

**Guide for
Parents and
Caregivers
Involved with
FAMILY
SERVICES
UNIT
(FSU)**

**HELPFUL INFORMATION
AND
ANSWERS
TO FREQUENTLY
ASKED QUESTIONS**



**Rhode Island Department of
Children, Youth & Families**

If you need an interpreter because you don't speak the same language as your caseworker, you can request one for free.

If you and/or your child identify have a disability, your caseworker must ensure reasonable accommodations are made to help you participate in DCYF services.

Si necesita un intérprete porque no habla el mismo idioma que su trabajador social, puede solicitarlo de forma gratuita.

Si usted y/o su hijo identifican que tienen una discapacidad, su trabajador social debe asegurarse de que se hagan adaptaciones razonables para ayudarlo a participar en los servicios del DCYF.

What is DCYF?

DCYF stands for the Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth & Families. This agency is responsible for helping children and their families who are dealing with child protection, behavioral health, and juvenile justice issues. Their mission is to work with families and communities to raise safe and healthy children and youth in a caring environment. DCYF staff are expected to engage respectfully and effectively with people from all backgrounds, recognizing the value of all individuals and protecting their dignity.

We understand this is a stressful time for you. The purpose of this booklet is to explain the process for families who will be supported by the Family Services Unit (FSU) at DCYF, and to provide answers to some of your questions, make clear to you your rights and responsibilities, and give you important contact information. If you have any additional questions don't hesitate to talk to the caseworker assigned to your case.

CONTACT INFORMATION

DCYF Family Services Unit (FSU)

Caseworker's Name: _____

Phone: _____

Supervisor's Name: _____

Phone: _____

Office Address: _____

Hours: Monday through Friday, 8:30 a.m. – 4 p.m.

Phone: (401) 528-3500

24 Hour Hotline: 1 (800) RI CHILD

1 (800) 742-4453

Why do I have to work with DCYF?

Safety concerns for your child were reported to DCYF. By law, DCYF investigates all credible reports of abuse and neglect. The concerns were investigated, and there was enough evidence to support your child was seriously harmed, in danger of being harmed, or at risk of being harmed. Your child's safety is *very* important.

What does it mean to work with DCYF?

If your child **is living at home** with services for your family and a safety plan, DCYF will monitor the safety plan and refer your family for services so you may improve your ability to keep your child safe at home and prevent placement.

If your child **has been placed outside of your home**, DCYF will assist you in making the necessary changes so your child can safely return to your home as soon as possible.

Rhode Island Family Court oversees the process, monitors progress, and makes decisions on custody, services, visitation (if not living at home), case plans, permanency, and many other things. Based on recommendations from your caseworker and service providers, and considering the best interest of your child, the judge could end DCYF involvement with your family.



My family is new to working with DCYF. What do I need to do? Who will help me?

A caseworker will be assigned to your family and will be your go-to person on your case. Your caseworker will regularly assess how your family functions and will work with you to create a service plan. Your caseworker will be in regular contact with you and will meet with you at least monthly. Your cooperation with DCYF is very important.

You are responsible to:

- provide any information needed by your caseworker so a proper assessment can be made and to make sure referrals for the right services can be made, so your needs can be met.
- maintain regular contact with your caseworker.
- report any changes to your phone number, address, and other contact information to your caseworker *as soon as possible*.
- report any changes in your home — such as anyone new moving in or moving out — to your case worker *as soon as possible*.
- contact your caseworker, as soon as you know you will be late for a meeting, need to cancel or need to reschedule.
- provide the names of relatives or close family friends (kin) who may be willing to provide a place for your child to stay, if your child has been placed out-of-home (*see pages 8 and 9*).

If you cannot reach your caseworker, you can contact the casework supervisor, who also knows about your case. Their contact information is on page 1 of this booklet.



Other people involved with your family might include:

Attorneys: You can hire your own attorney, or if you can't afford one, the court will appoint one for you. It is crucial to follow up on the court's referral to the RI Public Defender or RI Legal Services quickly so you can get an attorney and start working on your case. Your child will have a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) or another guardian ad litem, an attorney appointed to look out for their best interests.

Judges: Family Court judges make decisions about your family during court hearings. It is important to attend all hearings, so you know what is happening and your voice is heard.

Service Providers: Service providers from community organizations will help you reach your service plan goals. They will work with you on the services described in your service plan. In a case with a child living outside of the home, a service provider might be involved in your parent-child visit by supervising the visits, or perhaps by assisting with the transportation for the visits. In a case involving a child living in their own home, a service provider might come to your home to provide services to you and your family. It is important to know who your service providers are and how to contact them.

Out-of-home Caregivers

Foster Parents: If your child is placed outside of your home, your child may be living with foster parents. Foster parents are trained and licensed to care for children placed outside their homes. All foster parents have passed criminal background and abuse record checks. Foster parents receive training to support children dealing with trauma and other challenges children face while living away from their families. Often, foster parents and birth parents work together to ensure the child is receiving the best care possible.

Caregiving Staff: Your child may be placed in the care of a group home or in a residential treatment program. Again, it is important to know who has a role in your case and how to contact them.

ANSWERS TO FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS
ABOUT WORKING TO RETURN MY CHILD HOME
OR TO MAINTAIN MY CHILD AT HOME

What is a service plan?

A service plan is a plan to help your family meet your goal. In most cases if your child is placed outside of your home, the goal of the first service plan is reunification, meaning to have your child return home as soon as it is safe. If your child remains at home, the service plan goal will be “maintain child at home.” The service plan is based on an assessment to identify your family’s strengths, and areas where changes are needed to be made so your child can return home safely or remain at home and avoid placement. The written service plan:

- lists the services that can help you make these changes happen.
- states what results are expected and when they are expected.
- states the type of place where your child is staying (if living out of home).
- detailed plans for visitation (if living out of home).
- documents efforts DCYF made to find supportive relatives/kin.
- describes your child’s health and education details.
- includes a plan for youth ages 14 and older who are living out of home to help them to prepare for adulthood.



How will my family be involved in the service planning process?

You will be developing the plan along with your caseworker. Your input is important as you will help to set your family goals and make decisions about what services can help your family achieve those goals.

The types of services often received by families include visitation, family support, child behavioral health, mental health, domestic violence, substance abuse treatment, outreach and tracking, foster care, residential treatment, adoption, and kinship legal guardianship.

Your child will be given the chance to be involved in the service planning process if your child understands what is happening in their life. Your caseworker will:

- talk to your child about their goals and services.
- explain the plan in a way your child can understand.
- include your child in all planning meetings, as age appropriate.

Family meetings: When service planning, you can involve people who are important to you. Service planning often involves you, your caseworker, other family members and friends. Your child will be included if age appropriate. Service planning is a chance for everyone to share their thoughts, solve problems, and agree on a plan meet your goals.

Non-custodial parents: DCYF is responsible for identifying, searching, locating, contacting, and engaging with non-custodial parents. If a potential father comes forward, steps are taken to confirm paternity. Once confirmed, the child's father is included in the planning process.



How should I prepare for service planning?

Before the meeting, think about your strengths, needs, and your support network. What can you bring to the table, and who can help you? The service plan is developed at the meeting and should represent your thoughts and solutions. Make sure you understand your service plan. If you agree, it's like a contract between you and DCYF.

Key questions to answer:

- What are the issues that caused involvement with DCYF?
- What changes are needed to address these issues, so my child will be safe at home all the time?
- What is necessary for me to provide permanency, or a safe and stable home for my child?
- What services could help my family to make these changes?
- If my child needs to temporarily live out of my home, are there relatives or other caring adults who could care for my child?
- If my child is out of my home, what is our visitation plan?
- Do you and/or your child have any special needs that should be considered throughout the planning process?

What is permanency?

Permanency is a permanent and stable living situation, *ideally one in which family connections are preserved*. A permanency goal is what you are working to achieve, while making the necessary changes listed in your service plan. For kids living in out-of-home care, the first permanency goal is usually “**reunification**,” or for the child to return home. For children living at home, the goal is “**maintain child at home**.” There is a deadline to achieve the permanency goal.

Other permanency goals for children in out-of-home care:

- Adoption: When reunification is not possible, adoption by relatives, foster parents, or a licensed adoptive resource becomes the preferred goal.
- Guardianship: When reunification and adoption are not feasible, and it is in the child’s best interest, the goal may be changed to guardianship, where the child is placed with a kinship guardian.

What are natural supports and kinship, and why are they so important for my service plan?

Natural supports are people in your lives who know you and your family and can help you in a variety of ways. They say “it takes a village” to raise a child, and we want to help make sure that you have a strong support system.

It can feel embarrassing to ask your family and friends for help in these situations, but building a safety net for you and your child can help ensure that your family meets its service goals and minimize the amount of time you are involved with DCYF.

Why is it important that I identify family to care for my child?

The investigator who comes to your home and your social caseworker will talk with you about family members and other caring adults who could potentially care for your child. Kinship often includes grandparents, aunts and uncles, family friends, and others who have a relationship with the child (such as their schoolteacher). Even if your child is going to continue living in your home, we want to be prepared in case your home becomes unsafe.

When children cannot remain safely with their parents, research shows *living with relatives is better for children and benefits them in several ways:*

- 1. Trauma is minimized.** When kids come into care, they might have to move away from everything they are familiar with – their home, family, friends, and more. But if they can stay with relatives, it can help lessen this loss. Family members often take care of not just one child but also their siblings, and they might live nearby, so the child can stay connected with their community. Living with someone they already know and have a relationship with can be a source of comfort during a tough time.
- 2. Children’s well-being improves.** Children who live with relatives experience more stability with fewer moves and changes in schools. Relatives are more likely to stick with the child during tough times and are less likely to give up on them if they are

having problems. The kids themselves usually feel happier about living with family and are less likely to run away.

3. **Permanency increases.** Children are more likely to find a permanent home. Relatives often become legal guardians through options like guardianship, custody, or adoption.
4. **Behavioral and mental health improve.** Children placed with relatives had fewer behavioral issues. Research shows that forming a close relationship with an adult can lead to better mental health as an adult.
5. **Promotes sibling ties.** Kinship care increases the chances of children living with or staying connected to siblings, especially children in large sibling groups.
6. **Provides a bridge for older youth.** Strong connections to family or supportive adults are crucial for all children, and especially for teenagers. These relationships are vital for their independence and to lower the risk of homelessness or involvement in crime. Mentoring relationships, often fulfilled by close relatives, have been shown to be beneficial for a youth developing self-esteem, building healthy relationships, problem-solving, and identity development.



What's the plan for family time?

Family time, also called parent-child visitation, is crucial for family bonding and reunification. You and your caseworker will develop a family time plan, or a judge in Family Court may decide. It is important to take every opportunity to visit your child. The plan includes how often visits happen, how long they last, where they take place, and whether they are supervised. Sibling visits are also planned if siblings are not placed together. DCYF works to make sure siblings have contact if they can't be placed together. The family time plan is part of your service plan.

Do I need to sign my service plan?

Your caseworker will request signatures from everyone involved in creating, reviewing, and updating the plan. If you had the chance to express agreement or disagreement with the plan, your caseworker will ask you to sign it. It is important to note that signing the plan does not necessarily mean you approve of its contents; it simply shows that you had the opportunity to review and express your thoughts on it.

Will I receive a copy?

Yes. All parties who took part in developing the plan will receive a copy.

I don't agree with my service plan. What can I do?

You have the right to appeal any decision in your case. Your social caseworker is required to explain DCYF's appeal process to you and your child, in a way that your child can understand, each time you sign the service plan. Your caseworker will assist you by giving you at least:

- DCYF Form #016, which is the Formal Request for Hearing
- instructions on how to fill out the form
- guidance on how to go through the appeal process

Will my plan ever change?

Yes. Ongoing planning happens as your family works on making progress toward achieving your goals. It involves regular communication between you and your caseworker. Your caseworker will also stay in touch with your child, service providers, and family supports, to check on progress and quickly address any problems that may come up.

ANSWERS TO FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS
ABOUT THE LEGAL PROCESS

Why am I involved with Family Court?

Family Court reviews all DCYF cases of children who are not living at home, due to abuse or neglect/dependency. It is crucial that you attend all hearings about your child because important decisions will be made regarding your family. As a parent, you have the right to share your perspective with the court.

Do I need a lawyer?

Yes, it is highly recommended. If you can't afford one, the judge will refer you to Rhode Island Legal Services or the Public Defender. It is important to act quickly to fill out paperwork for an attorney assignment. If you can afford a lawyer but don't know who to contact, the Rhode Island Bar Association can provide names of family law specialists. Your lawyer will speak on your behalf during hearings, so it is essential to keep in touch with them. The numbers to these agencies can be found in the back of this booklet.

What should I expect at Family Court hearings?

There are different types of hearings in Family Court for DCYF cases. Judges in Family Court will make sure your family is treated fairly, make sure your family will get the services it needs, and will make decisions in the best interest of your child.

Court dates: Your attorney and your caseworker should keep you informed about scheduled hearings. Regular communication with your attorney is important for them to represent you well. Be sure to keep your important appointment, meetings, and court dates on your calendar.



What is an Arraignment?

At an arraignment:

- You will be asked to admit or deny the allegations of child abuse or neglect.
- If temporary custody is given to DCYF and your child is placed in an out-of-home placement by court order, you are advised of your right to a probable cause hearing.
- An attorney (guardian ad litem) is appointed for the child's interests.
- If you can't afford an attorney, the court will refer you to RI Legal Services or the Public Defender to apply for legal services.
- The Family Court judge may make decisions on custody, placement, visitation, counseling, and more.

What is a Probable Cause Hearing?

(In cases with children living out-of-home)

At a Probable Cause Hearing:

- The court will decide if there is probable cause (enough evidence for abuse and neglect allegations).
- If probable cause exists, your child stays in DCYF custody, pending a trial; if not, your child returns home.
- The court will also decide if there was a good reason for the emergency removal of your child from home.
- The court may also consider whether your child needs to stay placed outside of your home even though probable cause may have existed at time of removal.

What is a Pre-Trial Hearing?

At a Pre-Trial Hearing:

- The court hears discussion on whether your case can be settled or what steps are needed before a trial date is set.

What is a Trial?

At Trial:

- The court decides if a child has been abused, neglected, and/or dependent and if deemed so, will commit the child to DCYF's care, custody, and control.
- If the court makes no finding, the petition is dismissed; and the child returns home (if the child was placed outside of the home) in most cases. DCYF involvement is terminated unless the family agrees to services.
- The judge sets a date for DCYF to submit a service plan to the court. When the service plan is presented to the court, it is entered into the court file and if approved, it is made an order of the court.
- The court sets a date for the case to be reviewed, usually in six (6) months.

What is a Court Review Hearing?

At a Court Review:

- Family Court monitors the progress you and DCYF are making in meeting service plan goals.
- Any issues with your referrals for services or accessing services are reported to the court.
- New court orders may be issued.
- In a case where the child is in an out-of-home placement, an order to allow your child to return home can be made if the judge decides your child can return home safely.
- In a case where the child is living at home, the judge could close the case if changes made to address the reason the case was opened have been addressed.

What is a Permanency Hearing?

(In cases with children living out-of-home)

After a child has been living away from home for at least a year, a permanency hearing is held so the court can determine the status of permanency for your child and to decide if your child can safely return home, soon. The court looks at the progress being made and checks to see if the changes needed to support the child's return have happened. The court may approve or modify the service plan and make the plan an order of the court.

The main goal of this hearing is to make sure the child has a permanent and stable place to live as quickly as possible, which often happens by reuniting the child with their family. The court must decide if it is best for the child to stay in an out-of-home placement or the court could order DCYF to file a Termination of Parental Rights (TPR) petition within 30 days, unless:

- the court finds it is in the best interest of your child not to have a TPR petition filed; or
- there is a good chance your child will be returned to your home within the next three months; or
- your child is in care of a relative who is not willing to adopt, but is willing to provide a stable, permanent home; or
- any other significant factor which the court finds would not be in your child's best interest; or
- DCYF has documented in the case plan a compelling reason that filing a TPR petition and adoption petition would not be in your child's best interests; or
- DCYF has not provided the services to your family necessary for the safe return of your child back home, if required.

If there is no progress, the court might decide to change the permanency goal to guardianship or adoption. Permanency Hearings are held every 12 months until permanency is achieved or the case closes.

What is an Administrative Review Meeting?

Six (6) months after permanency hearings are held, **Administrative Review** meetings are held in the DCYF office. Parents, foster care providers, service providers, attorneys, and other supportive people important in the family's life can attend. An administrative review officer will review the case by asking about services for the family, asking about the child's well-being, stability in the out-of-home placement, and anything else to determine if the case is on track to achieve permanency. The review officer may make recommendations to help keep the case on track to achieve the goal on time.



ANSWERS TO FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT RIGHTS

What are my Civil Rights?

Under the law, DCYF may not discriminate based on factors such as disability, race, color, sex or gender identity, sexual orientation, age, national origin, religious or political beliefs, ancestry, familial or marital status, genetic information, association, or previous assertion of a claim or right. Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act requires reasonable modifications to policies, programs, services, and activities to avoid disability-based discrimination, and DCYF is committed to making reasonable modifications.

DCYF also provides effective communication and language access to ensure that everyone has equal access to their programs and services, including those with limited English proficiency or communication-related disabilities. Interpretation, translation services, and auxiliary aids are available at no cost to help with effective communication.

My child is a member of an Indian tribe or is the child of a member of an Indian tribe.

What do I need to know?

If your child is a member of an Indian tribe or eligible for membership in an Indian tribe and is the biological child of a member of an Indian tribe, you should inform DCYF as soon as possible. DCYF will contact the tribe to collaborate on the investigation in compliance with The Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA), a federal law that protects the best interests of Indian children and promotes the stability and security of Indian tribes and families. ICWA provides guidance to states regarding the handling of child abuse and neglect and adoption cases involving Native children and sets minimum standards for these cases. ICWA protects children from improper removal from their parents' custody.

ANSWERS TO FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS
ABOUT RESPONSIBILITIES

What are my responsibilities?

- Cooperate with your assessment. Let your caseworker know what you see as your family's strengths and help to identify resources that may be sources of strength and support to your family. Provide necessary information to receive appropriate services.
- Work in partnership with your caseworker on service planning. Be present for all meetings with your caseworker. If you can't make a meeting, contact your caseworker to let them know and reschedule.
- Attend all scheduled visits with your child. Visitation is very important. If you can't make a visit call, or text your contact person and reschedule it, if possible.
- Let your caseworker know of any major changes in your life within seven days, like changes to your address, telephone number, people living with your family, marital status, or other changes affecting your family or service.

What are DCYF's responsibilities?

DCYF staff are responsible to:

- maintain the confidentiality of your information.
- not use state resources to investigate friends, neighbors, or relatives.
- provide services only within the boundaries of their roles.
- avoid conflicts of interest and be transparent about any questionable activities.
- inform you of your risks, rights, opportunities, and obligations related to services.
- clearly define who the clients are and what professional obligations apply when working with multiple people.
- provide you with information about eligible services.
- inform you of your right to appeal to the Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS) if you're not satisfied with agency decisions.

ANSWERS TO FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS
WHEN CHILDREN ARE REMOVED FROM HOME

Why did they take my child away?

A child is only removed from their home and placed in temporary care when there is a serious concern for their safety. The Family Court reviews emergency removals within 48 hours to make sure it was necessary for the child's safety.

How is DCYF able to take my child away?

If a child is in immediate danger, a DCYF employee has legal authority to take the child into temporary protective custody for up to 48 hours. This can happen if there is reason to believe the child has been abused or neglected, or if continuing care at home would lead to imminent harm. A Family Court judge must approve holding the child for more than 48 hours.

If a case is already open with DCYF, a Family Court judge can order the removal of a child from home through a Motion to Change Placement/Custody filed by DCYF. In emergencies, a 48-hour temporary hold can be implemented.

Who will take care of my child?

DCYF prefers placing a child with someone familiar with the child, like a family member or close friend. Your caseworker will ask for contact information for potential caregivers your child knows. Background clearances will be done quickly to ensure safety. Until a kinship care provider has been found, your child may be placed in foster care, a group home, or a residential treatment program. Your caseworker will be able to provide you with the details. DCYF will work with you to bring your child back home safely.

How can I help my child adjust to the new living situation?

Participating in the Caring Connection Calls program will help!

Visiting with your child according to your visitation plan is also of great importance. Regular visits are critical for your child's well-being and can lead to shorter stays in out-of-home care. Visitation plans will be decided in meetings with you and your caseworker, or by a Family Court judge.

Ask your caseworker to attend medical appointments, school events, and other important activities in your child's life to provide additional support and time together. If you can't make a visit, try to reschedule, and ask about transportation assistance if needed.



Caring Connection Calls

DCYF uses Caring Connections Calls to support you and foster parents/kinship caregivers and to build relationships, so you can collaborate and share.

A Caring Connections Call is a telephone or video call connecting you and foster parents or kinship caregivers so you can ask questions and share valuable information about the care of your child.

DCYF's goal is to help all the caring adults involved in a child's life work together to best support the child and each other.

Children are most likely to benefit and thrive when the important adults in their lives cooperate with each other and share responsibilities and decision-making. DCYF is committed to making the Caring Connection Call as soon as possible after the child is placed into care.

Legal Resources

RI Legal Services

56 Dyer St.

Providence, RI 02903

(401) 274-2652

www.rils.org

RI Public Defender

160 Pine St.

Providence, RI 02903

(401) 222-3492

www.ripd.org

RI Bar Association

41 Sharpe Dr.

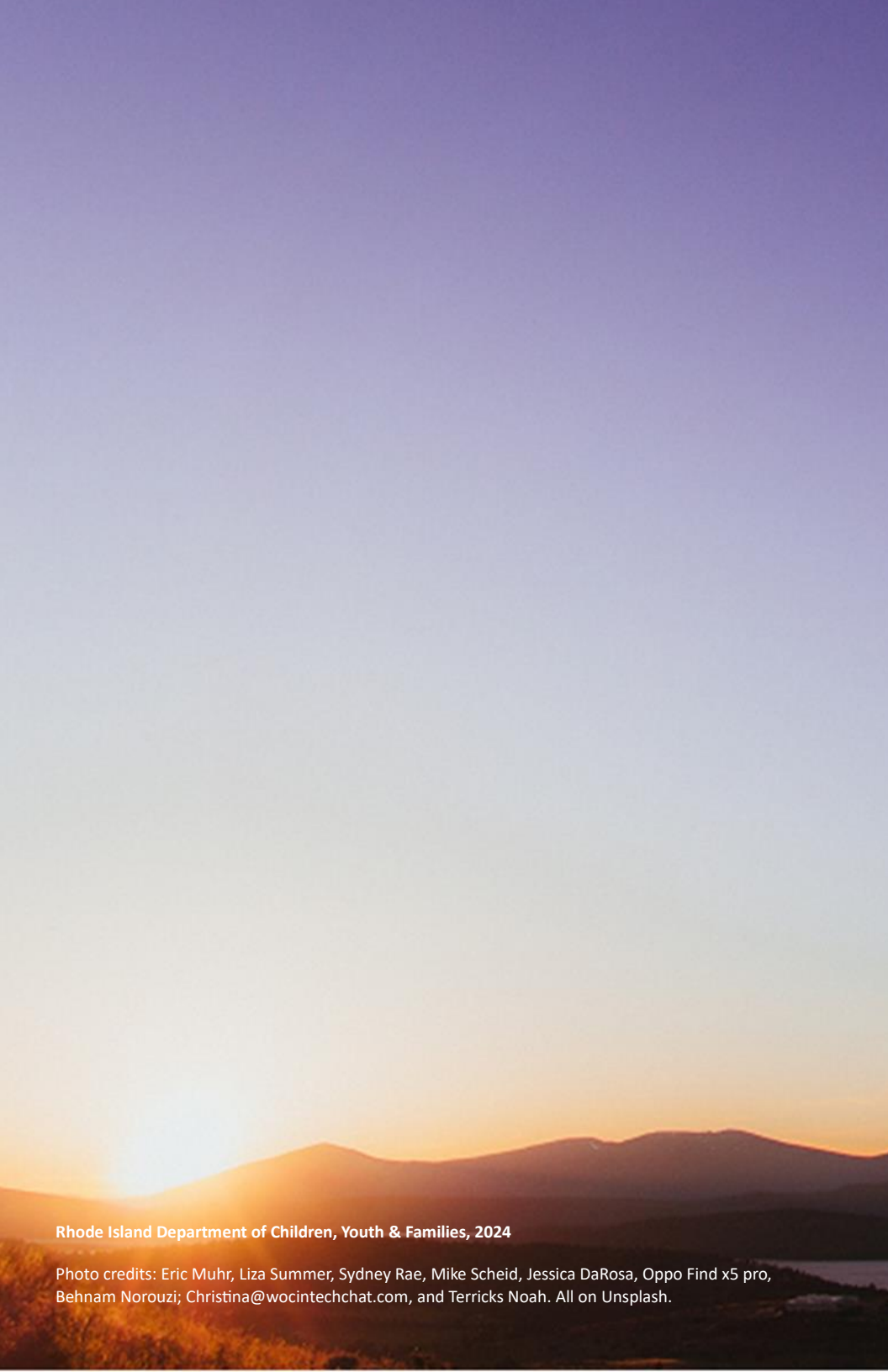
Cranston, RI 02920

(401) 421-5740

(401) 421-2703

E-mail: info@ribar.com

www.ribar.com



Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth & Families, 2024

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