

**Statement of Mary Callahan, foster and adoptive parent,
founder, Maine Alliance for DHS Accountability and Reform,
Providence, Rhode Island, July 20, 2010
207-409-8331 / maryec_98@yahoo.com**

Last year, the child welfare system in Maine was a finalist for one of the most prestigious awards any government agency can receive: The Innovations in American Government Awards from Harvard.

Less than a decade earlier, that would have seemed impossible.

Because in 2002 Maine's Child Protective System was every bit as bad as Rhode Island's is now. Not only was it cruel, but it was completely illogical. I saw it myself as a foster parent. The first child I ever got had been removed from her parents over a spanking, then went on to be molested, starved and isolated by a sadistic foster mother before coming to me 6 years later. I was hard pressed to see how Child Protection had protected her.

Another pair of siblings came to me after spending 4 years in separate group homes in spite of having no psychiatric, behavior or learning problems. And they had a grandmother who was a nurse and a licensed foster parent just over the state line in New Hampshire who wanted them desperately. Four years at \$130,000 a year times two kids is over a million dollars of taxpayer money that could have been saved and the kids would have had a normal life with someone who loved them.

Money, or the lack of it, is the main reason most children are removed from their parents, yet I was paid \$2,500-a-month tax free for each child I took. It would have cost less and saved a lifetime of misery to help the parents get on their feet, but that kind of logic played no role in the system I got to know.

It was so illogical that it was hard to believe it was true.

Early in my career a birth mother cornered me in parking lot to tell me frantically, "They are getting kickbacks for every kid they take. That's why they won't give them back!" I rolled my eyes and shook her off my sleeve in disbelief. Later when I asked to adopt a child who had been with me for 3 years, the foster care agency told me, "We need 60 kids to make payroll and we only have 61. We're not talking adoption or reunification with anyone until we get our numbers up." I thought back to that mother in the parking lot and realized she was right. It really was all about money.

Another parent tried to tell me that there was a contest for which worker could terminate the most parental rights. That story was so far-fetched that I discounted everything else that parent told me. Later I attended a foster parent training where a speaker was introduced as "The Terminator" because she had terminated the most parental rights the year before.

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The culture on the inside of the system had become so pervasively negative that “The Terminator” got a standing ovation for her accomplishment.

Just as this was not shocking to a meeting of insiders, neither was it shocking to a supervisor at DHS when I went to him about April, my first placement whose abuse had been far worse in foster care than it had been in her birth family. I'm not sure what I thought he would do about it but I did not expect the response I got, “What's your point?”

I went over his head to the Health and Human Services Committee at the State Legislature and was told, “There is nothing new here. We've got a hundred stories just like it.”

I realized later that the lawmakers weren't complacent about the story because they thought it was okay. They weren't really insiders. They brushed me off because they didn't believe the story. They were used to birth parents coming to them and they just assumed they were leaving things out or exaggerating. Their stories were just too bizarre to be believed.

I finally started to be believed because I wasn't a birth parent. I had nothing to gain and everything to lose by going public with the severity of the problems at DHS. And yet I was telling the same stories the birth parents had been telling for years.

And here is my point and the whole reason I came to Rhode Island: I am asking you to believe those crazy stories the birth families bring to you because they are probably true. Then put yourself in the place of these parents whose only crime was poverty or a spanking on a bad day who now can't get anyone to believe that their child is suffering needlessly.

And when you go to DCYF for their side of the story and they say, “There is so much more, but I can't tell you because of confidentiality,” don't believe them. I got it straight from my worker that they were instructed to answer reporters that way.

In Maine, it was only when the reporters started to believe the parents and tell their stories that the public got behind the need for reform. And with public support, the Governor was able to clean house at DHS and bring in new people who brought the Child Protective System to the point it is today.

We now have far fewer kids in foster care, institutions that used to warehouse kids sitting empty, kids who really do have to be removed are going straight to Grandma, instead of spending a single night in stranger care.

And all our safety indicators show that it was the right thing to do. If Maine could do it, Rhode Island can do it. And we're just a few hours up the road waiting to help.