VOICES OF EXPERIENCE

POLICY LESSONS FROM WOMEN IMPACTED BY THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM



LEGISLATIVE BRIEF

HOPE 585

HOPE. HEAL. THRIVE.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2025, Monroe County conducted 6,434 Child Protective Services investigations. Nearly three out of every four were ultimately unfounded while 97 percent included an allegation of neglect or deprivation of necessities, a category that can encompass conditions shaped by poverty and unmet basic needs.

Behind these numbers are parents and children who experienced the fear, intrusion and lasting trauma of a CPS investigation. For families that experienced challenges that brought them to the attention of CPS, a closed investigation frequently meant that their families were scrutinized without receiving the support they needed.

These outcomes raise a critical question about mandated reporting, the process through which many families are introduced into the Child Welfare system, as well as what supports exists that could be made available without requiring a family to first experience an investigation. A system more centered on the concepts of support and prevention would ask whether some impacted families could have received meaningful help through a different front door.

Across four trauma-informed focus groups conducted between March and April 2026, Hope585 interviewed 21 women with firsthand experience of the Child Welfare system. They described what happened when their families needed support but encountered surveillance, judgment and punishment instead. One participant explained the contradiction plainly: “I was looking for someone to help me and ended up in trouble.”

The experiences of these women point to a pressing policy lesson: crisis is not neglect, and need is not abuse. When housing instability, food insecurity, childcare challenges, mental health needs or unsafe household conditions are treated both by mandated reporters and by Child Welfare officials primarily as evidence against a parent, CPS becomes the doorway to services it was never designed to provide. Families may be investigated while the conditions that brought them to the system’s attention remain unresolved. The urgent question we need to answer is: How many families entering the Child Welfare system could be supported earlier, voluntarily and without an investigation?

The women who participated in the focus groups did not ask policymakers to choose between child safety and family dignity. They asked for a system that understands that the two are connected. Monroe County and New York State can act by creating safe pathways to voluntary support, distinguishing poverty-related need from maltreatment, improving access to independent parent advocacy, strengthening accountability, and giving people with lived experience real power in shaping reform.

POLICY PRIORITIES

The following priorities reflect the recommendations participants offered across the four focus groups. The legislative proposals and implementation options identified below describe ways policymakers can advance those priorities.

1. SHIFT FROM SURVEILLANCE-BASED INTERVENTION TO COMMUNITY-BASED PREVENTION AND FAMILY SUPPORT

Participants called for practical assistance delivered through trusted community organizations before family challenges escalate into crises. They identified housing, childcare, transportation, mentorship, behavioral health services, parent advocacy and emotional support as resources that could help families stabilize and remain together.

They emphasized that assistance should be voluntary. They did not identify CPS as an entity they trusted to provide prevention services. Their experiences point to the need for a front door to support that is clearly separated from investigation, monitoring and the threat of family separation.

New York State should advance the **Child and Family Wellbeing Fund (A63A/S6431)** as a concrete investment in this approach. This bill would fund community-led supports designed to meet the specific needs of neighborhoods with high levels of CPS involvement, with an emphasis on family preservation, reunification and healing. Monroe County's state legislative delegation should support the proposal and advocate for funding to implement it. Passage of this bill should be the beginning of ongoing investment in trusted community organizations that can provide the resources that families need independent of the Child Welfare system.

Participants' fear of seeking help and their experiences of being reported during times of crisis also highlight the need to address mandated reporting as it is currently practiced. New York State has already revised its mandated reporter training to encourage mandated reporters to explore options for supporting a family rather than reporting a parent, as one way to begin to address implicit bias and unnecessary reporting. While this is an important first step, the training puts the onus on mandated reporters to determine whether a family should be supported or reported while leaving them open to the same punishments for failing to report that historically have contributed to overreporting. **The Supporting Families Together Act (A9283A/S8602A)** would provide mandated reporters protection to make the practice shift that

the state is calling for, by repealing the civil and criminal penalties in Social Services Law §420 while retaining the underlying reporting obligation.

The Supporting Families Together Act and the Child and Family Wellbeing Fund should advance together. Changing the pressure professionals face and investing in reliable community resources would help make support a practical response when a report is not legally required.

In addition, Monroe County Department of Human Services should create guidance about federal, state and local resources already available to families, and develop ways to educate schools, health care providers, mental health programs and community organizations about these resources, so they are able to implement the updated mandated reporter training with reliable options for helping families whose circumstances call for assistance.

Two additional proposals address specific barriers to family stability. **Foster Care Child Support Reform (A1036/S3660)** would limit the state's ability to collect child support payments from parents whose children are placed in foster care. Monroe County's current policy requires some parents to pay the state when the state takes their children, a practice that has been shown to contribute to family debt and undermine reunification. The **Maternal-Infant Care Centers Pilot Program (S7460)** would provide treatment and family support for infants experiencing withdrawal from prenatal substance exposure, while specifying that withdrawal and/or admission into treatment alone do not justify a CPS report. These proposals offer additional ways to respond to family needs through assistance and care.

2. INCORPORATE LIVED EXPERIENCE LEADERSHIP INTO CHILD WELFARE PRACTICE AND POLICY

Participants called for people who have navigated Child Welfare involvement to help educate professionals and support other parents. They identified lived experience as essential to understanding poverty, racism, trauma, domestic violence, mental health challenges and parenting under chronic stress.

Monroe County Department of Human Services working together with the Monroe County Family Court should pilot a project to partner with parents and caregivers with lived experience to develop a set of trainings for Child Welfare workers as well as for judges, lawyers and other court officials. In addition, the Department should partner with, schools, health care organizations and other institutions to make this training available to mandated reporters.

Parents and caregivers should also have meaningful opportunities to shape system reform and family engagement practices through the creation of a parent advisory board, working groups, or other structures developed in collaboration with parents that allow parents to review and give feedback on agency policies. Participation should extend beyond sharing personal stories. Parents should be treated as valued partners. They should be supported in growing their advocacy skills in community with other parent advocates, while Child Welfare and family court leadership should explain how parent recommendations influence decisions. Participation in trainings and policy work should be compensated, and other practical supports should be provided, including childcare, transportation and language access, to ensure that impacted parents and caregivers are able to participate.

One of the first areas of focus could be the creation of accessible materials that provide impacted families with information about their rights [see Recommendation 3].

In addition, participants called for expansion of **parent advocate programs and peer mentorship models** that would provide opportunities for a greater number of parents under investigation or with open cases to choose to receive guidance from trained advocates and peers who have navigated similar experiences.

3. INCREASE TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Participants called for clear explanations of their rights, expectations and available resources at every stage of involvement. They also called for stronger oversight when workers engage in unethical or discriminatory conduct or violate parents' rights.

New York State should advance **Parental Rights Notification Legislation (A1234/S551)**, often described as **Family Miranda**. The proposal would require verbal and written rights information at the initial point of contact, in plain language and in the parent's preferred language. The bill provides a concrete legislative framework for addressing participants' concerns about intimidation and making decisions without understanding their rights.

Monroe County Department of Human Services should also partner with parents, independent advocates and legal services providers to develop and disseminate rights information to impacted parents and caregivers that is understandable and accessible. Materials should include explanations of allegations, the investigation process, expectations, available assistance and options for obtaining independent advice. Information should be provided as needed and at important milestones as a case progresses, rather than provided once and treated as understood. A working group or parent advisory board could also determine various ways to disseminate this information, including through a peer-led Child Welfare 101 class.

Working together with parents, independent advocates and legal services providers, the Monroe Department of Human Services should also address professional accountability, by determining ways for the Department to respond to impacted parents' and caregivers' reports of distorted statements, misinformation, discrimination, confidentiality violations and concerns about retaliation. As an integral part of providing parents with information about their rights, the Department should adopt a clear and clearly explained process for raising concerns, requesting correction of inaccurate information and obtaining review of alleged misconduct. Parents should be informed where to bring a complaint, how it will be reviewed and how they will receive a response. Parents' access to this process should continue even after a case is closed, as closing a case does not establish that concerns have been resolved.

In addition, the Department should develop a mechanism through which it receives continual feedback about how families experience involvement with the Child Welfare system, including whether their rights were respected and whether agency actions caused harm.

Lastly, the Monroe County Department of Human Services can hold itself accountable by treating Child Welfare data as the people's data.

Child Welfare data is created from the lives and experiences of children and families. It should not be treated only as agency information. Families and communities deserve to know what is happening in their local system and how that information is being used to make decisions. The OCFS dashboard is an important public resource, but state-level reporting does not replace local transparency. Posting numbers is not the same as explaining what they mean, identifying concerning patterns or showing how Monroe County is responding.

Monroe County should regularly present local Child Welfare data in a clear and accessible format, explain the decisions and practices behind the numbers, and create meaningful opportunities for families and community members to ask questions and shape what is measured. Transparency should allow the public to see not only how many families entered the system, but whether they experienced unequal outcomes, received help or were able to remain safely together.

The data comes from our families. The accountability must come back to our communities.

4. INVEST IN TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICES

Focus group participants called for trauma-informed and culturally responsive practices to become the standard in worker behavior, agency communication, and agency and family court decision-making.

This would start with strengthening of mandatory trauma-informed and culturally responsive training for professionals interacting with families that addressed issues related to racism, poverty, domestic violence, mental health and neurodiversity, including how distress or differences in communication can be misinterpreted as evidence of parental failure.

Participants emphasized that efforts must go beyond training, however. This should include incorporating expectations of trauma-informed and culturally responsive practice into supervision and case review.

Most of all, participants urged the Monroe County Department of Human Services and the Monroe County Family Court to **actively weigh the potential trauma of removing children from their families alongside concerns about conditions in the home,** This should be done through formal mechanisms, such as requiring Child Protective investigators to document whether practical assistance or other protective measures could address safety concerns while preserving family relationships. This consideration must operate alongside applicable legal requirements and immediate safety responsibilities.

This effort should also include the creation of formal policies that honor the importance of parent-child bonds after a child is placed in foster care. Monroe County Department of Human Services should review its current policies around family time, address barriers to family contact, communicate rights and expectations for family time clearly, and ensure that services and case requirements address families' actual needs rather than serve as bureaucratic barriers to families being together.

Trauma-informed practice should also address the lasting effects of intervention on parents and children even after cases close, including enduring fear, grief, isolation and distrust. This is another area in which partnering with parents could increase the agency's ability to make dignity, empathy, honesty and family connection part of everyday practice.

A CALL TO ACTION

The women who participated in these focus groups were clear. Families need practical help, trustworthy relationships, information they can understand, and a meaningful voice in decisions that affect their lives.

In the face of thousands of unfounded investigations annually, Monroe County and New York State have an opportunity to respond differently. Narrowing the front door to CPS does not mean ignoring child safety. It means building stronger pathways to support, reserving investigation for situations that require it, and addressing family need before it becomes a crisis.

The next steps are concrete: invest in trusted community supports, advance legislation that makes support more accessible, fund parent advocacy and peer mentorship, provide clear rights information, strengthen accountability and require practices that recognize the potential harm of family separation.

Every parent deserves the dignity of support. Investing in families is an investment in hope.



LEGISLATION WE SUPPORT

The following four New York State legislative proposals offer ways to advance the policy priorities in this brief. Parental rights notification legislation, A1234/S551, provides an additional framework for the transparency and accountability recommendation.

- **Supporting Families Together Act (A9283A/S8602A):** Repeals the civil and criminal penalties for failing to report contained in Social Services Law §420 while retaining the underlying mandated reporting obligation.
- **Child and Family Wellbeing Fund (A63A/S6431):** Establishes funding for community-led supports in communities with high levels of child protective system involvement, emphasizing family preservation, reunification, and healing.
- **Maternal-Infant Care Centers Pilot Program (S7460):** Establishes at least four centers providing treatment and family support for infants experiencing withdrawal from prenatal substance exposure. Specifies that neonatal withdrawal or admission to a center does not, by itself, constitute abuse or maltreatment or justify a CPS report.
- **Foster Care Child Support Reform (A1036/S3660):** Limits referrals for child support collection from parents whose children are in foster care when collection could undermine family stability or reunification.

SOURCES

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