As the COVID-19 pandemic quickly escalated throughout the United States in Spring 2020, most communities, tribes, and states implemented stay-at-home orders, and home visiting programs rapidly transitioned to virtual visits with families. This was the safest way to continue supporting families while also preventing the spread of COVID-19. Family Spirit affiliates and other home visiting programs around the country quickly adapted and now have many new tools and creative practices for engaging with families through phone and/or video visits.

Despite the advances in virtual home visiting, it is important to acknowledge that virtual visits in under-resourced communities - and especially in rural areas - have been challenging due to limited access to internet and necessary equipment (e.g. phone, computer, tablet devices). In some cases, the families who need the most support have not been very reachable during the pandemic. As the pandemic persisted, many home visiting programs enacted procedures to safely provide essential services to those families in-person, using COVID-19 safety precautions to protect families and home visitors. As one Family Spirit home visitor noted, “virtual works, but at times you really need eyes on the family to know that they are okay.”

In July 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic entered a new phase with effective vaccines available to all individuals age 12 and older. In November 2021, vaccines became available to all individuals age 5 and older. A significant national effort is ongoing to vaccinate all individuals who want a vaccine. As a result, the morbidity and mortality rates from COVID-19 have decreased. Overall infection rates continue to fluctuate. Many areas of the country have lifted COVID-19 restrictions. However, some communities continue to take special precautions to ensure their community members remain protected from the risks of COVID-19. Given these evolving circumstances, the Family Spirit National Office endorses a hybrid model of home visiting to allow for either virtual or in-person visits, depending on local policies and family and program needs.

A hybrid model of home visiting delivery allows for flexibility at each affiliate site to consider the following factors: 1) local (Tribal and/or state) practices and health orders with regard to the COVID-19 pandemic; 2) the circumstances of each participating family, and their preference for either virtual or in-person visits; 3) any risk posed to the home visitor or family by completing an in-person visit.

An effective, efficient and equitable hybrid model of home visiting delivery requires special attention to program policies and procedures, as well as refined training and support for home
visitors. The Family Spirit National Office recommends the following guiding principles for a hybrid model of home visiting:

- The determination for location and mode of visit should be family-driven, with the goal of accommodating the family’s preferences and offering the most effective services for their circumstances.
- Programs should consider what activities can be done virtually and what must be done in-person. For example, some mental health screenings require special training to be effectively done virtually, and in some cases they should only be done in-person. In addition, the privacy of conversations cannot always be ensured when communicating virtually. Special planning is needed to ensure confidentiality.
- Decisions about program practices for in-person and/or virtual delivery should consider equity of virtual home visiting services, for example:
  - Consider technology access (e.g. devices; internet service; data plans) among participating families and methods of virtual communication that are available to families.
  - Consider the program’s ability to reach all families who need services, given current staffing and resources.
  - Consider the program’s ability to ensure equitable access for all home visiting activities, with special consideration for data collection, screenings, and service delivery.
- Programs should clearly define a virtual home visit, with consideration of funder requirements for what constitutes a completed visit.
  - The Family Spirit definition of a home visit is:
    - Family Spirit defines a home visit as a consistent, positive interaction that takes place between a health educator and a caregiver or caregivers in a setting that is most comfortable for the participating family. Historically, home visits have been in the client’s home on a one-to-one basis with the health educator and caregiver or caregivers. More recently, many visits have occurred virtually (through phone or video communication), based on family needs and circumstances as well as local health restrictions regarding in-person contact.
  - The Family Spirit definition of a virtual lesson visit is:
    - Visits should be a minimum of 15 – 20 minutes. Follow the home visit structure to the best of your ability.
    - Social support visits are expected; however, effort should be made to include relevant lesson content.
      - A lesson visit must include content from the Family Spirit curriculum. Focus on the teaching points from the lesson pages, and expand as time allows. Utilization of the various curriculum tools (i.e. the VISION or SPIRIT worksheets) are helpful for goal setting and problem solving.
      - If you do not get through all teaching points during a lesson visit, plan to finish that lesson at the next virtual visit.
      - Visits that do not cover Family Spirit lessons are social support visits.
    - Ask about needed referrals and provide community resources.
  - Document the contact with date, time, length of visit, type of contact and material covered. If electronic systems are not accessible remotely, this documentation can be done via paper and transcribed into electronic systems when returning to the office.
The Family Spirit National Office has compiled various resources to support a hybrid model of home visiting delivery:

- **Digital curriculum:** The Family Spirit core curriculum is now available on a digital platform, to facilitate virtual delivery of visits as well as offer flexibility in mode of delivery for in-person visits. Training is required prior to accessing the digital curriculum. Contact familyspirit@jhu.edu for more information.

- **Guidance on caseloads:** Family Spirit has updated guidance on participant caseloads, to reflect the variety of circumstances experienced by families, home visitors, and programs. [Guidance on caseloads](#).

- **Recommendations for completing a virtual visit:** Family Spirit offers guidance and recommendations for completing virtual visits. [Recommendations for Completing a Virtual Home Visit](#).

- **Safety procedures for in-person visits during a pandemic:** Family Spirit recommends specific procedures for safely conducting in-person visits during the COVID-19 pandemic. [Recommendations for Home Visiting During COVID-19 Pandemic, Updated December 2020](#).