GREATER BOSTON
LEGAL SERVICES
...and justice for all

BY ELECTRONIC MAIL

April 20, 2021

Mandated Reporter Commission
C/O Office of the Child Advocate
One Ashburton Place, 5th Floor
Boston, MA 02108

To the Commission:

Enclosed please find written comment responsive to the Mandated Reporter Commission's Report Seeking Public Comment: Proposals Presented to the Commission. These are statements created by caregivers who have firsthand experience with the mandated reporting and wished to provide anonymous (with one exception), written public comment to the Commission. None of the caregivers' whose testimony is enclosed within are clients of Greater Boston Legal Services; we are only facilitating their anonymous submission.

Thank you for your continued attention to this critical matter.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth McIntyre
Senior Attorney, School to Prison Pipeline Intervention Project

Caregiver 1:

Good afternoon. I am a parent of an elementary school-aged girl with autism and dyslexia. I have been filed on as a parent by my daughter's counselor, and I also grew up in the DCF system myself. I am here to speak against the proposals that the Commission is considering.

I came to this country when I was 13. I was put into a foster home before I was able to join my family. While I was in the foster home, I was sexually assaulted. I did not tell my DCF case worker because I did not trust her. She didn't get to know me. I wasn't going to say something like that to someone I just saw every once in awhile. We didn't really have a real relationship.

Someone first filed on me when my daughter was just five years old. My daughter had just gotten her autism diagnosis. She was in preschool at the time, and there was a new teacher, or a substitute teacher, who didn't know about her autism. When she had my daughter in class, my daughter was rocking back and forth a lot and hitting her head on the floor and wall. The teacher filed a 51A because she said my daughter was doing "suspicious activity." Eventually, DCF closed that case, but it was open for months. I kept trying to explain that my daughter had autism, and that I was trying to get help for her, but I felt like no one was listening to me. I was trying to get help for my daughter, and no one was giving me help, but everyone seemed to think I was a bad mom.

Later we moved to a new town. My daughter, who is Afro-Cuban and has dark skin, was being called the n-word by kids at her school, and she hated it. She was so unhappy. I was trying to figure out what to do and how to help. I was always talking to her teacher and her counselor. Then one day, my daughter said that she was thinking about suicide to her counselor, and her counselor filed a 51A on me. I still don't understand why the counselor filed a 51A. When I tried to explain that my daughter was being bullied, had autism, and needed support, the counselor told me she had been a counselor for 15 years and she knew the right thing to do. I never trusted that school counselor after that, and we eventually moved so my daughter could go to a new school.

I've also had so many people file on me because my daughter would have a sensory meltdown and they'd think I'm hitting her or something. But if they would just talk to me first, or talk to her providers, they would know that's her autism. Finally, I made a little paragraph that just says "here is my daughter, she has autism, here are all her providers," that I give out to people so they don't call DCF all the time.

DCF has always eventually closed my cases, but it makes me feel ashamed when they come look into my house. I know it's not my fault, but it's hard to remember that sometimes. I am worried that what you are considering doing is going to make life worse for minority parents and kids, and we are already disadvantaged in this country.

I am proud that I have raised my daughter off of food stamps and social security and trying to get her all the services that I have. I am a fighter. But I think that if you want to help people like me and my daughter, what you should do is make sure that teachers and therapists can make good relationships with kids, and I think telling teachers and therapists to file on parents more will just make everything worse.

Caregiver 2:

I am a mom to a six year old girl with PTSD, and I want to speak against these proposals, because in my experience telling people to file 51As just makes it harder to get my daughter services she needs.

When my daughter was four years old, she was sexually assaulted by one of my parents, who was living with us at the time. It was so horrible. When I found out, I immediately packed us up and left. We became homeless and had to stay in shelters and on couches. Finally I was able to get housing and I was able to find my daughter some services. She got OT, speech, and counseling through early intervention, and she got an outpatient therapist, a therapeutic mentor, an in-home therapist, in-home behavioral services, a family partner, and an intensive care coordinator. My daughter was having a really hard time at school and at home. I was really worried about her, but we were working with all these services.

Then this past summer she had to go to a hospital, an inpatient unit, because of her PTSD. After she was there for weeks, they sent her to a CBAT. She was at the CBAT for many more weeks. She had met her treatment goals, but the staff at the CBAT said they wanted to keep her there for a while longer to monitor. But I felt like it was time for her to come home. She had been out of my home for months, and she was only a little girl. Also, her school had finally gone in-person for the first time in months. And because of pandemic restrictions, she couldn't see all of her usual providers in-person while she was at the CBAT. Plus, she was about to turn six years old. After everything she's been through, I didn't want her to spend her sixth birthday at CBAT. I wanted to be able to celebrate with her.

So I decided that with all these things happening - she'd met her treatment goals, she needed to be able to go back to in-person kindergarten, and she needed to see all of her regular providers in-person - it was time for me to check her out of the CBAT. My daughter's PCP and big team from the Home for Little Wanderers agreed that it would be okay for her to come home. But the CBAT did not want me to take her home.

My daughter's in-home therapist had a phone call with me and the CBAT people, and she asked if they were going to file on me if I brought her home. When they said they didn't know, my daughter's in-home therapist asked them to please talk with her before they do that, and said again that my daughter's entire team thought she could be safe and supported in my home.

Then the next day I came and checked her out. My daughter went back to school. Then I found out that the CBAT did file on me. A DCF worker came out to the apartment and saw my daughter and me and asked us questions. Eventually it was screened out, but I was so upset about everything that happened. I don't understand how I can be expected to trust a CBAT if my daughter ever needs one again.

It seems so unfair to me. When my daughter was really hurt, no one stepped in to help me. I had to fight for housing, for health insurance, for services, for everything. But then when I try to make good decisions for my daughter, when I try to get help for her, I got penalized. Like the system thinks I'm a bad mom because we're homeless. But I know my daughter better than anyone else and I should be able to make medical decisions for her. I don't understand how doing what my daughter's entire regular team, including her pediatrician and psychiatrist, recommended could be neglectful. Getting a child mental health services shouldn't be neglect. I just don't think that people should be encouraged to file 51As because they make you feel so bad, as a parent, and they make you think you maybe can't get help if you need it.

Caregiver 3:

I am the adoptive parent of a nine year old boy with disabilities, and I would like to tell you that I do not think that the changes that the Commission is considering will not help keep kids safe. All they will do is make things harder for families like mine.

The first time I was reported on, it was by my adoption support group. I was having a hard time; it was soon after my son's disabilities first started showing a lot, and he was really having a hard time. We had an in-home therapist who was not a good fit for us. She told me that I wasn't providing enough natural consequences for my son, who was then five, because when he was upset at bedtime I would let him fall asleep in my bed. I knew other parents who also did that in one of my adoption groups, so after one of the groups, I asked the group facilitator if we could talk.

I told her we were having a hard time and what my in-home therapist said about him falling asleep in my bed. I also told her that I was really worried about money. She asked me what my income stream was and I said that I was helping out at a farmers' market in my neighborhood. She asked me if I brought my son, and I said yes, of course.

We talked for awhile, maybe an hour or so, and I felt better after we talked. She was going to make a referral to a new IHT. Then, two days or so later, I got a call saying someone had filed on me with DCF. I was devastated. I asked the adoption caseworker why she had reported - I thought we had a good conversation and had been feeling better! She told me that she had to report, she was sorry. I still don't really see why she had to report. I stopped going to that group after that and found a new IHT myself.

The second time I was filed on was maybe three years later. I have a medical condition, and I'm prescribed medical marijuana in gummy form. I have a medical safe lock box where I keep it, but I was having a hard time remembering the combination, so I wrote it on a piece of paper that I taped in my closet, so I could check when I remembered. It never occurred to me that my son would see a post-it note in the back of my closet or that he would put it together with the lockbox, which was in a drawer in my nightstand. I thought I had come up with a really good situation that would keep my meds and my son safe. For a long time that worked fine, but one day while I was cooking he got into the safe. He brought the gummy's into the kitchen and asked me what they were. I took them away from him and told him they were my medicine and it was really important that he not touch them. I counted how many there were, and knew he hadn't eaten any.

The next day at school, he told his teacher that his mom had medicine gummy's and that he had eaten a whole bag of them. The teacher filed on me. She didn't even call me first to talk to me about what had happened. It was awful. When DCF called me, I kept trying to explain that I keep track of how many they are, that this was so important to manage my medical condition and keep me being able to parent my son. Then the DCF person asked me, “What do you do with your son while you’re high?”

I felt so ashamed, so anxious. I cannot tell you how anxious I felt. I didn’t know how to explain to her that I wasn’t getting high. It was medicine. I had a prescription. My doctor had offered to talk to DCF to explain. I told them I just couldn’t remember the combination. I told them I was worried he had eaten one too, that’s why I counted! No matter what I said, they didn’t listen.

It was so upsetting to get filed on. I just feel like - is anyone working harder for my child than I am? Everything I do is for my son. I work so hard to try to help him. I push and I push and I get support for him that people said was impossible. He has made progress in school that his teachers said he would probably never make. You don’t know how it feels to love your child so much, to put so much into them, and then have someone who doesn’t even know you ask you what you do with your son when you’re high.

Caregiver 4:

I am a mom to two daughters, one is 18 years old and the other 15 years old. I want to tell you about a time that I was filed on that I think is very unfair, to explain to you why filing on parents doesn't really help and I don't think more reports will help either.

My 15 year old daughter has disabilities and she has a bunch of services that help us with that. One was a therapeutic mentor. Earlier in the pandemic, I was having a problem getting the 15 year old to wash her dishes. She would just let them pile up, and it was leading to a lot of fights between our girls. I told my 18 year old to not worry about the 15 year old's dishes and worry about her own; that I would take care of it. Over the course of the week, the dishes started piling up and my 15 year old was just refusing to do them. So I got a small bucket and put all of her dishes in their and then put the bucket in her room. My daughter was really mad I put the bucket in her room. I told her I understood she was mad but that especially while we're all stuck at home we all have to help out, and that starts with taking care of messes you make.

My daughter told her TM that I had put a bucket of dirty dishes in her room, and the TM filed on me. I just could not believe it. The TM told me that she understood but unfortunately she just had to file. It was so upsetting to have to explain this to DCF. Would you want to explain to a DCF person what you tried to do to get your teenager to wash her dishes? It just feels so stupid, and I don't know, aren't there real problems? Why are you bothering me about my daughter refusing to wash dishes? Why are you acting like I'm such a terrible mom because I tried to figure out how to hold my daughter responsible for her choices? Isn't that good parenting? What was I supposed to do, just wash all of her dishes for the rest of her life?

It also really scared my daughter. When she found out that DCF had called, she was so scared. I tried to tell her that it was going to be fine, it was just process, but it's hard to talk to your kid about that when you're not exactly sure of it yourself. She was so scared, I felt so badly for her. She stopped seeing her TM after that, and we lost services because she wouldn't go. It took me another six months to get her new services, and she's just getting to know them now. It makes me so mad that we lost this service and I was made to feel like a bad mom all because I was trying to get my daughter to do dishes.

Caregiver 5:

I am a parent of a first grader with ADHD, anxiety, and autism. My son, like so many other kids across Massachusetts, has really had a hard time with remote learning. It has been a nightmare. He can't access learning through a screen at all. When the pandemic first started, every single day was just an hours long fight trying to figure out anything to get him to engage with any school. Sadly, I think that we really damaged our relationship with our son by trying to force him to do something that we and he knew he really couldn't do.

When he initially restarted in-person learning, it went well when he actually got to the building, but it was tough getting him to go there. His schedule was going Thursday and Friday mornings and then every other Wednesday for the whole day. This was really confusing for him. Nearly every Wednesday he would ask his father and me if it was a day he was going to school. We work with at-home ABA and had a visual schedule, but it didn't seem to help much. He also did not understand why he had to leave school in the afternoon.

At some point in February, the school agreed to let him do remote learning in the building on Thursday and Friday afternoons, to help with the predictability. But unfortunately, the remote learning in the building really did not help. He was working with a tutor there, and the tutor was not certified to work with him. Because he had missed so much school, and had been completely unable to do remote learning, he was really behind some of his classmates who had been able to do at least some remote learning. Almost every session he had with the tutor was a mess - he would end up dysregulated and upset. As the sessions got worse, my son stopped agreeing to school. He just would refuse to go in the morning.

We started trying to figure out a different plan with the school. My husband and I started doing parent training with the BCBA from the school too, at least an hour a week. We talked to the school every day to tell them whether he was going or not.

The school told us to call them 15 minutes after he refuses to go to school. This is really hard, though, because it's not like my son just says "I won't go to school," and we call the school to tell them he won't go and that's that. We spend lots of time going through what the BCBA has told us to try; it's often a long negotiation in the morning, trying to help him get to school. So usually we would call to say he wasn't going only after it was very clear to us that there was no way he would agree to go. At the same time that we were working with the school on trying to get him to go to school, we also thought it was really important to recognize that my son was refusing school because school was miserable for him. So not only was it important to get him to go to school, we were trying to get the school to recognize that it was also important for them to support him once he got to school.

Then, about six weeks ago, my husband got a voicemail on his phone saying it was DCF and to call them back. I felt so nervous it was hard for me to dial the number. I had no idea what was going to happen. I wondered if maybe one of our neighbors had seen my son having a tantrum and not understood it?

When the DCF person read me the report, I felt like all the air had been sucked out of the room. She told me that the report said: "educational neglect of son by mother, child missed nine full days and five half days this month, family has not been able to follow through with any plan."

It is so hurtful to know that my son's school said those words about me, the person who had been talking to them every single day trying to get my son to school and trying to figure out how to help him in school. I couldn't sleep for three days, I was so afraid. DCF did screen this out, but so much has changed now. I don't know who to trust. Every time I talk to the BCBA or my child's teacher I wonder if they think we're bad parents. I have put so much effort into my son's education. I just feel like - isn't it my son's school's job to figure out how to teach him with his disabilities? I feel like the school is blaming me for the fact that they are having a hard time teaching him. But that's not my fault. That's not because I'm a bad mom.

This report put so much doubt in my mind. I'm overweight, I'm middle-eastern, I'm a woman - how much did any of that have to do with this report? Before this, I thought the school and us were mostly working together. We had some disagreements - we were more worried about what school was like for our son when we he got to school - but basically, we liked the teacher, we felt supported, we had a plan, we were working on it. I don't understand how this happened. We're thinking of just moving to a new town. Especially because my son has complicated disabilities, it's so important for us to be able to trust his teacher. I don't know if we can ever do that now.

Caregiver 6:

I am a parent to a 10 year old child with PTSD. My child has witnessed and experienced violence in the past, and I have worked very hard to keep him safe. But because of his trauma history, when he becomes escalated, he sometimes says that I hit him. He sees a trauma specialist as an outpatient therapist and also has in-home therapy, and his therapists have explained to me that sometimes young kids with trauma histories get stuck on ideas, even if they aren't true. We have a really good team that is working with us, and my son is starting to get better.

But for a long time, it's very stressful whenever my son needs a new support or gets a new teacher, because they don't know about this. When my son started back at school this fall with a new teacher, he had an episode at school and got very upset, and said that I hit him. The school sent him to the emergency room and filed on me. When I talked to the DCF person, I asked couldn't they just talk to my old DCF person, or talk to my son's therapists to explain his trauma. It was so stressful to be in the emergency room with my very upset son and trying to defend myself to a DCF investigator. I felt like I was in such huge trouble, and I just felt so exhausted.

Now whenever I have a new provider I have to say "this is my son and sometimes he says these things when he is upset and this is why, if he says these things to you please call all these providers before you call DCF." One time, I had a school counselor who did agree to call his therapists before filing on me, but then after she talked to them, she called me back and said she believed me and understood the trauma history, but she had to file anyway. I still don't understand why. How did filing help anyone?

It makes me mad because my son actually does need help. It's not like everything is fine. My son has been through a lot, and so have I, and we need help. It took me such a long time to find good help for both of us. Instead of filing on me all those times, why didn't any of those people talk to me about what I needed, or talk to my son about what he needed?

When someone files on you, you feel so many things at once. You feel so tired, because you are already working so hard, and now you have to deal with this other thing. I also feel embarrassed, or ashamed, because a little part of you wonders if maybe you are doing a bad job? Maybe there is something you could do different? And you feel scared. No matter what DCF does once someone files on you, you know that they could take your kids if they wanted to. They're DCF. They can do what they want. No one will believe me, or even believe my son, over them. I'm the only one who has ever always been there for my son. What will happen to him if I'm not allowed to do that anymore?

Caregiver 7:

I am a mom to two young teenagers, a boy and a girl. You should know that my ex-husband was abusive, and it took me two years to get away from him and keep my kids safe. It was the hardest time of my life. He initially had supervised visits with the kids, but then, after I was fighting for months and months with my lawyer, finally he hurt one of the kids during a supervised visit and they agreed to end them. I remember the very first DCF worker I talked to, back when I was still with my husband, and scared for my kids, and trying to get away, and she told me, "You're just projecting your fears onto your kids. Your marriage problems aren't your kids' problems." When she told me that, I thought she was right. It took me another six months to realize that no, none of us were safe with him.

Once I got away from him, one of my kids told a teacher about something that her dad had done to her, and the teacher - without calling me - filed on me. I don't understand why she did that. I had been fighting to keep my kids safe from their dad for literally years. Why file on me for something their dad did years in the past? But then a DCF worker came to our house. She came on a Saturday morning, and we had a 21st birthday party for my nephew the night before, and my nephew's girlfriend had brought jello shots. But we had planned to have the party outside, it had been raining, so people didn't stay very long and we didn't end up having most of the jello shots.

Even though the reason I'd been filed on was because of something my abusive ex had done to my kids years ago, the DCF worker who came to our house mostly talked to me about the jello shots. I told her about the party and the rain and that only my nephew and his girlfriend had really had any. I told her she could call the other people at the party, or ask my neighbors. She asked my why I hadn't thrown them away yet. I didn't know how to answer her. I just hadn't? I had gone to bed and we'd had a busy morning and I was nervous about her coming over, so I hadn't cleaned out the fridge.

This was found unsupported, but on the letter, they wrote that it can been closed "with concern w/mom's drinking problem." I hate so much that that note is still there, in black and white. It is so unfair. Why did she think I had a drinking problem? It just feels so unfair.

I was also filed on by someone at my son's school because of a problem with his socks. When my son was 13, he thought it was funny to put his dirty socks everywhere. He put them in drawers where we keep pots and pans, in his sister's pillowcase, you know, everywhere. I kept trying to get him to stop and when he didn't listen I told him that if he didn't stop I was going to take away his socks. He then put socks in my pillowcase. I talked to his therapist, who said this was attention-seeking behavior and I should try to give him more positive attention, not rise to this stupid socks thing. So I decided to take all of his socks, wash them, and then hid them in my room. I also decided that he and I would spend every Tuesday afternoon when his sister had dance together, just the two of us, and hoped that would help. His teacher filed on me because she said he could get blisters from his shoes. It was screened out, but I was so upset. What would you say I should do with a teenager who thinks it's funny to stuff his sister's pillowcase with dirty socks? I talked to his therapist, I did the best I could.

It honestly made me want to just not talk to my son's teacher any more. I know I can't do that, but that's what I wanted to do. I just could not get over the fact that after everything we've been through, everything I have done for my kids, they are constantly trying to get DCF in our life, even while it's a fight to get my kids the services they actually need.

Caregiver 8:

Good afternoon. I am a single working mother of 3 children – 2 sons and 1 daughter. One of my sons has 4 step-siblings, and I have also raised all of them. All of the older children are grown and are doing very well. Most of them have families now and children of their own. I also helped raise all of my nephews and most of the boys on my son's wrestling team. My house is a place where young people come when they have no place else to go. When they grow up, they come back and thank me for giving them a place.

My 14-year-old daughter still lives at home with me in Springfield. She is deaf and she also has ADHD and ODD. I have done everything for her. I have gotten her therapy, psychiatrists, mentors, behavioral support, and I have taken her all the way to Boston multiple times to have experts evaluate her. I have been to every single IEP meeting. I am taking sign language classes to help me communicate with her. I've done everything I can to help her move forward in life. But her care is constant and it has not been easy for a single parent who works.

Since she was little, she has attended a school for the deaf. Even though she attends a special school, her life at school has been just like at home. Very challenging and hard to deal with. She has been aggressive toward peers and adults. She has had many tantrums and refusals. At first I tried to trust the school's knowledge, because I thought they dealt with students like her, but I learned they were not actually capable of supporting her. The school did not have the therapeutic expertise she needed. It was very challenging for them and they became very frustrated. My daughter also became more frustrated because she was not getting her needs met. She became more and more defiant at school. And this is when the DCF calls started.

It started with me disciplining my daughter for something she should not have done. She went to the school and told them. After talking to the school and explaining the situation to them, here comes DCF. They went to the school and met with my daughter before they even contacted me. She was so scared because I wasn't there to help explain it to her. She is deaf and that makes the communication hard. She didn't understand what was going on.

Then they came to the house. They went all through my house and asked me all these questions. They were so intimidating to me, asking the same questions over and over again. All you can do is sit there scared because you don't know what to do. All you can think of is "are you going to take my child?" With her being deaf and special needs, how would she communicate? Who would take care of my child if not me? After putting me through this, the report was unsupported. But the school kept calling DCF, at least four or five more times.

It doesn't matter how many times I've been through this, the same fears start all over again. It starts with looking out your window, waiting for them to come. Part of me always expects the police to show up with them. Everyone in the house is all uptight and afraid, and we take it out on each other because we are so scared. We know we haven't done anything wrong, but you don't know what might trigger them to take your child out of your home. Who are they going to believe? That word neglect is so broad you just don't know where DCF is coming from. This creates such distress. It's terrible.

On top this, there is everything this takes out of you time-wise, money-wise, and emotionally. You have to miss work, and a lot of times your employer doesn't give you sick time or vacation. I had to run back and forth from my job to home to meet with DCF, and multiple times they didn't even show up.

I know DCF should not have been called. My daughter is clearly not abused. She is up to date on everything. I have all these professionals involved in her life. She is not hidden. All of them are mandated reporters. Everyone knows she is not abused. The school knows this, too – and yet they still call DCF. It doesn't make any sense. To put this under a bigger umbrella, you will be making families who do not abuse and neglect their children go through all of this. You will disrupt all these people's lives. Please do not expand mandated reporting in the way you are considering. If you do so, you will hurt many families and children. Thank you for listening.

Caregiver 9: Patty Linnane

I am speaking today because I am scared about the power that individual mandated reporters have to abuse the system, and to report families simply because they disagree with their choices, rather than because of abuse or neglect. This is what happened to my family.

My grandchild DJ had been an only child for most of his life, and always wanted a little brother. On the school bus on the way to school, DJ saw a mother and child walking alongside the school bus, and joked to the driver, "Look, he's cute – can you go get him for me!" DJ had been talking about this for years, and the monitor and driver knew he wished for a little brother. One day, when he was on the bus to school, DJ had gotten a new phone. The bus monitor went onto his phone to install wifi, and saw that he had searched 3 and 4-year-old boys.

The bus monitor felt she needed to report this to the school, and in the report wrote he had photos of nude 3 and 4 year olds. In fact, there was a parental control filter for a child 13 and under installed and couldn't search nude photos. He did have photos of little kids – fully dressed - from the adoption agency that he had been showing me, asking me to adopt them so he could have a little brother.

The school social worker at DJ's school reviewed the report from the bus monitor, and called DCF and accused me of neglect and sexual abuse. The year before, this same social worker was upset with me because I disagreed with the school psychologist's evaluation of DJ's learning disabilities for his IEP. When I requested a neuropsychological exam as an independent educational evaluation, she objected, and alleged in this DCF report a year later that I "did nothing" about DJ's evaluations, when in fact we were on a 6-12-month long waitlist at Boston Children's Hospital. The day after DCF was at my house to investigate her charges, Children's finally called to schedule the neuropsychological exam.

The social worker called me at work to tell me about her report, and to say she had talked to the district attorney. I felt sick to my stomach. She said, "If he did this to someone, who did this to him?" I had no idea what she was talking about. After that I was scared to send DJ back to school. I was scared DCF would pull him from school and send him god knows where. I couldn't stay at work from worry that DCF would take him, and I would pick him up from school myself. It scared the hell out of me, I was sick to my stomach – I was throwing up, shaking all the time.

After the DCF investigator came to my house, she said, "I have seen this before. The social worker thought she could control you, and when you disagreed, she tried to control you by filing this report." DJ heard that conversation at our house, and didn't want to talk to the school social worker anymore after that, even when she would say hello. He would roll his eyes to look away from her, or roll his body down the wall to avoid her, and would get thrown into the "time out room." I told the principal to keep them away from each other, and that DJ could talk to the other social worker (it turned out the "mandated reporter" wasn't even his social worker).

What happened was totally wrong, and there were no repercussions for the social worker or the school. All of it has hurt DJ. My grandson doesn't even want to go to school now, doesn't want to do his school work, doesn't cooperate at all with the schooling because he knows what happened. They email me all the time, say he's not even trying. He loved school before, wanted to see his friends, he did his work. Now he says, "Why do I have to go to that building."

He won't talk about the DCF reporting, but I know. DCF sent social worker to our home who talked to us, and then to Dontae privately about wanting a little brother, about sexual abuse, asking about discipline and punishment at home. Afterwards, he clearly said he would never trust or talk to anybody again – now will only talk to me about wanting a little brother.

I know a lot of kids out there need help, you see it on the news; but we can't have these teachers waste DCF time because they have a grudge to hold. I respect DCF, but mandated reporters have to be serious. They can't play games with it. It scares me to expand the net of mandated reporters. It should be a whole group who decides this, not one person, especially in a school setting.

Please do not expand the net of mandated reporters. Thank you.

Caregiver 10:

My name is Diane, I live in Quincy, MA, and I am the mother of an autistic 5-year-old child. At 18 years of age, I suffered a car crash at 20 miles per hour and shattered my skull, resulting in a traumatic brain injury, depression, anxiety, and epilepsy. I have worked for years with my medical team of 6+ doctors and specialists as well as my child's medical team, which includes in-home ABA therapy (which we practice daily alongside my daughter) – a form of autism therapy which helps to manage my disabilities and teach my daughter how to act if I have a seizure.

In 2018, my then-3-year-old indicated to a mandated reporter that I had a seizure, prompting them to file a 51A against me for supposed neglect. After this 51A, the DCF case worker encouraged me to take a neuropsychological evaluation, on which I scored within the normal range of adults my age for each individual test. Eventually, I received a letter from DCF saying that they had dismissed this case.

A couple years later, in 2020, my 4-year-old autistic child went to school excited about seizures after a change to the seizure video she watches during in-home ABA therapy, telling a teacher that I had a "30-hour seizure." This prompted the school to file a 51A against me. Not once did the school scrutinize my child's comment or call me to clarify – they just went ahead and filed. When a DCF case worker broke the news to me, I told him that it would be impossible for me to have a 30-hour seizure, and my doctor could support that fact. When the DCF worker contacted my doctor, who confirmed my explanation, this did not stop this investigation and a DCF supervisor informed me that the allegations of "neglect" were due to me having a "Chronic Brain Injury and Seizure Disorder." The Supervisor in my local DCF office informed me that they could take me to court and have my child removed from my home due to this issue.

That day was the scariest day of my life, and I have seen my own brain. I called the ADA, the brain injury association, the Epilepsy foundation, and every lawyer I could think of. I did not have a seizure at that time, and the fact that the DCF disregarded both my neurologist and my epileptologist is just appalling. 33+ years of combined Medical training stating that I did not have a seizure disregarded over the word of a 4-year-old on the autism spectrum? I know that the mandated reporter who filed this 51A is from my child's Head start program, and she only attends that program due to the first 51A that DCF felt necessary as an added support. If the Department of Children and Families did not require me to keep her there, I wouldn't. I have since learned that only 2 days before this second 51A was filed, all Head Start staff had seizure and epilepsy training. This means that the reporter should have known that it was impossible for me to have a 30-hour-seizure.

It's my understanding that the Mandated Reporter Commissions is thinking about changing the definition of neglect when it comes to 51A reporting. As part the 1/4th of America with a disability, the 1 in 26 with epilepsy, and the 9 in 10 according to the American Association of Neurologists who will have a seizure in their lifetime, I am very worried about this. As you have heard, under the current definition, I am already being discriminated against based on my disability. The whole situation inflicted unnecessary stress and anxiety onto me, which can cause me to have more seizures. With the removal of "Disability," I expect to do all but live in the Department of Children and Family office to keep fighting for my right to be a parent even though my Medical Team, the Forced Neurological Psych Examination by the DCF both already agree that I am more than capable. I ask you to please think about 1 in 4 houses on your street that are living with some form of a disability.