

Thank you for allowing me to come before you today and provide testimony about our experience living and coping with the trauma our child suffered at a very young age. A trauma that still continues today through his interaction with our Vermont community.

In 2010 my husband and I were fortunate to bring a wonderful little boy into our lives and into our family. Our son who had been in foster care since the age of 6 months lived through eleven transitions in seven different homes during the first two years of his life. He suffered physical, emotional and psychological abuse by a parent who also suffered unspeakable incredible trauma as a child.

I will admit now that I was very naïve when I adopted our son, thinking that the community would rally around this child and our family to help him overcome his traumatic start in life. Sadly I was mistaken and over the last seven years I have become dismayed and angered by the very institutions charged with serving our children that are the foundation of our society.

Raising a child with trauma is heart breaking, not because of the child or the child's actions, but because of the rejection that child experiences. We knew early that our son had challenges, stability was not something we could provide him outside the home. In pre-school his emotional breakdowns quickly led to him being removed from a few reputable and well trained centers.

In elementary school he was quickly identified as a child with special needs and an IEP was created. Support in the school would depend on the "luck of the draw" depending on who your child would receive as a 1:1. Over the first few grades our son has had ups and downs, failures and successes. Our relationship with school staff deteriorated over the years and we have learned that we have to fight tooth and nail to protect our son's rights. We struggled to help our son.

In grade 4 after what seemed like a great and wonderful summer where he grew so much and interacted so well with peers, he returned to school. What followed was simply horrific. During the first two months of school at Thatcher Brook Primary School in Waterbury, our son, a child with trauma, was restrained 57 times in two months. It became very clear to us that the school was using restraint to resolve their staffing issues. Even the principal posted on social media that the school was bursting at the seams and they could not meet the needs of special needs children. The school in a blatant violation of state regulation didn't even bother to notify us of the excessive use of restraint. It was our son's therapist who disclosed to us that our son had reported being sat on by an adult and that he couldn't breathe because he was choking on his tears.

This occurred in what I have heard described as one of the most "trauma informed" schools in the state. Our son was re-traumatized and truly fell apart. We removed him from TBPS and placed him in a day therapeutic program, in hindsight a mistake but a decision that was made in haste to protect our son from further physical harm. Our son who had previously been successful in a least restrictive environment was punished by a school district who didn't have



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the staff to support him so they shipped him 45 minutes away, out of his community, and away from his peers. He still remains outside his community. His school district has refused to let him back in to a school in his community and instead he rides a taxi to Burlington to attend another program. One of the biggest disadvantages of this is that our son doesn't have the opportunity to model other kids his age instead he is exposed to the emotional breakdowns of other children with emotional and behavioral issues like his own.

Over the years we have spent almost \$40,000 in legal fees fighting for our son to have a free and appropriate public education. The system however is set up to advantage school districts who can hire high cost lawyers to ensure your child's rights are not protected. We turned to various agencies including the VT Federation of Families, Lund, Easter Seals, the Adoption Permanency Program at DCF and all were very sympathetic but in the end they couldn't help or provide solid assistance. Even the Agency of Education has failed to even acknowledge Thatcher Brook's violation of state regulations.

I bring this up because any legislation to help children with trauma that doesn't extend advocacy and help with education will have little impact on these children's lives. For a young person school is a core foundation of development. This is where they learn about relationships, community, social interaction, and most importantly where they create bonds with their peers. Our son was robbed of this because he is a victim of trauma. Schools may preach that they are trauma informed but I am here to tell you that they are not. Every school my child has attended has eventually called us asking us what they should do. As a nurse I could not imagine calling my patient's family at home because they were having respiratory distress and asking what should we do.

Last night I spoke with another parent of a child with trauma. She expressed to me that trauma informed means very little. She works at a child care center and said they have people attend a six hours workshop and then slap the label "trauma informed" on their program. Her child was also kicked out of his "trauma informed" day care center.

We opted to try to find an alternate education for our son but children with trauma and behaviors have few options in the State of Vermont. Private schools in Montpelier, Stowe and Morrisville all closed their doors on our son. All the evidence shows that children with special needs do better in a general education environment, we wanted that for our son who has shown he can be successful in a general setting with appropriate support, however when you have 57 restraints on your record no one wants anything to do with you.

This rejection is also carried through into the community. After school programs and summer camps quickly get rid of kids with trauma once their behaviors surface. There is very little "trauma informed" approaches in these programs. Last year our son was doing really well in a summer camp when another child punched him. Our son reported it to a counsellor but when nothing was done and he experienced a crisis, police were called and he was immediately kicked out. When we approached the Town of Waterbury and requested accommodation

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under ADA they replied that they are “not an ADA camp”. Even after ADA was explained they refused to provide reasonable accommodation. We currently have a human rights complaint against the town of Waterbury for violating our son’s rights. These are the steps trauma families have to take to take part in a simple recreation program.

This is what trauma families go through. The invitations to Birthday parties stop pretty quickly. In social settings “that kid” is blamed anytime something flares up. These kids are excluded in just about every aspect of their community. Kids tell them they can’t play with them or they are not inviting them to their parties. The message is very clear to these children.. you are bad and we don’t want you.

We have started to seek out and socialize with other trauma families who share our experiences. Through this I have met some of the most wonderful people I know. I have met beautiful wonderful children who have been subjected to awful abuse and trauma. I have heard similar stories of these beautiful children being rejected by other kids, families, organizations and even their community. That is the true cost of trauma and the trauma continues for these kids at the hands of “well meaning” people.

I do want to recognize that there are some agencies out there who are trying. The GBYMCA have been receptive to our requests for accommodation. They work to accommodate our son through their afterschool program and the Camp Abnaki program. I wish there was more organizations like them. We also receive services from the Lund Family Center who try to provide what they can but honestly have very little scope with what they can do. They have provided some great opportunities for adoptive and foster families to come together, although they are not focused on trauma, it has a big impact on those families. However it is not enough.

So what should we do to help children with trauma?

1. Vermont schools need to be provided with resources and accountability. Trauma is growing in our society. Opioid abuse is growing. We have leaders in our country who normalize bullying. This problem is only going to get worse and we can choose to spend the money on school support now or jails later. We need to provide solid evidence based approaches to trauma and we need to provide the funding to hire real professionals with education and training who can support these children. Six hour workshops are simply not enough. The current revolving door model, such as the WCMH BI program, is not a successful strategy. BI’s come and go, they are paid low wages and lack experience and education. Legal support and advocacy needs to be made available to children with trauma to hold schools accountable for their actions and to ensure these children are not rejected by the very institutions charged with their development.
2. Children with trauma should not be thrown out of their community after-school or recreation programs. These organizations need to be educated about trauma and about

ADA. Support and advocacy needs to be provided to families to fight for their children's rights. Any organization that receives taxpayer's dollars should be prohibited from expelling a child with trauma disabilities. We need to get away from this attitude of it's the kid's fault and we should punish them for behaviors they can't control.

3. Many adopted children in the state of Vermont have a history of trauma. The Post-Permanence Program offered by the state of Vermont needs to reflect this and needs to be redesigned to provide more meaningful real advocacy and not just a time limited resource for referrals.
4. Vermont needs a trauma organization where families can turn to for help. Help finding mental health practitioners. Our son currently does not have a mental health provider. UVM Medical Center has a wait for their waiting list. NFI simply said No. Dartmouth will see him but that is over an hour away. A trauma organization to provide support groups for families, crisis help, someone to help schools manage difficult cases. Someone for us to turn to when every other door closes.

This is not our story alone. I have become outspoken in my community and as a result parents have reached out to me and told me stories of restraint and isolation in our community schools. I have heard the same stories of rejection from schools, organizations, and even community leaders. I have seen firsthand the sadness in the eyes of a child who is not allowed to play with others or who is not included. Children who more than anything else want to be loved and to have friends. Children who too often are rejected again and again. We facilitate ongoing trauma on this kids and not enough is being done.

Thank you for listening.

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