

Human Services Committee
Select Committee on Children
Public Hearing on the Department of Children and Families

December 18, 2008

Senator Harris, Senator Meyer, Representative Villano and members of the committees.

My name is Elizabeth Slezak. I was employed by the Department of Children and Families as a Social Worker Trainee from January 18, 2008 until October 31, 2008. My working test period was due to end on November 17, 2008, however due to an unsatisfactory performance appraisal given me on October 31, 2008, I was dropped from state service.

I am here today in support of the statements made about the deficient leadership and management within the Department of Children and Families. My personal story will give an example of how the local offices are disconnected from the Central Office and how management clearly knows when SWS are incompetent, however chooses to ignore and refuses to take any steps .

I came to the Department of Children and Families with an extensive background in Behavioral Health experience, as I was involved with System of Care, Care Coordination for almost 4 years. First as a Care Coordinator, then promoted to Care Coordination Supervisor .

I have over 20 years prior State Service beginning at Norwich Hospital as a Psychiatric Aide, then with the Department of Social Services as first a Connecticut Career Trainee, then promoted to Eligibility Services Worker. I spent over 10 years employed with the Judicial Department as a Support Enforcement Officer. I left state services after 20 years for personal reasons with the hopes to return at a later date when my daughter was older. This occurred when I was hired by the Department as a Social Worker Trainee. At the time I was employed by United Services as a Care Coordinator Supervisor and was admired by my supervisors for doing an excellent job.

I felt my experience with System of Care would give me the Behavioral Health background to do a good job within the Department. My goal was to become involved with the Differential Response System that was scheduled to be introduced by the Department in July 2009. I felt DRS was similar in many ways with System of Care which was a strength based model and involved doing assessments of the family and not placing blame within the family. It also involved the family being part of the decision making process in what the family needed to help them achieve success within the family.

I attended the Training Academy and completed the 35 classes required of all Social Worker Trainees. I took my test on October 16, 2008 and received an 82 on the written part of the test. During my training period I received 3 evaluations of my work and they were all Satisfactory with no concerns noted on any of them. They were given to me in April, May and July 2008.

It was a difficult job to say the least, however I felt my previous experience was very helpful in getting me through the training period. I was in a training unit with a Social Worker Supervisor, who gave me very little supervision and I was left to figure it out on my own or as he would tell me to ask my co-workers for assistance as it was difficult for him to do his work, when I would interrupt him for questions I would have.

It wasn't until August 2008, when I was disciplined for having made two visitation errors on my caseload, that I knew that I may be in jeopardy of losing my job.

On August 5, 2008, I asked to speak with the Social Worker Supervisor as he had been avoiding me since the mistake had been found out. My SWS told me I would be having a meeting with the Program Supervisor and SWS to discuss my errors and any discipline. SWS stated he didn't know what that would be, however he felt I didn't have the skills necessary and stated he didn't see me making it past my 10 month working test period.

At that point I realized I needed to speak with the Program Supervisor to give my side of the story and reveal my lack of supervision by my SWS. The next day when my SWS was out sick, I attempted to speak with the Program Supervisor to discuss this matter. She refused to speak with me alone and stated when SWS returned they planned on meeting with me, so I would be able to speak with her then.

I knew I had done a good job in the previous 6 months and had three good evaluations to prove this.

On August 8, 2008, my PS, SWS and myself met to discuss the seriousness of my not meeting appropriate visitation standards on two occasions. The PS told me she had consulted with Human Resources who felt they had enough to fire me, however they were going to give me another chance. I received no written discipline, just this verbal warning. From August 8, 2008 to the day I was let go, I met the Department's visitation policy.

For the first time since I started in January 2008, I started getting weekly supervision after that meeting which was something new and wondered if my SWS's behavior toward me had to do with his lack of supervision and my visitation mistakes.

At this time I spoke with the union to get their guidance. I was told as long as my work was not late and met the visitation standard, they wouldn't be able to let me go.

I did my best work from August 8, 2008 to October 31, 2008. I was only late on paperwork that my SWS told me verbally that I would have more time and later denied every saying that. My SWS had supervision with me that was intimidating at times as when he thought I hadn't met the visitation policy was harsh with his comments such as "I think we have a big problem here," only to find out I had met the standards. This went on weekly with different issues being picked on.

In September 2008, when I asked for a meeting with SWS and PS to again address the unfair way I was being treated, I was told by the Program Supervisor, they were planning to meet with Human Resources at the end of September to discuss my late work and my future at the Department. I worked even harder to prove them wrong. I then tried to go to the Human Resources Department to give my side of the story and once again I was ignored.

My treatment plans were coming back from SWS in September 2008 with nice job and they were being approved by the ACR unit. In October 2008 I felt positive that I was going to make it. I did not know that my SWS would resort to lying to achieve his goal of getting me fired.

I was told by my SWS on October 28, 2008 that I was getting my evaluation on October 31, 2008 and then meeting with Human Resources to discuss my future with the Department of Children and Families. I spoke with the union who confirmed with SWS that I was being dropped on October 31, 2008.

I continued to do my job the best that I could until October 31, 2008, even when it was known I was being fired. Coworkers wondered why I continued to come to work and I replied this is the kind of worker I am, I need to go out with the knowledge I did my job and was professional about it to the end. That is the kind of work ethic I have always had.

So on October 31, 2008, I was given a unsatisfactory appraisal that was entirely made up of lies. The lies were so unbelievable and could have been shown to be lies if anyone had actually taken the time to check them out. I was given a Fair rating on Dependability which can be given only if shown absenteeism and or tardy is an issue with the employee. I had perfect attendance in the training academy and my attendance in the office was almost perfect with 4 hours of sick time being used in the almost ten month period. As far as being tardy, I was never tardy and 10-15 minutes early, which was seen daily by my PS.

I was given Unsatisfactory ratings for Quality of Work and Quantity of Work, yet continued to get comments such as "nice job" and work with few mistakes that could have been shown to anyone. Numerous mistakes alleged by my SWS that occurred in May, June and July 2008, however they do not show up on my July 15, 2008 evaluation given to me by my SWS. In fact, my SWS did not give myself a copy of that evaluation until October 31, 2008 when I had to ask for it at my termination meeting.

My first chance to tell my side of the story was at an Administrative Hearing held at CO on November 10, 2008 with the Human Resources Director. She stated she did not have a copy of my July 2008 evaluation, which I thought was odd and made me wonder when my SWS was preparing my October 31, 2008 appraisal, he didn't realize he had given me one in July 2008, and started fabricating mistakes after my May 15, 2008 appraisal given to me.

I am still waiting to hear the results of that hearing. I was told it would take one week for the decision to either reinstate me or not reinstate me. It has been almost 6 weeks and I have not heard back and voicemail's go unreturned.

I wrote to the Commissioner, Susan Hamilton regarding this matter and had requested to meet with her and have not heard back from her.

In closing, I agree with the Child Advocate, Jeanne Milstein' statement that an analysis of leadership and recommendations for talent enhancement is a necessary first step to getting it right. My experience shows that a good Social Worker was allowed to be fired due to the incompetent SWS and the lack of any action by the management .

Also, the question , Are the children and families better off for their involvement with the Department of Children and Families, I would say no. My experience gave me insight into how a family member must feel when they try to go up the chain of command to have their issues addressed and they are ignored. I was ignored and my families had a good social worker who was fired due to the incompetence of a bad SWS.

I would like to end with a compliment I received in October 2008 by a child's attorney I was involved with. In Juvenile Court this Attorney told my SWS, that he had a good Social Worker. I was a good Social Worker. How is it I was fired. Please clean house and get the right people with the right skills in place or nothing will ever change.

Thank you for your time.