

Testimony for Tuesday Aug 12, 2014  
Kay Curtis  
Happy Hands: A School for Little People  
Director/ owner

My name is Kay Curtis. I run a licensed home childcare program in Brattleboro Vermont. We have the capacity to take twelve children with two teachers. The school has been in business for 14 years. We estimate over 100 children have attended our school during this time.

We have always served a large population of low-income children. The families of 13 of our current 14 students enrolled for the summer qualify for subsidized childcare. We feel we do a great job helping our children grow strong and capable during the time they are at Happy Hands.

Some of our children experience home lives that are lacking in resources: food and clothing. We can help with this by hooking families up to programs or giving them hand me down clothes from other families.

Often parenting skills are lacking and we can help inexperienced families make good decisions for their children by recounting stories that inspire them to be more patient or to realize that their child is doing what children do at this stage and it will pass.

A family lost their home in a fire and became homeless. We were able to contribute in many ways by using church communities and by collecting donations. We arranged for counseling for the two children who had escaped from their burning home and were traumatized by losing their toys and pets.

We have felt very confident over the years in our ability to help families deal with whatever came up.

Then we met a family we could not help. In order to protect the privacy of the family I will not give you too many details. I will only say that, as a professional with many years experience caring for children, I am very frightened for the safety of the several children in this home. The parents are dealing with severe mental illness that seemed to exacerbate at certain times of the year and I noticed that the child we cared for at that time was becoming increasingly anxious and traumatized.

I began to lose sleep worrying over what might happen to the children in this family.

After much soul searching we decided to report the family to DCF. I was very nervous because I was sure we would lose all ties to the child in our program. We had never reported anyone before. Was it the right thing to do?

I went through with it and filled out the forms. And then I waited and waited. Apparently the process is to report and then trust them to do whatever is necessary? I was confused. I called and spoke to an irritated caseworker who reminded me about confidentiality and that they could not tell me anything. AND by the way they had denied the claim. I begged them to let me know that someone was monitoring the home during the summer months when the children were home from school and was told this was confidential I was not allowed to know.

I felt so betrayed by the system. I asked people I trusted who worked inside the system what I could have done to be more effective and they told me:

Each time you call in a complaint it goes down and eventually the reports add up. And then something might be done.

Add up to what? A parent with severe mental illness is left alone with several small children and I am supposed to wait calmly until there are enough complaints? What kind of system is this? How does this keep our children safe?

I continue to care for another child in this family, who is showing signs of the severe situation at home.

I cannot get a diagnosis or help for the condition because I need a parent's permission. The mother believes immunization records are not safe to share with anyone.

When the children go to school at five will there be help? How does one advocate for this child?

Clearly this parent is not well and I feel our hands are tied by a system which is more respectful of her rights to privacy and to treat her condition the way she chooses than the well being of these young children.

I wish we had a system that worked for children. AND if this family were to be monitored perhaps it would be a relief to them to have the support.

Thank you for your time.

Kay Curtis