS clearance for any history of abuse and neglect, including everyone 18 and older living in your home.
- ◆ Can be employed full- or part-time.
- ◆ Can own, lease or rent your home.
- ◆ Must comply with all licensing rules.
- ◆ Must have transportation available and a phone in your home.
- ◆ Must have a bed and adequate bedroom space for each household member and foster child.
- ◆ Must be in good general health (a medical statement from a medical provider is required).
- ◆ Must have adequate income to meet your family's needs.

- ◆ Must provide three unrelated references.
- ◆ Must complete foster parent orientation and pre-service training sessions.
- ◆ Must work with a foster home certification worker to complete an initial home evaluation.
- ◆ Must sign and abide by the agency discipline policy.

The licensing rules are the same for relatives and non-relatives. Your certification worker can request variances to non-safety licensing standards on a case-by-case basis. Examples of non-safety licensing standards include but are not limited to bedroom space, square footage and child capacity.

How long will it take to become licensed?

The foster home licensing process takes approximately three to six months. The length of time depends on how much work the certification worker has to do, the length of time it takes to do the health inspection, the cooperation of family members and how soon the required information is provided to the certification worker.



What should I expect throughout the licensing process?

Step 1: Orientation

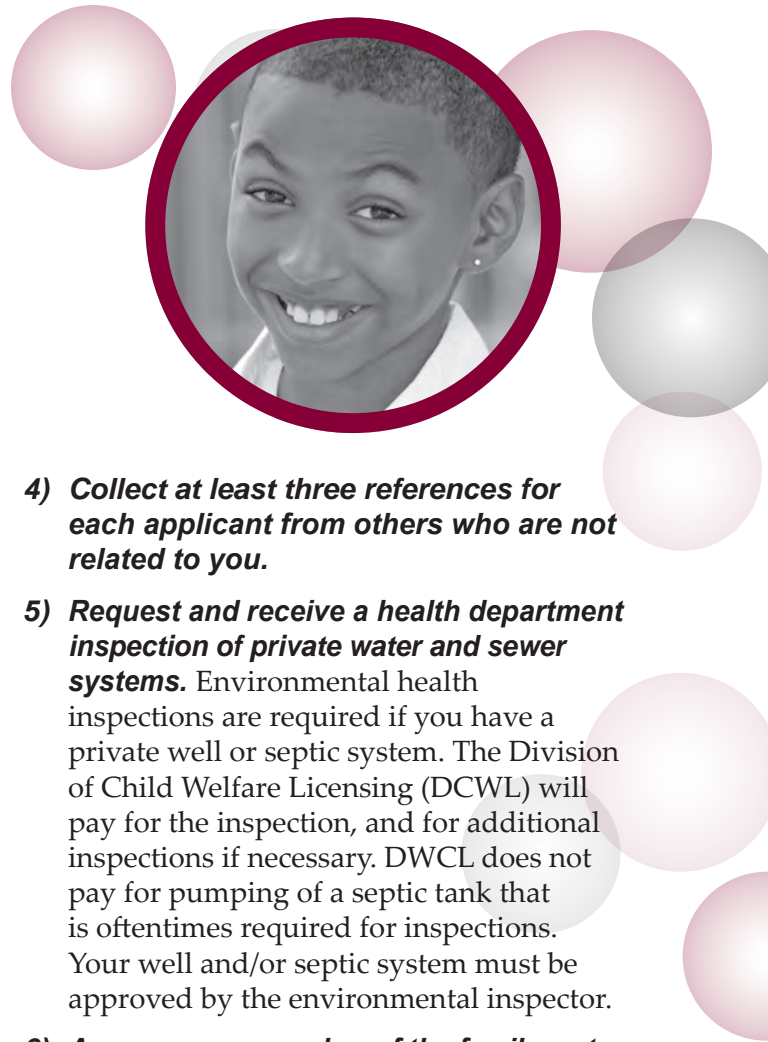
An orientation will be provided by the agency to explain the licensing process. During this meeting, you will learn about state licensing rules and the agency's policies and expectations. Orientation can last up to three hours. After the meeting, you may complete and sign the foster home license application.

Step 2: Home and family assessment

After orientation, you will be assigned to a certification worker. Your certification worker can assist you in completing all forms required for licensure, including scheduling fingerprint appointments, locating training options, answering questions you may have about foster care and providing you with other assistance needed.

Once the agency has received your completed and signed application, it will begin the foster home study process. This process includes the following steps:

- 1) **Conduct criminal clearances on all adults in the home.** Each adult household member needs to fill out the Licensing Record Clearance Request (CWL-1326). *Prospective foster parents are required to be fingerprinted.* Your certification worker can assist you with scheduling a fingerprinting appointment. After you complete your fingerprinting, return the CWL-1326 to your certification worker. Return additional CWL-1326 forms completed by adult household members who are not applying to be a foster parent to the certification worker.
- 2) **Check for any history of child abuse or neglect on all adults in the home.**
- 3) **Gather medical statements for every member of the household.** Each member of your household will need to complete a medical statement form. A physician, physician's assistant or a licensed nurse practitioner can complete this medical form.



- 4) **Collect at least three references for each applicant from others who are not related to you.**
- 5) **Request and receive a health department inspection of private water and sewer systems.** Environmental health inspections are required if you have a private well or septic system. The Division of Child Welfare Licensing (DCWL) will pay for the inspection, and for additional inspections if necessary. DCWL does not pay for pumping of a septic tank that is oftentimes required for inspections. Your well and/or septic system must be approved by the environmental inspector.
- 6) **Assess every member of the family as to:**
 - Strengths and areas needing support.
 - Willingness to accept foster children.
- 7) **Assess prospective foster parents on:**
 - Parenting skills.
 - Understanding of children's needs.
 - Willingness to work with the agency.
 - Willingness to work with the foster child's biological parents.
- 8) **Assess the physical home for adequacy of space, cleanliness and general safety.** It is important to know that the home study process will involve an evaluation of every member of your household and immediate family, including all of your children. Remember that the purpose of licensing is to assure that children will be safe and protected; therefore, evaluating all household members is an important part of this process. If you have adult children that do not live with you, they will also be interviewed.

Note: Contact your certification worker if you have questions or need assistance.

Step 3: Get involved through trainings

The steps above can be completed at the same time you are completing your training requirements. Prospective foster parents must attend 27 hours of training. Michigan uses the Parent Resources for Information Development and Education (PRIDE) curriculum. Training sessions usually last three hours per session. After you complete 12 hours of PRIDE (sessions 1-4 and 6) and all of the other requirements have been met, your certification worker can recommend your home to be licensed. Once licensed, foster care payments can begin. You must complete the remaining 15 hours of PRIDE training within the first year you are licensed. Ask your certification worker for a schedule of PRIDE sessions in or near your county.

Step 4: Recommending a license

If all licensing requirements are met, your certification worker will complete and submit the Initial Foster/Adoptive Home Evaluation (CWL-3130) to recommend a license for your home. If approved, the Division of Child Welfare Licensing will issue a foster home license. The official license will be mailed to you.

If you are unable to be recommended for a license, you may discuss the barriers and possible solutions with your certification worker.

Step 5: Maintaining your license

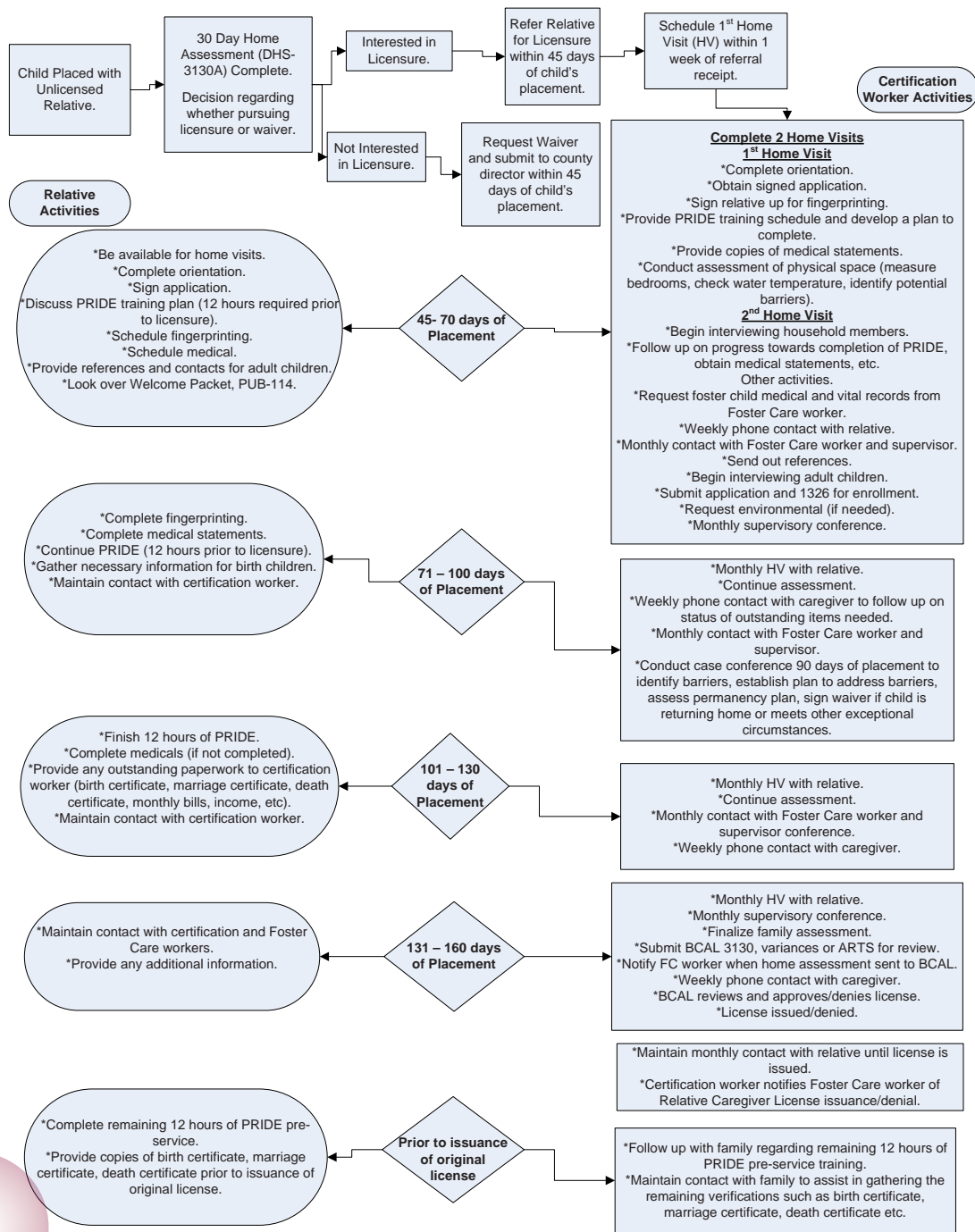
Your first license is a provisional license and will expire in six months. At the end of the six months, the agency will make a recommendation about the renewal of your license. If renewed, a regular license is issued and will be open for two years. A license review is required every year. To maintain your license over the next two years, you will need to complete a minimum of six hours of training annually. You should keep track of the training you complete, the dates, the topics and number of hours.

What happens if I cannot become licensed or do not want to be licensed?

In exceptional circumstances, a relative caregiver may decline to be licensed or may not be recommended for a license. In these circumstances, the child's foster care worker must assess your home to determine if the child should continue living in your home. If so, you will be asked to complete a waiver. If the waiver is approved, you will not have to be licensed. To inquire about a waiver, contact your child's foster care worker. If a waiver is not approved, you must become licensed or the child will have to be moved from your home.



Relative Licensing Certification Process: Best Practice Time Frames



Is there financial assistance available during the licensing process or if I do not become licensed?

Yes, you can apply for Family Independence Program (FIP) grants. There are two types of FIP grants:

- 1. Ineligible Grantee Awards** (Child Only Grants) are available for the child regardless of household income.
Note: A foster child's income (Supplemental Security Income [SSI], Retirement, Survivors and Disability Insurance [RSDI], etc.) is not included in the household income and will reduce the award amount.
- 2. Eligible Grantee Awards** (Family Grants) are based on the income and assets of all family members. To remain eligible, relative caregivers must work unless they provide proof of disability or are older than 65 years old.

As of 2010, cash assistance is approximately \$158 per month for one child. See the chart below for each additional child.

FIP MONTHLY ASSISTANCE PAYMENT STANDARD Effective 10/1/2008)		
Group Size	Eligible Grantee	Ineligible Grantee
ONE	\$306	\$158
TWO	\$403	\$274
THREE	\$492	\$420
FOUR	\$597	\$557
FIVE	\$694	\$694
SIX	\$828	\$828
SEVEN	\$905	\$905
EIGHT or more	Add \$80 for each additional person	

Note: Once you become licensed, FIP payments must end prior to your receiving foster care payments.



How do I apply for the Family Independence Program (FIP)?

The Assistance Application, DHS-1171 is available at local MDHHS offices or you can apply online at www.michigan.gov/mibridges.

When do I start receiving the FIP payment?

The processing time is about 45 days from the date of the application. A child cannot receive benefits on two cases at one time. If the child's parent was receiving cash benefits, the child has to be removed from the parent's case first. Benefits may then start on your case, assuming the child did not already receive benefits for that month on a parent's case.



Can I apply for food assistance for my entire family with the same application?

Yes. The foster care worker can assist you in applying for other benefits you may be eligible to receive, such as food assistance. You must provide complete financial information for everyone living in the home, including everyone's income and housing expenses.

What other services will be available?

Some of the services that MDHHS can provide are subsidized childcare if you work or are in school; respite care for the child in a licensed foster home and transportation for the child to scheduled appointments. You may ask the child's foster care worker how to access such services. Referrals to community agencies for parenting skills training, emergency services and counseling are also available.



How will I get medical care for the child?

If children do not have medical coverage through a private insurance, they will be covered by Medicaid.

What am I expected to do?

Relative caregivers have the following responsibilities:

- ◆ Make a commitment to provide a safe and loving home for the child.
- ◆ Sign and follow a written agreement of expectations and responsibilities with the agency.
- ◆ Provide services for the child as outlined in the child's service plan.
- ◆ Communicate with your foster care worker on an ongoing basis so you can support the stability of the child's placement.
- ◆ Work closely with your child's foster care worker to establish a permanent living arrangement for the child.
- ◆ Request information about the child from the foster care worker that will help you provide care for the child.
- ◆ Use non-physical, age-appropriate discipline.
- ◆ Assist the foster care worker to ensure that the child receives regular medical and dental care, therapy and other required services.
- ◆ Enroll the child in school.
- ◆ Report the child's progress and concerns to the foster care worker and be available for scheduled home visits by the foster care worker.
- ◆ Attend court hearings and family team meetings to provide input.
- ◆ Provide transportation and support visits with the child's parents and siblings.

- ◆ Keep all information about the child's case confidential. This includes not sharing information with other family members. Your child's foster care worker will advise you what information may be shared with professionals working with the child.

What should I expect from foster care workers?

Foster care workers are the staff you usually talk to about the child(ren) in your care. Foster care workers are responsible for making sure children are safe and their needs are being met. They also try to help parents develop the skills needed so children can return home. You should discuss with the foster care worker any services you may require due to disability or special needs. The parents and

the child's foster care worker together will plan for the changes that need to be made for the children to return home. If the child's parents do not make these changes and the child(ren) cannot return home, the foster care worker will make a recommendation for the child's permanent plan. This recommendation will be discussed during family team meetings.

Will the foster care worker share information about the child with me?

Yes, you will receive a copy of the case service plan and information about each child placed with you. If you do not receive the case service plan or other information you need, ask the foster care worker for them.



What are the permanent living arrangement options for a child?

When children are removed from their homes, the foster care worker will pursue one of five ***permanent living arrangements***. The five federally approved permanent living arrangements include:

- Reunification.
- Adoption.
- Guardianship.
- Permanent placement with a fit and willing relative.
- Placement in another planned permanent living arrangement.

Reunification, or the process of reuniting a child with the parent(s), is the first goal in foster care. After the child is removed from the home, the supervising agency must have a permanent living arrangement finalized for a child within 12 months. The timeframe can be extended if the parent has been working with the agency and it is expected that reunification can occur within a defined period of time. Once it is determined that is safe to return a child home, the foster care worker must begin the process to reunite the family.

After efforts have been made to reunify the family and progress has not been made, the foster care worker must assess the child's best interests and permanent living arrangement. A foster care worker may recommend termination of parental rights. If termination of parental rights is ordered by the court, ***adoption*** is the preferred goal. If adoption is not in the child's best interest, permanent legal guardianship is another option.

If a determination is made that termination of parental rights is not in the child's best interest and the child cannot return home, permanent legal ***guardianship*** should be the goal.

Adoption or guardianship offer the child a sense of security and family attachment and allows the adoptive parent or guardian to make decisions on the child's behalf.

Permanent placement with a fit and willing relative (PPFWR) should only be considered after reunification, adoption and guardianship have been ruled out as the permanent living arrangement for the child. To qualify as a permanent placement with a fit and willing relative, the placement must be stable and must include a signed, written commitment agreement. The relative agrees to care for the child until the foster care case is closed or it is determined that another appropriate plan offers the child a more secure permanent living arrangement.

What is the difference between adoption and guardianship?

Adoption requires the complete termination of the birth parents' rights by the court. Adoptive parents have all the legal rights and responsibilities of birth parents. Guardianship generally allows birth parents to maintain reasonable visitation and contact with the child (unless the court will not allow it). Guardianship is another option when reunification or adoption is not in the best interest of the child.

If I adopt or become the legal guardian, is there any financial assistance for the child?

Yes. Adoption subsidy can include a monthly payment and/or reimbursement of special services for the child. The monthly payment is based on the child needs. The monthly payment cannot exceed the foster care rate.

Guardianship assistance also provides a monthly payment that is the same rate as a foster care payment. To receive guardianship assistance, you must become a licensed foster care provider and have the child in your home for six months. Most children in a guardianship will qualify for Medicaid, unless they have other significant income. Both adoption subsidy and guardianship assistance remain in effect if the family moves out-of-state.

The court process

Children are placed into foster care when the court determines it is not safe for their parents to care for them at home. The following is a summary of the court's process for abused and neglected children.

Preliminary hearing

The preliminary hearing must be held within 24 hours after the children have been removed from their parents' home. The purpose of this hearing is to determine whether the court will authorize the petition filed by CPS and whether out-of-home placement is necessary. During the hearing, the reasons for the petition are explained, and the parents are provided an opportunity to respond. If the parents disagree with the allegations in the petition, the case will proceed toward trial. The children will be assigned an attorney. If the parents cannot afford to hire an attorney, one will be assigned to them.

Pre-trial hearing

The court may have one or more pre-trial hearings. The attorneys provide the court a list of people who will testify about the allegations in the petition. There may be other discussions about placement, possible services and amendments to the original petition. A date for the trial is usually set at this time.

Adjudication hearing or trial

The adjudication hearing, or trial, must occur no later than 63 days after the children are removed from their parents. The purpose of this hearing is for the court to determine whether the children have been abused or neglected and whether the court has the authority to remain involved in the family's life. This hearing is either a bench trial with a judge or referee or a jury trial with a judge and jury of eight. Parents may admit to the allegations or plead "no contest," in which case a full hearing will not be held. In a trial, evidence is presented and witnesses may testify. The court will decide if the children should remain in foster care. The protective services worker's involvement in the case ends when the court makes its finding regarding the allegations of abuse and/or neglect.

Dispositional hearing

The dispositional hearing is held within 35 days of the adjudication hearing. The court will determine what the parents must do in order for the children to be returned to their care. This is the first hearing at which the foster care worker assigned to the children must address the court about the service plan, progress and children's status. The court will provide the foster care worker instructions about the case and services. The court will also make decisions about parenting time (parent visits) such as frequency, location and need for supervision. The plan that is developed by the foster care worker and parent and ordered by the court is outlined in the "Parent Agency Treatment and Service Plan." In limited situations, the agency may seek termination of parental rights at the beginning of the case. If so, the decision about termination will occur at this hearing.

Review hearings

The initial foster care review hearing takes place within 182 days after removal of children from their home and no later than every 91 days after that for the first year the children are subject to the jurisdiction of the court. After the first year children are removed from their home and subject to the





jurisdiction of the court, review hearings are required to be held not more than 182 days from the immediately preceding review until the case is dismissed. The court reviews the case, including the progress of the parents, the quality of the parenting time and the care and services provided to the children. The court will decide if the children should continue in foster care or return to the parents' care. Review hearings may continue even after children are returned home so the court can continue to monitor parental progress.

The court or any party in a case may ask for an earlier review hearing to be scheduled on a case depending on the case plan. A foster care worker or attorney can request an additional review hearing if the case situation warrants it. At any point in the court process a party can request and the court may decide that the children be returned home.

Permanency planning hearing

A permanency planning hearing must occur no later than 12 months after the children were removed from their home if the court case is still open and once every 12 months thereafter. The purpose of this hearing is to determine whether the children will return home or remain in foster care for a limited and specified period. The court may decide that the children are to remain in foster care or may order the agency to file a petition requesting to terminate parental rights.

If the court orders the agency to file a petition requesting to terminate rights, the agency must file it within 14 days. Once the petition is filed, parenting time is not suspended unless the court finds the continued parenting time would be harmful to the children.

Termination of parental rights hearing

The purpose of the termination hearing is to determine whether the legal relationship between the parent and child will be permanently severed, making the child available for adoption. Termination can only occur when one or more of the conditions outlined in the law are met.

If a petition is filed requesting termination of parental rights, the court will set a termination hearing, or bench trial. Some courts will also schedule a pretrial meeting or hearing to allow the parties involved to prepare for the trial.

At the termination hearing, evidence is presented and witnesses will testify and be cross-examined. There are two steps in a termination hearing. First, the agency must provide evidence that demonstrates a statutory, or legal, basis for termination. Second, the court must determine that termination is in the children's best interest. Parents, through their attorney, may attempt to show that termination is not in the children's best interest. Within 70 days of starting and within 28 days of taking final evidence, the court must issue its decision. The court may make its finding and conclusions on the record (orally) or in writing.

If rights are terminated, the children are considered permanent court or state wards and are legally available for adoption. However, the parents have a 21-day period from the date they receive their written order to file an appeal with the court. In a termination of parental rights situation, parents have a right to appeal and will be appointed an attorney if they need one. The children will continue to be represented in appeal hearings by their assigned attorney.

Voluntary release

Parents may choose to give up their parental rights at any time during the case. In some situations, only one parent may choose to release his or her rights. Any parents inquiring about releasing their rights will be informed of the consequences and impact of this decision. The children are not available for adoption unless the rights of both parents have been terminated, whether by a termination trial or after a voluntary release.

The children's attorney

The court must appoint an attorney or lawyer-guardian ad litem (LGAL) for each child. The LGAL is to complete an independent investigation and determine what is in the child's best interest. The attorney must meet with and observe the children, and find out the child's wishes before certain hearings. If the attorney determines that the child's wishes are in conflict with the attorney's determination of best interest, the attorney must inform the court of the conflict and the

court may consider appointing a separate attorney to represent the child's wishes. This second attorney for the child must advocate for the child's expressed wishes.

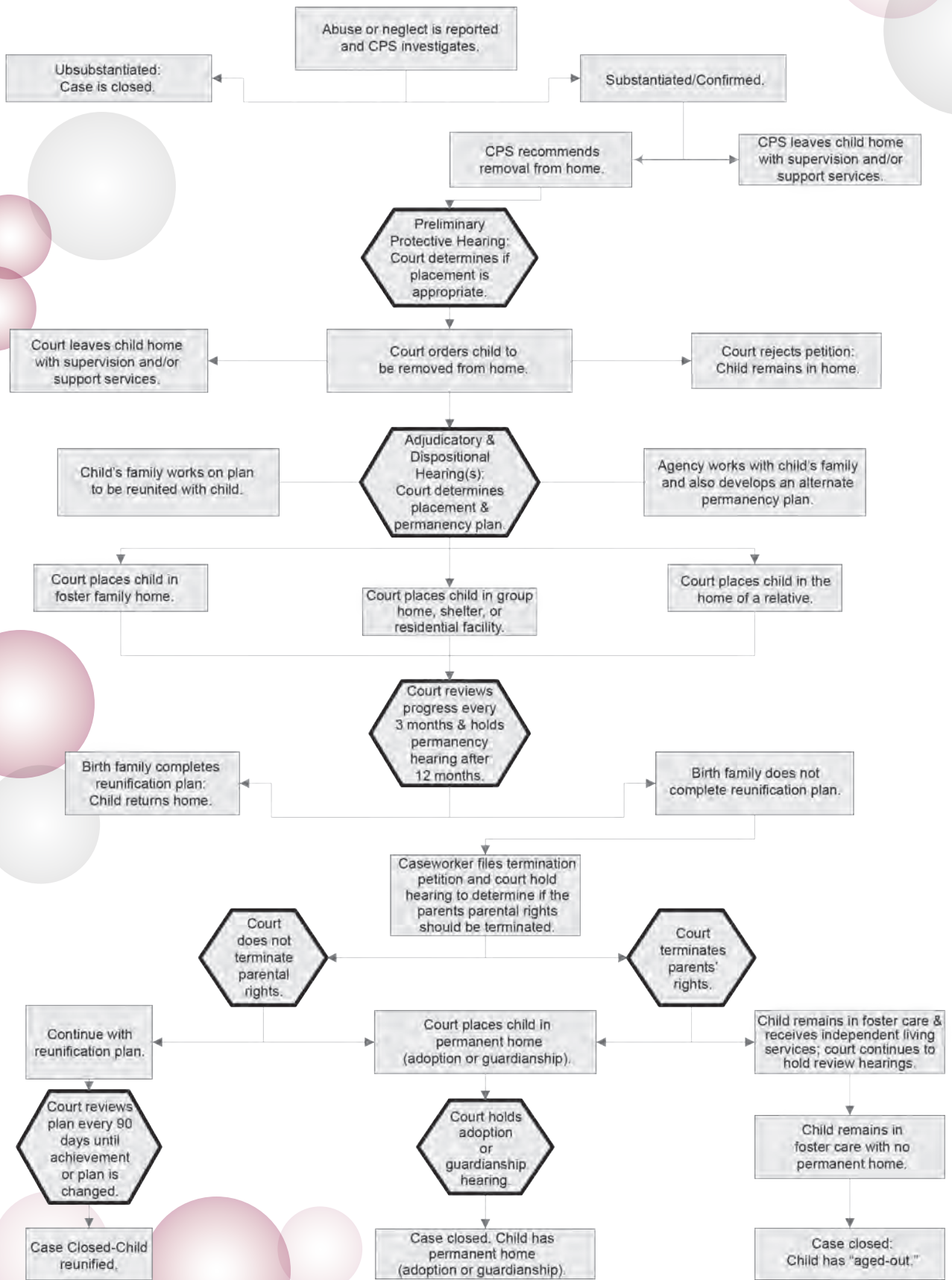
You should have contact with the child's LGAL either at court or in your home. You are able to speak freely with the child's attorney. You must allow the LGALs access to your home and contact with the child they represent.

Caregivers at court

Most courts welcome your presence at hearings. Input from caregivers should be included in the foster care worker's report to the court. You may provide your written observations of the child and their progress to the foster care worker or directly to the court. If you take your written statement to the court, be sure to bring several copies so that the information can be shared with all parties. You should receive a copy of each court order.



A Child's Journey Through the Child Welfare System



Additional supports available

Support Groups

Kinship Care Resource Center
Phone: 800-535-1218
E-mail: kinship@msu.edu
Website: www.kinship.msu.edu

Michigan Association for Foster, Adoptive and
Kinship Parents (MAFAK)
Phone: 269-271-5216
Website: www.mafak.msu.edu or
www.mafak.org

Your foster care worker may be able to refer
you to additional foster care support groups,
programs and services.



To become a licensed relative
foster parent, contact your local
MDHHS office and ask to speak with
a foster care worker.

Visit the Contact Us section on
www.michigan.gov/mdhhs
or call the Foster Care Navigator Program at
855-MICKIDS (642-4543).

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