

To: Members of the House Human Services Oversight Committee,

My name is Galen Blodgett the father of two healthy and thriving children, our daughter (3 ½) and son (4 months). I currently teach professional development skills to at-risk young adults. Before my current position I was a Vermont State Correctional Officer after being a Security Contractor for the State of Arizona Department of Economic Security.

Six months ago, DCF, as set out below, threatened to take our daughter (two months before our son was born) from us. This letter outlines what happened to us. To list all the missteps and violations of DCF's own policies and procedures would require several pages. Upon request we will supply a well-documented six-month course of DCF conduct that left our family scared and ultimately traumatized.

We have never neglected or abused our children either emotionally or physically, as anyone who has spent time with our family would know. The simplest conclusion that we can reach is that DCF, protected by statutory confidentiality and lack of higher oversight, not only ignored but significantly contributed to the danger of mental and emotional harm to our family and, despite significant evidence to the contrary, tried to have my daughter, spouse and myself state that we were responsible for a scrape on our daughter's back.

In brief, from January 2020 to September 2020 our daughter attended a daycare in St Albans. The daycare experienced a high level of turnover amongst staff and students during the pandemic summer of 2020. She was pulled for several months while we were home and when Jane returned in August she was met with staff she did not know and students who were physically aggressive. Our daughter is active, adventurous, and confident when trying new activities such as climbing, running etc. The daycare she attended was largely outdoor and we were told when she started that she would likely get bruises, scrapes, and come home dirty (we approve of a daycare approach that includes children trying things that may result in bumps scrapes and bruises - this is how children learn). Ultimately, she got injured at daycare (a scrape along her back), the staff, whether unsure of the cause or attempting to protect themselves, called DCF and reported possible abuse.

DCF initiated action on Friday evening September 18, 2020. They gave us no statement of charges or any other written notice of action being taken. We were categorized as a "priority 1" investigation. (They later apologized to us stating that, because the scrape was on the surface of our daughter's back, and not deeper, the "priority 1" designation was erroneous, and that DCF internally was very confused why we were classified as such). Despite DCF's written policies regarding notice to parents we were not informed of this erroneous designation (or our rights) until the next week. Our innocence appeared so obvious to us and our support team that we assumed every step of the way DCF's investigation would conclude that this likely happened at daycare. In fact, our daughter stated to us, our DCF investigative caseworker, VSP and the DCF forensic interviewer that she was injured at daycare on various occasions (additionally the forensic interview was traumatizing for our daughter and we were told her statements were meaningless). Regardless we were left being treated like criminals, put on a 24-hour safety plan, threatened with court intervention at nearly every interaction (although we were calm and

compliant with every step), and repeatedly told that it was “too bad we had so much time to get our stories straight,” by both DCF and the NUSI VSP investigator assigned to our case.

The scariest part is no one at DCF checked in on our daughter, our safety team, or expressed concern for our daughter’s safety other than when threatening us with further DCF and court involvement. DCF’s sole interest appeared to us to be proving parental guilt. We can only assume that this was to protect DCF’s interests.

This culminated in an investigative report that not only omitted all exonerating evidence but also included “statements” that my spouse never made. We were put under pressure, saying the investigation needed to end 15 days early, and were given the option of going to court or entering a family services plan. We were under constant threat of a possible finding of substantiation (which would mean the loss of both of our jobs) and/or other court action. We frequently heard the phrase, that if we did not agree with DCF, they would have to "take it to the judge" or "give it to the judge" and even that DCF “utilizes court to coerce families to work with [them].” Under the constant threat of our child being taken away we felt forced into a family services plan. Initially this plan and its “recommendations” (which if not abided by will result in “court action” IE a CHINS petition) included highly inappropriate requests. When we pushed back, advising that we had plenty of appropriate resources for the type of support DCF “recommended” for our family, we were met with a condemning email from DCF, further forcing us to comply or meet consequences.

For reference, our risk factors included:

- An open DCF investigation
- Increasing tantrums at 18 months (we asked our daughter’s pediatrician about this at 18 months, being new parents, we wanted to be sure this was developmentally appropriate. We were told it is).
- A “supervisory override” the day before we entered the family services plan

We have since been reassessed at zero or “low” risk.

We realize now that leaving us unsubstantiated and in a family services plan was advantageous for DCF, as now we are unable to litigate for the trauma caused to me, my wife, and most importantly to our daughter. It also improves DCF’s statistics, showing a presumed positive outcome and reducing federal scrutiny on VT DCF’s terrifying statistics. This is all at the expense of our privacy, our amazing 3 ½ year old little girl and the sanctity of our family home.

Now, six months of probing, information releases, threats, trauma, and overall being treated as major criminals (people who victimizes their own innocent children) we have finally been released from DCF caseload. Even now we’re unable to obtain any documentation on our own case, another tactic which we expect is to protect DCF. Requests for information are going ignored, and we are left post-DCF with no recourse and no way to hold the agents and agency accountable.

Throughout all this we had nowhere to turn. Our options were the court system or compliance. We watched as DCF violated its own policies and procedures, victimized our child and family, and did so knowing that our only recourse was talking internally to DCF supervisors who would

back up their workers. An agency that operates as a pseudo-law enforcement agency, with absolutely no transparency as a result of statutory confidentiality and is expected to hold itself accountable is a terrifying thing, especially when it has the authority to seize children from their parents. Families need a place to turn that will account for all the information and evidence, a place that will work for them to keep DCF at bay, especially when the stakes are so high.

Having watched some of the testimony from the recent hearing I am extremely concerned about a “slow rollout” or potential “adversarial” interactions with DCF. Simply put DCF is doing irreversible damage and needs to be held accountable as soon as possible. Additionally, the idea that outdated computer systems are contributing to a culture of intimidation is ludicrous, as computer systems do not dictate agency culture, policy adherence, and moral decision making. The agency appears out of control, has virtually no oversight, causing great and unnecessary damage to children and families. If we are truly interested in protecting children and supporting families then we must open the office of Advocacy and Ombudsman as soon as possible, before more innocent families are accused, framed, and forgotten. Another child or family falling victim to these highly unethical tactics is unacceptable.

Thank you,

Galen Blodgett