

NATIONAL COALITION FOR CHILD PROTECTION REFORM

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RHODE ISLAND'S "OBSCENE" RATE OF NEEDLESS CHILD REMOVAL TRAUMATIZES CHILDREN, COMPROMISES SAFETY, CHILD ADVOCATES SAY

**State's extreme rate of institutionalizing children makes it
"child warehousing capital of America"**

The full report discussed in this press release is available online at:
www.nccpr.org/reports/95472ri10.pdf

PROVIDENCE, R.I. - Rhode Island takes away children at one of the highest rates in the nation, and then compounds the children's misery by placing a greater percentage of them in institutions than any other state, a national child advocacy group said Tuesday.

Rhode Island takes away children at a rate nearly 80 percent above the national average and double to more than triple the rate in child welfare systems widely-recognized as, relatively speaking, models for improving child safety, according to the National Coalition for Child Protection Reform, which released a report on Rhode Island child welfare Tuesday.

"When it comes to the problems plaguing Rhode Island child welfare, wrongful removal drives everything else," said NCCPR Executive Director Richard Wexler. "Rhode Island's obscene rate of child removal exposes hundreds of children each year to the trauma of being separated needlessly from everyone they know and love – and the high risk of abuse in foster care itself. At the same time, it overloads caseworkers, leaving them less time to find children in real danger who really should be taken from their parents.

“Wrongful removal makes all children less safe,” Wexler said. He added that because the current class-action lawsuit against the Rhode Island Department of Children Youth and Families largely ignores the issue, that lawsuit is not likely to lead to real improvement. “The lawsuit was filed in an attempt to reform child welfare. But the lawsuit itself needs to be reformed,” Wexler said. “Otherwise, it will be, at best, a waste of time, money and effort. If it is not reformed, the lawsuit even could make things worse.”

Wexler spoke at a news conference at the State Capitol. He was joined by Mary Callahan, a foster and adoptive parent from Maine who led a successful effort to transform child welfare in that state.

“Just eight years ago Maine's Child Protective System was as bad as Rhode Island's is today,” Callahan said. “One young girl was removed over a spanking, then molested, starved and emotionally abused by a sadistic foster mother. The next child was taken because his mother couldn't afford to meet all his needs. Yet I was being paid \$2,500 a month to raise him.

“Things might never have changed in Maine if the public hadn't finally accepted that they were paying tax dollars to ruin lives, not to save them,” Callahan said. “But the public did see it, they demanded change, and they got it. The same can happen in Rhode Island.”

All of the problems are compounded by the fact that “Rhode Island is the child warehousing capital of America,” Wexler said. The state places children in group homes and institutions at a rate double the national average.

“While child welfare scholars differ on many things, there is one point on which they are nearly unanimous: Institutionalizing children does them enormous harm – and an enormous amount of institutionalization is unnecessary.

“The harm to children is even worse when they are exported all over the country – something Rhode Island does at an alarming rate. Hundreds of miles from everyone they know and love, their only source of emotional support is a peer group of troubled young people. And

when children are out-of-state, out-of-mind, it is that much more likely that they will be harmed while they are institutionalized.

“Committees, commissions and task forces have zeroed in on Rhode Island’s obsession with institutionalizing its young people for decades. But an entire industry – a foster care-industrial complex – lives off of institutionalizing children, paid for every day they hold children in their largely-worthless institutions,” Wexler said. “But DCYF has been unwilling or unable to take them on – to the point where the agency condones what amounts to ‘kid auctions’ in which residential treatment centers hawk their wares directly to children at the Rhode Island Training School.

“The biggest addiction problem in child welfare is not substance-abusing parents, though that problem is serious and real,” Wexler said. “The biggest addition problem in child welfare is big, powerful, old-line, child welfare agencies, with their blue-chip boards of directors embedded in every community. These agencies are *addicted* to their *per diem* payments. And they are putting their addiction ahead of the children.

“Or, as Dr. Ron Davidson, director of the Mental Health Policy Program at the University of Illinois at Chicago Department of Psychiatry puts it: ‘Sadly, there is a certain element within the child welfare industry that tends to look upon kids in the way that, say, Colonel Sanders looks upon chickens.’”

Wexler said the addiction “is costly in every possible way. Though DCYF has whined about not having enough money, Rhode Island actually spends on child welfare at one of the highest rates in the nation, a rate more than two-and-a-half times the national average and a rate double to quadruple that of states that are, again, widely-regarded as, relatively-speaking, models.

“But the great paradox of child welfare is: The worse the option for children, the more it tends to cost. Rhode Island spends so much and gets so little because it squanders its funds on

warehousing children.

“Fully 70 percent of the DCYF budget goes to institutionalizing children. Everything else done by the entire agency has to get by on the other 30 percent.

“At NCCPR we tend to be tax-and-spend liberals and proud of it,” Wexler said. “But Rhode Island doesn’t need to spend more on child welfare, Rhode Island needs to spend smarter on child welfare.

“DCYF and the institutions that warehouse the state’s children are short on facts and short on vision – but they’re long on excuses,” Wexler said. “They’ll offer up every standard excuse for the state’s dismal record. We’ve even provided an excuse checklist with our report.

“But the worst excuse, the one that is most dangerous to children, is the false claim that Rhode Island has to tear apart families in order to keep children safe. Typically agencies claim that only adults suffer when families are torn apart, and they piously proclaim that they have to ‘err on the side of the child.’

“In fact, there probably is no phrase in the child welfare lexicon that has done more harm to children than ‘err on the side of the child.’

“When a child is needlessly thrown into foster care, he loses not only mom and dad but often brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, grandparents, teachers, friends and classmates. A major study of foster care ‘alumni’ found they had twice the rate of post-traumatic stress disorder of Gulf War veterans and only 20 percent could be said to be “doing well.” How can throwing children into a system which churns out walking wounded four times out of five be “erring on the side of the child?”

“Two more studies, of 15,000 cases, are even more devastating. Those studies found that even maltreated children left in their own homes with little or no help fared better, on average, than *comparably-maltreated* children placed in foster care.

“All that harm can occur even when the foster home is a good one. The majority are.

But the rate of abuse in foster care is far higher than generally realized and far higher than revealed in official figures which involve agencies investigating themselves. That same alumni study found that one-third of foster children said they'd been abused by a foster parent or another adult in a foster home. And the record of institutions, on which Rhode Island relies so heavily, is even worse. If a child is taken from a perfectly safe home only to be beaten, raped or killed in foster care, how is that 'erring on the side of the child'?

"But even that isn't the worst of it. Everyone knows how badly caseworkers are overwhelmed. They often make bad decisions in both directions – leaving some children in dangerous homes, even as more children are taken from homes that are safe or could be made safe with the right kinds of services. The more that workers are overwhelmed with children who don't need to be in foster care, the less time they have to find children in real danger. So they make even more mistakes in both directions. That is almost always the real explanation for the horror-story cases that make headlines.

"None of this means no child ever should be taken from her or his parents," Wexler said. "Rather, it means that foster care is an extremely toxic intervention that must be used sparingly and in small doses. But for decades, Rhode Island has been prescribing mega-doses of foster care."

Wexler said that the only states with proven track records for improving child safety are those that have rebuilt to emphasize keeping families together.

He said that's because "contrary to the common stereotype, most parents who lose their children to foster care are neither brutally abusive nor hopelessly addicted. Far more common are cases in which a family's poverty has been confused with child 'neglect.' Several studies have found that 30 percent of America's foster children could be home right now if their parents just had decent housing. And single parents, desperate to keep their low-wage jobs when the sitter doesn't show may have to choose between staying home and getting fired, or

going to work and having their children taken on ‘lack of supervision’ charges.

“Other cases fall between the extremes, the parents neither all victim nor all villain. What these cases have in common is the fact that there are a wide variety of proven programs that can keep these children in their own homes, and do it with a far better track record for safety than foster care, and a vastly better record than institutionalization.”

Wexler warned that those expecting change because of the class-action lawsuit “shouldn’t get their hopes up. The group bringing the lawsuit, the group calling itself ‘Children’s Rights’ (CR) knows very little about children or about rights. Because the ‘right’ most children crave most is the right to live safely in their own homes with the people who love them, and not be torn from their loved ones just because they’re poor.”

Wexler said that because CR almost always ignores this problem – and sometimes exacerbates it - the lawsuit settlements it crafts on its own rarely do much good and sometimes can do harm. In contrast, he said, the settlements have been helpful when other organizations have improved them.

“That’s why our first recommendation is that CR’s partner in the suit, the Rhode Island Child Advocate – whoever that child advocate may be – should redirect the lawsuit and any negotiations over a settlement to emphasize solutions built on safe, proven alternatives to taking away so many children in the first place, as well as alternatives that break Rhode Island’s addiction to warehousing children in institutions.”

NCCPR’s report includes a series of other recommendations, and specific solutions, including a recommendation that Rhode Island officials study Maine’s successful reform – which emphasizes keeping more children in their own homes, and drastically reducing institutionalization.

ABOUT NCCPR

The National Coalition for Child Protection Reform is a non-profit organization whose members have encountered the child protection system in their professional capacities and work to make it better serve America’s most vulnerable children. A full list of the NCCPR Board of Directors and Staff is available at www.nccpr.org

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