



September 27, 2023

**New York City Council
Public Hearing on Child Welfare System**

My name is Cassandra Gonzalez, Rise's Program Support Manager. I am a parent impacted by the child welfare system and I can say from personal experience there are some deficiencies in mandated reporting practices and policies.

The mandated reporting policies meant to protect kids so many times put children and families in harm's way.

My experiences with mandated reporting are far from perfect and there are additional challenges I have faced as a survivor of domestic violence. It's disheartening that instead of receiving the support I needed,, a domestic violence officer reported me to child welfare services .

I felt like the system failed me and instead of supporting me and really understanding my situation, they called and revictimized me, I couldn't understand a system that can truly break down your mind, body, and soul with no regrets and can rip your child from you instead of giving me the tools and resources to make me better as a mother and as a community member that needed support. When I got that call, I knew the domestic violence officer called. I was shocked and had a lot of emotions including confusion. I needed help, not separation. Mandated reporting did more harm than good and I wish that I had the opportunity to really advocate and speak about my wants and needs and that it was heard.

When ACS comes to families' homes, it makes you feel like a guilty suspect. This leads to a distressing journey of harassment, surveillance, and punishment, particularly for families living in poverty. The dehumanizing treatment by agency staff adds to the already challenging circumstances.

Mandated reporting should focus on providing wrap-around services and support to families in difficult situations, such as domestic violence. However, in my case, it resulted in ACS

involvement rather than the assistance I was seeking. This not only failed to address the underlying issues but also caused further harm to my family.

I hope my testimony as a parent impacted by these issues raises crucial awareness about the harms of mandated reporting. It emphasizes the need to reconsider current practices and prioritize support for families in situations like mines. It's essential to create support networks that families can turn to without fear, ensuring they receive the necessary assistance without experiencing further harm.

Given these concerns, I would suggest that this council rethinks and reforms mandated reporting practices. It is essential to consider the impact on families, to support and understand the differences between poverty and neglect, and to create a system that is truly focused on the well-being of children and families.

At Rise, we are working together to build support networks that families can turn to without fear, judgment or shame of what they are going through, ensuring they receive the necessary assistance and resources to thrive. We hope through our Peer and Community Care Network we see less harm in families and more support for them. I believe there can be a change and a different outcome if we shift and begin to reduce state central registry calls by providing mandated reporters an outlet to refer parents to when they don't have capacity.

Thank you for your time today and for taking into consideration a parent's perspective.



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Hi. Thank you for holding this hearing. My name is Jeanette Vega, Rise's Executive Director. I am also a parent impacted by the child welfare system and want to share the harms that mandated reporting has on family well being.

Rise is a community of Black, Latinx, and low-income parents across New York City who have been impacted by the child welfare system. We are primarily Black and Latina mothers from neighborhoods who have the highest rates of child removals and investigations. Our families are being separated due to poverty and child welfare is calling it neglect.. Black and brown families—and especially Black families—are overrepresented at every stage of the child welfare system—more child protective investigations, more children removed, longer stays in foster care and more terminations of parental rights. What parents really need is legislative change to cut down on surveillance and access to safe and healing family support and better conditions, so our families can thrive.

The policies of mandated reporting meant to protect and keep children safe actually harm our families. Mandated reporters are stationed within the same community networks that are supposed to be support outlets for parents such as hospitals, social service organizations and schools. For low-income families of color in New York City, child welfare is a constant, threatening presence. Calling a child abuse hotline has become the default response for mandated reporters, resulting in unnecessary child protective investigations and a painful cycle: Families fearful of an investigation do not seek out help so family challenges are more likely to become crises.

At Rise, we have heard from hundreds of parents that say they are scared to reach out for support and resources that will benefit their children and help with everyday needs due to the fact that those people are mandated reporters. One problem is that these hospitals and schools don't have the capacity to give parents direct support so they use the hotline with the intention to provide support, but that is not what actually happens.

Rise's team of parents impacted spent a year holding community conversations and doing a survey to hear what parents want for their families and communities instead of hotline calls and investigations. We talked to 48 parents and got 60 surveys back. The report highlighted how poverty is categorized as neglect and families are being separated.

A better way to meet families' needs is by changing the definition of neglect so that only children who are really at risk are reported, and by shifting mandated reporting to family supporting practices that benefit families' well-being.

Rise has started to provide that support to families under stress through our Peer and Community Care Program. Our Peer Support program is designed to fill a significant gap by improving the ability of schools and community organizations to refer struggling families to parent-led support groups and peer support specialists who connect parents directly to community resources.

For instance, New York City's lack of accessible mental and behavioral support for low-income families has put intense pressure on schools and community organizations to address family mental health crises. However, schools and organizations often do not have the tools or capacity to address these issues. Additionally, parents navigating school and behavioral health support systems often don't know what community resources and services are available. This disconnect leads to high levels of stress and isolation, deteriorating relationships, and ultimately, schools calling the ACS hotline to intervene even though it's not neglect. In fact, according to ACS data, 85% of school calls in New York City do not meet the standard of neglect of abuse or neglect. ACS itself agrees that the hotline is not an appropriate service pathway for these families.

That's where peer support can make a difference.

Parents say that community peer support is what they need to prevent and manage mental health issues of toxic stress, anxiety, isolation and daily life challenges for themselves and their children. This is consistent with newly-released World Health Organization guidance that recommends alternative peer approaches and community-based mental health care supporting day-to-day living, such as linking people to housing, education and employment services. Parents often trust other parents from their community who know how to access services, share information and provide person-centered support. Research shows that peer support is an early and effective approach to connecting people to the information, resources and services that improve their families health and wellbeing. The peer program will create highly networked communities that are more able to make use of existing resources, address challenges early and provide mutual support for families to thrive.

New York State and City should invest in the kind of care parents DO want and end mandatory reporting by teachers so they stop hurting families with investigations.

At Rise, we had a parent call us recently who was a single young mother- 26, lived in a shelter and was giving birth on Sept 4th. She asked the shelter for some support, resources to have someone care for her 3 year old while she gave birth. The shelter replied, you cannot leave your child with another shelter resident. If you don't have care for the child when you go into the hospital we will call child welfare to pick up the baby. This mom cried and told them that she had no family, she was alone and needed someone to care for the child for a few days. This mom also had been a child raised in foster care and did not want child welfare involved as she feared the process of getting her daughter out afterwards. The parent called the hospital to ask for guidance, resources and the hospital said the same thing, that they are mandated reporters so if she comes with her daughter, they will have to call child welfare. A few days before having to give birth, her fear and stress was at an ultimate high. She found out about Rise's Peer program which provides peer to peer direct support to parents in community and the team was able to provide support and respite care so that the parent can give birth and not worry about her child being returned to her.

It is a scary world we live in when parents asking for support get told the only option is mandated reporters calling child welfare. When will we start to shift conditions that cause and keep families in poverty versus punish and harm our families further by reporting things that are most of the time, out of our control such a lack of child care, lack of housing, food insecurity, emergency situations? Families are up to fail.

Mandated reporting gives child welfare direct access to our families, without understanding the aftermath that comes after that call.

If New York State wants to be a state/ city that really wants to see families thrive, not just live day by day . We need to end mandated reporting on families who just need support.

As a parent impacted, I still face trauma triggers from my experiences of child welfare. Scared to trust mandated reporters, fear of child welfare coming back, no matter what level at work I am in. Parents like me get judged, accused of being child abusers and violated by the removals of our children, and not provided the support and resources to address the situations. These things stay in our lives forever for most parents, being on the state central registry as a child abuser also hinders our employment opportunities which again keeps families in poverty.

Let's end mandated reporting and become a world that provides community support. Thank you for listening to the hundred of parents that stand with Rise on this statement.