

Testimony before the Human Services Committee and Select Committee on Children
December 18, 2008
Public Hearing on DCF

Good afternoon, distinguished chairs of the Human Services Committee and the Select Committee on Children. My name is Deborah Erickson and I am before you today to testify to the fact that my husband and I have first hand knowledge of how dysfunctional the Department of Children and Families really is in attempting to treat children in our state. We filed for voluntary services in April 2004 in the Meriden office for help with our teenage son who was diagnosed with Oppositional Defiant Disorder and Intermittent Explosive Disorder. Our son, Kyle, exhibited oppositional and even violent behavior in our home starting at age 11. At one point in 2004, we were calling the police every week because Kyle was so out-of-control. We have three other children who were 3 ½, 2 and 8 months old at the time.

During these past four years with DCF, we have been subjected to the overarching philosophy in the agency that the parents are at fault for the child's behavior. While a majority of DCF cases are the result of children being abused and neglected by their parents, we were not the typical DCF family—my husband and I are married, both college educated, we care deeply for our children, and would do anything to help them. My husband owns his own business, and I am a stay-at-home mom and our son, Kyle, who is extremely bright, with an IQ of 134.

After several years of exhausting a wide range of community based programs and a private residential facility that we paid for by selling our house, we were forced to ask DCF to take temporary custody of our son in order to get him more intensive services out of our home. In the state of CT, a parent must sign a document stating that they are basically abandoning their child because they cannot meet their mental health needs. DCF considers this neglect. But this is the ONLY gateway to DCF's funding once voluntary services are exhausted. As parents, this was the most heart-wrenching decision we ever had to make, but to protect our younger children and get Kyle the help he needed, we did it. As a result, our DCF caseworker actually accused us of abandoning our son, and told us ours was an abuse and neglect case. This thinking pervaded the Meriden office right on up to the Area Director who told us that her entire office believed this. No parent should have to suffer through this and sign a court document stating they are abandoning their child because they need services from DCF. This MUST change.

At a family treatment planning meeting in 2005, the clinical social worker actually yelled at us across the table, telling us that we abandoned our child, that we were guilty of neglect, that the case wasn't about Kyle but was actually about my husband and I, and even had his facts wrong about our case, and on it went. We had never been so rudely treated in all our lives. We wrote several letters to the DCF commissioner calling for this man to be fired but nothing ever happened to him. We even had a friend with us in the room who at the time sat on the DCF advisory board. He was appalled at the outrageous and unprofessional actions of this man. In an email that we acquired through the Freedom of Information Act concerning our case, we found that another DCF employee in the room at the time actually wrote an email within the agency, lying about the facts of the incident. Outrageous!

Another problem is caseworker incompetence and mismanagement – DCF caseworkers are required to submit treatment planning reports every six months. The caseworker we had was extremely incompetent as was his supervisor. He continually wrote treatment plan reports about our family that were distorting, misleading and outright lies. The caseworker shifted the focus of the reports to blame us, Kyle's parents, for creating Kyle's oppositional defiance disorder and intermittent explosive disorder and accused us of perpetuating these problems in our son. This shift in focus delayed progress in Kyle's treatment as new treatment providers had to sift through the inaccuracies, information omissions and biased views that the caseworker presented to them. We spent hours upon

hours going over these reports and submitting corrections to all the errors that were made. We went up the administrative line in the Meriden office and then took our case to Hartford in July 2006, eventually sending a 14 page letter to the DCF commissioner documenting why we wanted our caseworker and his supervisor removed from our case. We got nowhere.

At one point we filed a complaint with the ombudsman office. Unfortunately, this office consists of DCF employees hired to oversee complaints from families. Because we had documented our case so well, the office did help us to move our case out of Meriden to the Middletown office. Leading up to this, however, we were disconcerted to find out the ombudsman director was on a friendly first name basis with our local area director. How can a dysfunctional agency like DCF monitor itself? DCF complaints need to be monitored by an independent body of professionals.

The one bright spot was the Yale Child Study Center program IICARS (Intensive In-home Child and Adolescent Reintegration Services). In June 2006 they started visiting our home several times a week and eventually saw Kyle's aggressive behaviors. They really advocated for a treatment plan that was in Kyle's best interests and stuck to the facts of the case even when DCF staff continued their "it's the parents' fault" comments. They were instrumental in helping us push DCF to seek continued care for our son.

DCF staff often went against recommendations of the professionals working closely with us and our son. In one case, our son was in a psychiatric hospital after a crisis and both IICARS and the hospital recommended a therapeutic boarding school for Kyle. DCF said they knew of no such service and threatened us in that meeting that if we didn't take our son home, they would file for custody and take him away from us. With no alternative, we took him home, and within a month, he was back in a psychiatric hospital after another crisis, just what we and the IICARS team predicted would happen. A few years earlier, an intensive-outpatient program recommended Kyle be placed in a residential facility and again DCF ignored their recommendation.

After continued pressure from us and the IICARS team, DCF finally relented and approved an out-of-state therapeutic boarding school where our son graduated high school from this past June. He still had problems that he would not work on, but the time away gave us and our other children the respite we needed from the continual chaos in our home. Because Kyle's angry behaviors were still present, we couldn't safely have him home after graduation. Again, instead of helping us to find him a place to stay for a month until he turned 18, DCF stepped in and just took custody of him. They paid for him to go to an expensive college in Pennsylvania, but he wasn't ready to be on his own. DCF set him up for failure. They failed to provide the emotional support he needed in a big city all alone and failed to provide his necessary asthma medication for months. He has since been kicked out of college for drug use that started in college and has walked away from DCF because he doesn't want to live under "their rules" either.

In desperately trying to find services for our out-of-control son, we allowed agencies, including DCF, into our home and allowed our parenting style to be put under a microscope. We tried everything that multiple therapists suggested. Time does not allow me to read my complete testimony, so I have provided the clerk with many supporting documents for you to read. Thank you.

Sincerely,

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