



# MHA'S VISITATION CENTER PARENT HANDBOOK

FOR  
SUPERVISED VISITATION AND MONITORED SUPERVISION

Building Family Connections Since 2002

The Mental Health Association of Frederick County  
226 S. Jefferson Street  
Frederick, MD 21701

Email: [visitation@fcmha.org](mailto:visitation@fcmha.org)  
Phone: 301-663-0011 ext. 119  
Fax: 301-663-5738

**For cancellations with less than 24 hours' notice please call the  
Center Cell Phone: 301-788-6220**

Questions concerning inclement weather call 301-663-0011 ext. 138 or  
check our website at [www.fcmha.org](http://www.fcmha.org)

Hours of Operation  
Thursdays 4:30-8 pm  
Fridays 3:30-6pm  
Sunday 12-6 pm



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## Vision, Mission and Services

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### The Mental Health Association of Frederick County

#### Vision

A community where children can grow and thrive without fear, where good mental health is valued, where people of all ages know when and how to seek help for emotional or family problems without shame, and where everyone will have access to mental health services without barriers.

#### Mission

To build a strong foundation of emotional wellness through education, empowerment, advocacy and treatment for children, adults and families. MHA is always available, accessible and responsive to the changing needs of our community.

#### MHA's Visitation Center

The mission of MHA's Visitation Center is to promote and strengthen healthy family bonds by providing children safe, conflict-free opportunities to visit with their non-residential parents.

The Family Center has served Frederick County residents, as a program within the Mental Health Association of Frederick County, since 2002.

MHA's Visitation Center is a child-centered program offering weekly and sometimes biweekly slots. MHA'S VISITATION CENTER follows current Frederick County court orders when scheduling visits. For clients without court orders, the scheduling plan is a result of a negotiation between the visiting and residential parent, brokered by the Program Manager. Every effort will be made to satisfy all of the preferences of the participants but this cannot be guaranteed.

We offer Child Orientations to children of new families. Studies show children need to understand why they are coming to MHA'S VISITATION CENTER for visits. An opportunity to talk with staff, discuss concerns and tour the center enables children to arrive for visitation with less anxiety. Observers and staff strive to intervene during visits as little as possible and are guided by the child when intervening in visits. Observers and staff will make efforts to alleviate the child's anxiety and encourage visitation with the Visiting Parents.

MHA's Visitation Center is closed for the following holidays. However, if there is a significant number of parents who cancel on other holidays, the MHA reserves the right to cancel that day's services:

- New Year's Day
- Martin Luther King's Birthday
- Easter Day
- Memorial Day
- Independence Day
- Thanksgiving Day
- Labor Day
- Christmas Eve
- Day after Thanksgiving
- Christmas Day

***The staff of MHA's Visitation Center program reserves the right to modify the procedures in this handbook at any time in order to maintain the safest environment for everyone.***



## Definitions

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**Child:** Person between the ages of birth and 18.

**Client:** Child, parent, grandparent or other authorized person to whom services are rendered.

**Court Order:** A court document that defines the terms of supervised visitation including the frequency and who is responsible for payment of services. The court order contains an expiration date. Court orders that are less than a year old will be considered “current” by center staff.

**Monitored Visitation:** A less-intense form of supervision in which visiting parents and their children are checked on at random intervals during the visit by trained observers.

**Monitored Transfer:** Children are escorted from one parent to another by MHA’S VISITATION CENTER staff to facilitate a conflict-free exchange for parents with current custody agreements.

**Neutral:** As used in the context of MHA’S VISITATION CENTER services, neutral means maintaining an unbiased, objective, and balanced environment when providing the service. MHA Staff and volunteers do not take a position between the parents in providing visitation services. Providing service in a neutral manner ensures respect for all individuals in their capacity as parents and protects children attempting to remain in contact with their parents. Being neutral does not mean MHA’S VISITATION CENTER disregards behaviors such as abuse or violence of any kind.

**Observer:** A volunteer, intern or paid staff member screened and trained to supervise visits and intervene only when necessary to protect the best interests of the child

**Program Report:** A fee-structured, written document provided by MHA’S VISITATION CENTER that contain the recorded observations of the Observer.

**Residential Parent:** Biological, foster, or adoptive parent, or a guardian, or state agency and its representatives that have temporary or permanent physical custody of a child.

**Supervised Visitation:** Center-based visits between parents and children that are monitored by observers who ensure safe and positive interactions between visiting parents and their children.

**Visiting Parent:** Biological or adoptive parent or other adult who is not living in the same residence as the child and whose contact with a child must be supervised according to a court order.

**Safety:** Protection from danger or risk of physical, psychological, or emotional injury to the best of the program staff’s ability

**Security:** Measures put in place for the safety of all parties involved in visitation services. This includes the presence of a security monitor and safety screenings.



## Confidentiality

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MHA'S VISITATION CENTER will not share client information with anyone outside the program. Exceptions are:

- When mandated by law or requested via subpoena
- When requested via a current, signed Authorization for Release of Confidential Information Form for each party requesting information
- In reports of suspected abuse and neglect to the appropriate authorities as required by law
- In reporting danger or threats of harm to self or others as required by law

Parents have a right to review their individual records. Parents do not have the right or access to the other parent's individual records. The records individuals may review are Program Reports, Sign-in sheets, Payment history, and Program letters.

Authorization of professional parties external to MHA'S VISITATION CENTER to participate or observe a visit must be obtained by court order, approval of a judicial officer, or by approval of a parent who signs an Authorization for Release of Confidential Information Form

Parents are **highly discouraged** from discussing information learned about other parents, their children or observed incidents with anyone outside the center. Furthermore, parents are advised not to share personal contact information with other parents at the center and to refrain from developing personal relationships outside the center with other parents or their visitors. If anyone has a concern about someone who attends MHA'S VISITATION CENTER, please speak with a staff member.

## Service Fees

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- All fees are due in full the day the service is provided; in cash, by check, or by credit card.
- All parties are assessed a fee based on their individual income. Each party will pay their individual fee unless specified in the Court Order. When the Court order does not designate which parties will pay for SV services, visitation fees will be split 50% between the residential parent and visiting parent. If either the Residential Parent or Visiting Parent would like to pay the total fees for services and they are not authorized to do so in a court order, that Parent must inform the Program Manager in writing.

### Reassessment of Fees

- If **parental income has changed** the individual parent is responsible for contacting the Program Manager to request a fee re-evaluation by completing a Fee Re-evaluation Form. Reasons for fee reassessment are loss of a job, a significant loss of weekly working hours, pay raises or being newly hired.
- All fees are re-assessed yearly or when the Frederick County court order expires (orders that list an expiration date that has passed, and/or orders that are more than one year old).
- Visitation fees will be waived for clients who are identified as having active Title IV-D child support cases in Frederick County, MD. Clients are responsible for informing MHA'S VISITATION CENTER of their Title IV-D status. Clients are still responsible for service fees.



## **Cancellation Fees and Procedures**

- MHA'S VISITATION CENTER reserves the right to cancel the visit 15 minutes after the visitation time begins and either party fails to show for the visit. This will be documented as a no-show appointment. Three (3) tardies of 15 minutes or more without any notification of tardiness will result in termination of services. Visits terminated early because of parental non-compliance with MHA'S VISITATION CENTER Handbook will not receive a refund of fees and are not eligible to reschedule the visit.
- If a child refuses a visit and less than half an hour has passed, the fees paid will be credited towards the next visit.
- Any cancellation without 24 hours or more notice will assess the MHA designated late fee of \$10.
- Only the cancelling party will be responsible for cancellation fees, regardless of court order payee.
- If either parent shows a pattern of non-compliance (cancellations, non-payment, no call/no shows, violation of policies or procedures, etc.) MHA Visitation center reserves the right to request documentation for the absences, issue a letter of warning, notify the court (if applicable), and modify the visitation schedule to accommodate the needs of the center. Three (3) no-shows or cancellations without 24 hours or more notification will result in termination of services. Frequent absences from Supervised Visits negatively impact the children who anticipate this time of parent child bonding. Please be mindful of this when considering cancelling a visit.
- If there is a cancellation due to a personal reason, including vacation MHA is not responsible for rescheduling missed visits.

## **Contacting Us Regarding Cancellations**

- The cancelling party is responsible for informing MHA'S VISITATION CENTER of a cancellation by calling MHA'S VISITATION CENTER phone at 301-663-0011 ext.166 or ext.138, or the center cell phone at 301-788-6220. MHA'S VISITATION CENTER staff will then contact the other party. Notifications through any individual other than the cancelling parent are not accepted. Cancelling party must give a reason for the cancellation that will be noted on the program report.

## **Illness**

- MHA'S VISITATION CENTER uses the Code of Maryland Regulations (COMAR) 13a.15.11.02. Childcare Exclusion for Acute Illness to guide cancellations due to illness. Children or visiting parents with vomiting, diarrhea, fever, conjunctivitis (pinkeye), rash or severe pain (headache, earache, toothache) may not attend visits and should have more than 24 hours of wellness before returning. Parties who cancel due to illness are not charged a cancellation fee provided they communicate the cancellation with MHA'S VISITATION CENTER and provide documentation.



## Cancellations due to Inclement Weather

- If there is inclement weather or if you are unsure if the center will remain open, parents are to call the Program Manager at 301-663-0011 ext. 138 who will leave a voice message indicating if the center will close. There will also be a running banner on the website [www.fcmlha.org](http://www.fcmlha.org) indicating if the center is closed. These visitation days are not eligible to be rescheduled and any court report will state “center closure due to inclement weather” for that date.
- When MHA’S VISITATION CENTER is open but a parent believes there to be a significant risk to their safety to drive in the current weather conditions, MHA’S VISITATION CENTER records will state, “RP or VP cancelled due to weather”. Cancellations due to weather with less than a 2-hour notification could be subject to the canceling party paying the service fees.

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## Conditions of Participation

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### Parents’ & Guardians’ Responsibilities

- All behavior, including tone of voice and choice of words, shall be respectful at all times.
- All clients and visitors shall respect the privacy and personal space of others.
- Parents and guardians are responsible for their actions while at MHA’S VISITATION CENTER. Non-compliance with staff and security requests and/or policies may jeopardize the use of MHA’S VISITATION CENTER services.
- Residential and visiting parents are responsible for the care of the child, management of inappropriate behaviors and for providing supplies necessary to care for the children’s personal hygiene.
- No person shall ask a child, staff member or visitor to deliver support payments, medications or legal documents to the other parent.
- No client or third party may attempt to serve legal documents upon another client inside the center or in the parking lot of the MHA.
- No adult may physically discipline or threaten to physically discipline a child while at MHA’S VISITATION CENTER.
- No parent may question a child about the other parent or guardian or make negative comments about the other parent or guardian in the presence of the child.
- Parties are responsible for notifying MHA’S VISITATION CENTER of changes to visitation status, address, phone numbers, attorneys, income, physical or mental health status, or legal status by informing staff.

### Arrival and Departure Procedures

- **Residential and Visiting Parents have separate entrances, exits, waiting areas and parking areas. When entering the parking lot from their respective streets, parents may not go beyond their designated parking areas. Doing so may result in suspension or termination from the program.**





- **Residential Parents** will enter and exit the MHA parking lot from Jefferson Street and park in the parking area directly in front of the main entrance. Residential parents must enter and exit the MHA through the glass vestibule. Please follow all health and safety protocols including the when entering the facility.
- **Visiting Parents** will enter and exit the MHA parking lot from Catoclin Avenue and park in the parking area next to the playground. They will enter and exit the building through the door facing their parking area.
- Visiting Parents must arrive 15 minutes before the scheduled beginning of the visit and remain 15 minutes after the visit ends in the area designated by the guard or staff member.
- Residential Parents arrive 5 minutes before the scheduled beginning of the visit and leave immediately following the end of the visit.
- Upon entering the MHA building, all clients will sign in, pay any applicable fees and follow the directions of staff and/or security. Once signed in, Residential Parents may not leave the MHA premises until after the visitation service ends. (MHA is not a licensed child-care facility and agency insurance coverage does not permit the assumption of custody in making emergency medical decisions).
- The Residential Parents must use waiting areas located near reception desk. Seats outside the waiting areas are reserved for other services.
- If another driver brings clients to MHA'S VISITATION CENTER and that driver is not approved to wait in the waiting area or enter the visit, the driver is required to exit the parking lot and not return until the time the client is to leave the center.

## Guests

- Visiting Parents must have prior approval from MHA each time in order to bring guests. Guests are allowed to accompany Visiting Parents on a bi-weekly basis for those with weekly visits and on a monthly basis for those with bi-weekly visits. Guests are also welcome to accompany the visiting parent on the child's birthday or recognized cultural or religious holidays.
- If the court order does not specifically designate who the visiting parties will or cannot be, MHA'S VISITATION CENTER will approve up to two guests and will be based on their relationship to the child.
- All guests must be accompanied by the visiting parent and never attempt to make contact with the residential parent. All guests adhere to all health and safety procedures while at the MHA.
- All guest policies are subject to modification at the discretion of MHA'S VISITATION CENTER

## Security and Safety

All security measures are in place to create and maintain a safe environment and a relaxed atmosphere for the children, clients and guests. A hand-held metal detector is used to scan all persons entering the visiting side. Security will not safeguard any personal property and MHA'S VISITATION CENTER is not responsible for their safekeeping

- The Security Guard shall inspect client's pockets, bags, purses and gifts.
- All clients and visitors will refrain from bringing sharp objects that may be used as a weapon. Weapons of any kind will not be tolerated. If a weapon is observed or suspected, staff will call law enforcement and report to the court the substance of the interaction.



- All clients and guests will follow the directions of security and staff members at all times. If the supervisor or security guard ends a visit, the decision is final. The parent will refrain from arguing or discussing the decision in the presence of the child. If the parent disagrees with the supervisor's decision, the parent may contact the Program Manager on the next business day.
- Emergency/Fire Procedure is as follows: Children will be escorted out of the building by observers through the George E Shields exit. Residential parents will be escorted by reception and exit through the main doors. Visiting parents will be escorted by security and exit the building through the door facing their parking area. Residential parents are responsible for meeting the observers in front of the Dance Unlimited studio to pick-up children. A map outlining these certain entrances and exits can be provided.

### **Alcohol & Illegal Substances**

- Alcohol or illegal substances cannot be tolerated
- Individuals who appear impaired by alcohol or illegal substances (i.e: noticeable smell, impaired mobility, blood shot eyes, slurred speech, abusive language) will be turned away and not allowed to enter MHA'S VISITATION CENTER or participate in the scheduled visit.
- If a parent brings a child to MHA'S VISITATION CENTER and appears to be under the influence of alcohol or illegal substances, the listed emergency contact will be notified. If the emergency contact is not available, child welfare officials will be notified. The child will not be allowed to leave MHA'S VISITATION CENTER accompanied by any individual who appears to be under the influence of alcohol or illegal substances.
- MHA'S VISITATION CENTER may report the appearance of symptoms related to alcohol or illegal substance use in participants who have court orders with stipulations against such alcohol and/or drug use to the appropriate court and may also report the symptoms to the other party in the visitation or transfer at its discretion.
- During Visits
  - Staff and observers do not structure visitation time; visiting parents are encouraged to plan their visits by bringing games, toys, books and activities.
  - Unless stated in a court order, the Department of Social Services, or another specific reason that would endanger the safety of the children, the visiting parents are encouraged to share a meal with their children; may include prepared food, take-out, refreshments and/or snacks to enjoy eating together.
  - If the child has an allergy of any kind, a medical form, signed by the child's medical physician, shall be completed stating what dietary and medical restrictions are present before starting visitation at MHA. Restrictions enforced by MHA'S VISITATION CENTER on the visiting parent are based upon the information provided on this form.
- MHA's Visitation Center has an outdoor playground for use on a case-by-case / week to week basis. Its use is a privilege and MHA'S VISITATION CENTER reserves the right to suspend a client's use at any time. The Visiting parent must inform the Staff that they would like to go to the playground before there visit begins, so staff can appropriately give every family an opportunity to enjoy the outdoor playground.
- **Residential parents** are responsible for applying sunscreen to children before visit start time. MHA'S VISITATION CENTER is not liable for any sunburn that may occur during a visit.



MHA'S VISITATION CENTER staff will closely monitor visiting parent's assistance with the child's personal hygiene. The staff and observers of MHA'S VISITATION CENTER will take their cues about how to proceed in the visit from the child. If the child is upset, observer and staff will encourage the visiting parent to comfort the child. If the child is inconsolable after 10 minutes, the staff will intervene to help soothe the child. If unsuccessful, the visit will be suspended and the child taken to his residential parent or guardian. If possible, the child will return to the visiting parent to attempt to resume the visit.

The staff is available to help parents navigate successfully through the following rules designed in the best interest of the children. We realize these rules may feel restrictive but they are based upon nationally recognized best practices for supervised visitation programs.

- Gifts are only permitted on a child's birthday and recognized cultural and religious holidays. However, if a craft is made during the visit, the child may take it home with them.
- Gifts may not be wrapped. Gift bags enable the gift to be inspected upon arrival.
- Parents will avoid bringing up any court related topics or custody arrangements in the presence of the children and will redirect any comments made by the child.
- Staff reserves the right to look at any videos, pictures or electronic games being played to assess for appropriateness.
- Parents will only bring videos or handheld games rated "E" or "T."
- Phone calls during the visit must be made outside of the visiting room.
- Parents will refrain from making promises regarding trips, visits with other family members or gifts outside the agreed upon arrangement of MHA'S VISITATION CENTER.
- Pictures are permitted. However, videos/audio/ and all social media apps (i.e. Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook) are prohibited by all individuals.
- Prior permission is needed to use FaceTime or any other video calling app. Screen recording is not permitted.
- Pets are permitted to participate in visits. Visiting parents MUST contact the Program Manager or Site Supervisor to request permission prior to scheduled visit. Visiting parent will have documentation for the pet which includes updated vaccinations, keep the pet on a leash or in a designated cage, and clean up after their pet.
- Visiting parent will always speak to the child in a way that is audible to the observer. Parents will refrain from whispering, talking in low tones or speaking in a language unknown to the observer. All communications between the visiting parent and the child must be heard and understood by the observer.
- Parents will tidy the visitation room, ensure the child's shoes and coat are on, gather personal items and promptly leave the room when the visit is over to ready the space for the next family and facilitate smooth center functioning.

MHA'S VISITATION CENTER reserves the right to discontinue services at any point for any reason. Parents and guardians who exhibit behaviors or engage in activities that require staff intervention for any reason may be required to participate in additional services or other community interventions as a condition of further participation in the program.



## Program Reports and Documentation

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- Without a subpoena, documentation requests by visiting or residential parents are made by completing a Request for Documentation Form. Documents that are available by request of a visiting or residential parent or their designated agent by signing an Authorization for Release of Confidential Information Form are:
  - Program Reports
  - Payment history of the parent who signed the Authorization for Release of Confidential Information Form
  - Any letters addressed to the parent who signed the Authorization for Release of Confidential Information Form by staff of MHA'S VISITATION CENTER
  - Sign-in sheets of the parent who signed the Authorization for Release of Confidential Information Form
- When Sign-in documentation or payment histories are requested, copies are only provided to the parent to whom the sign-in or payment history belongs. Exceptions are those requested via a subpoena
- Unless compelled by law, court order, or internal MHA signed release form, client contact information will not be shared with the other parent, other MHA departments or anyone outside the MHA
- **Once the request for documentation is received, MHA's Visitation Center has 10 business days, to prepare and mail the documentation.**



Please Sign the following page and return it to us via email or in person prior to starting visitation at MHA. If you have any question or concerns, please email the Site Supervisor or Program Manager at the emails provided on the first page.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF PARENT HANDBOOK**

I (Print Name): \_\_\_\_\_ acknowledge that I have received, read, understand, and agree to the policies and procedures of MHA's Supervised Visitation services defined in MHA's Visitation Center parent handbook. I also understand that if I do not adhere to these policies and procedures, my services may be interrupted by suspension or up to and including termination at the discretion of the Director of Family Support Services.

Client Signature

Date

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**BELOW PLEASE FIND THE PARKING MAP WITH DIRECTIONS ON WHERE TO PARK. FOR THE RESIDENTIAL PARENT (RP) AND THE VISITING PARENT (VP).**







