

Good afternoon. My name is Rachael Grossman. I work as a Family Support Worker with parents who have children in DCF custody. This is a program run by the Defender General's office. My role is to support parents in a very difficult, confusing, and traumatic process. Thank you for giving me this opportunity to share my observations. The testimony you are about to hear are my own observations and do not necessarily reflect any opinions of the attorneys at the Defender General's office.

I am going to start by telling you about two families with whom I have worked.

Debra has three children. Debra also has a cognitive disability. Her oldest child was taken into custody when it was discovered that she had a severe medical condition that had gone undiagnosed. Her younger two children were also taken into custody. Debra's DCF caseworker did not understand her disability. Nor did the nurse at the hospital who tried to teach her how to manage her child's complex medical condition. Nor did the Easter Seals worker who provided Family Time Coaching. No one, at any point in the process, acknowledged her cognitive disability and made an effort to provide reasonable accommodations. As a result, she failed to grasp her the intricacies of her child's medical condition and her Family Time Coaching was ended due to "lack of progress."

Right now, the cards are stacked against Debra's family reuniting. Not because Debra can't do it – with the supports that can be put in place, I have no doubt that she can parent her children. But the clock is ticking and two of the children are in pre adoptive homes. It is looking like these three children will grow up in three separate households. This family will most likely be split apart – because of failures of the system – not because Debra, with good supports in place, could not keep them safe. We can do better than that for our children.

The second family I am going to tell you about is Sandy and Michael. Sandy and Michael have two children who were taken into custody. These children absolutely needed State intervention. Sandy and Michael's apt was beyond messy; it was unsanitary. Sandy and Michael were not attending to their children's medical needs. Their oldest child has a disability and his unique medical issues were not being addressed. However, this was a wake up call for the parents. These parents snapped to attention. They cleaned up their apt (and kept it clean) and immediately began cooperating with all providers, and attending to their children's needs.

Keeping our children safe is a huge challenge - especially when it entails removing children from their parents' custody. It is a confusing, bewildering situation that is traumatizing for every member of the affected family. Our system, while not perfect, can work. I have seen it work. I have seen parents whose children come into custody and, like Sandy and Michael, get right to work - they go to counseling, they take the parenting classes, they fully engage in Family Time Coaching (FTC), they find stable housing, they work on a budget –

in short, they work hard, change their behavior, and regain custody of their children. This is what happens in a best case scenario.

However, we all know that ideal scenarios are usually the exception rather than the rule. And even in an otherwise ideal scenario, the entire family suffers trauma from being separated. When it is less than ideal, which, unfortunately, is more often the case, the trauma is even more heart breaking and long lasting.

Parents whose children are taken into custody love their children just as fiercely as you and I love our children. And their children love them just as much as our children love us. Not every child will have an ideal life; in fact, as we know, hardly any do. But every child has the right to the life he/she/they were born to. Within reason.

And that's where the rub is. I have the right to the life I was born to. And you, the community, in the form of the State, have an obligation to make sure that I am safe in that life.

I am going to share some of my observations of the dire consequences for families that often occur when the State steps in.

Debra's children were in **thirteen** different foster homes over a 2 ½ yr period. They are currently in three separate foster homes. How do children feel when they are moved that many times? Scared? That it's their fault that they were removed from the home? That if somehow they were better, the foster families would have kept them? Probably all of the above. This is trauma.

I worked with another family whose son had been in a stable foster home for almost a year. Then his behavior got really challenging and the foster parents said they could not keep him anymore. In trying to find another placement, he was moved **six** times in a two week period. More than one of those six foster parents brought him to school one day, with his belongings and called DCF and said that he could not return to their home that day. They were done. Unfortunately, I learned that while not common, this scenario has happened before with other children. Imagine this child's trauma. Do you think this is a child who feels worthy of love?

On hearing this story, my first reaction was horror and disbelief. How could anyone do that to a child? However, as I thought about it, I remembered that DCF workers spend their days putting out fires. My guess is that the foster parents had tried, several times, to reach the DCF worker. Not knowing that this was a five alarm fire, the DCF worker didn't return the call. Or perhaps the worker didn't even have time to hear the voicemail. Or perhaps, believe it or not, there were six alarm fires the worker was dealing with. The foster parent was desperate. The child's behavior was probably so disruptive that they could not compromise their own family's life for this child any longer.

Surprisingly, there is also trauma in a good foster care situation. One Debra's children, now in her 14<sup>th</sup> foster home that by all appearances, is stable, is now telling her foster parents that she does not want to return home. She also tells her mother that she does want to live at home. This is typical of what children go through – this child, who has been moved around so often, is now in a home that seems stable to her. The foster parents can provide so many more opportunities – camp, extra curricular activities, and material things. Of course this child is confused - she loves her mother and siblings and wants to be with them. But things are ok where she is now. It is so very confusing for her.

Visitation is always an important piece for every family whose children have been taken into custody. Yet, visitation can be very challenging too. DCF tries to schedule as many family visits as possible. But it's a strain on everyone. When Sandy and Michael's children were taken into custody, Sandy had just begun working at a convenience store. She told her boss the situation and her boss said she would work with her so that she could attend all visits her children and participate in all the other DCF requirements and still keep her job. That was week one. By week three, her job was in jeopardy because DCF had changed the visitation schedule so many times. Sandy's boss really wanted to work with her, but she had a business to run. Sadly, I have seen visitation schedules very fluid in many other cases.

A visit schedule was created for Sandy and Michael's older son that took him out of school for a noontime visit that would last an hour. This schedule went into effect the first week of foster care. Whose idea was this? How can a child, who is scared, confused, and traumatized at being taken from his parents possibly have a productive day in school after a one hour visit in the middle of the day? Sandy was the one who saw that this was not in her child's best interest and asked for a new schedule. The new schedule was not much better. Visits were then scheduled for 8am before school. This is just one example – there are many permutations of this scenario – all equally traumatic for children and their parents.

There are other financial implications as well. In Sandy and Michael's case, one of the children was receiving SSI. His SSI helped to pay the rent. Once the children were removed from the home, Sandy and Michael were at risk of losing their housing. Debra lives in subsidized housing and had a four bedroom apt. for her family. After the children were in custody for about a year, the housing authority forced her to downsize to a two bedroom apt that would accommodate her and her mother, with whom she lives. In both cases, inadequate housing will be a barrier to reunification.

I am not suggesting that we do not ask parents to attend classes, counseling, and participate in a myriad of activities that will enhance their parenting skills. I am suggesting that we need to take care of those families financially. It is

absolutely criminal that we allow families to lose housing when they lose custody of their children.

I have pointed out many flaws in an imperfect system. It is heartening to see this committee working on solutions. A few possibilities -- An Office of Child Advocacy would ensure that we are looking at systemic issues and give direction in finding out what is working and what is not working. It would also provide an independent office parents could access when they need assistance. The families that I just described to you are by no means exceptions – I can change the names and circumstances and the issues are the same.

The last time this committee met, there was discussion about having independent mediators involved as soon as children are taken into custody. This is another way that could decrease tension between parents and DCF right from the start, creating a much better scenario for all parties. I also believe that every parent should have a support person. Honestly, I am not trying to self-promote. However, the Defender Generals' Family Support Program is an effective way to support parents. Supporting parents can increase the likelihood of family reunification. Not every parent will need a Family Support Worker but all should be given the option.

Lastly, to use an overused phrase, let's think outside the box. If Debra can't manage her child's medication but can parent effectively in every other way, surely there must be another solution besides adoption. Let's think about other ways to facilitate visits between families that are separated that work better for everyone's schedule. And here's another solution for Sandy and Michael's children. These parents can keep their children safe from 5pm when they return home from school and daycare until 8am the next morning when they go to school. Send them home now. Send them to respite on the weekends. There must be creative solutions to many of the problems the system faces – solutions that keep families together, solutions that create less trauma for the everyone – especially the children – when they are removed from the home.

Thank you.