

Good Morning Committee Members-

My name is Shannon Morton, I am the Staff Safety Manager for the DCF Family Services Division. I have worked for DCF (then SRS) since 2004; 12 of those years were in the field as a child abuse and neglect investigator and the last 6 yrs in my current role. My position was created in following the murder of our colleague Lara Sobel. It was created so that we would be better able to gather information regarding threats, create consistency in our response to impacted staff, foster parents and children and develop ongoing planning to manage the risk inherent in our work. We are proud of how far we have come in creating systems level change and how we have moved from a practice of grin and bear it, to one where the norm is to report and respond to the safety incidents that our folks encounter. In 2018 I earned my Certified Threat Manager (CTM) credential via the governing body of the Association of Threat Assessment Professionals; this is a rigorous process, one that requires the mastery of a substantial body of knowledge and constant pursuit of evolving learning. I believe I remain the only CTM in Vermont. I tell you this so that you can know that threat assessment and threat management are my day to day and I am constantly working to ensure that our system is in line with National best practices in this complicated field. I am grateful that DCF has prioritized this level of expertise in meeting the needs of our staff, our foster parents and the youth in our care.

I was sorry to hear about the number of threats received by members of this committee, references to your colleagues' receiving threats and the threats spoken to last week by the Secretary of State to his office and other elected and election officials. The impact that these can have on the threatened party and those that care about them is something we within the Family Services Division unfortunately know very well. Since we began diligently tracking threats and other staff safety incidents in 2015, we average about 110 reported incidents per year. These vary from direct in person threats, third party threats, threats on social media, verbal assaults, physical assaults and others. Our work is charged, there are significant power differentials at play and complex personal dynamics, issues with mental health, substance use disorder and trauma. These make for a perfect soil for grieves to grow. I have worked with our 12 districts and staff of our central office to assess and manage these situations so that we can carry out the federal, state and policy requirements necessary in child protection and juvenile justice.

The terror, fear and intimidation that our staff feel is real, for many who have been around since or before 2015 it is piled onto the vicarious trauma of losing one of their own. Many knowing, that the worst has happened and wondering if they could be next. We have staff who have utilized our HOPE team and clinicians, filed workman's comp claims, accessed their sick time, some who just keep on and some who ultimately decide working with the risk is not for them, not for their families. The impact of this is felt in our workforce and in the work with vulnerable Vermonters.

I truly appreciate that this legislation which as Leg Counsel Ben Novogroski indicated, brings us in line with what is constitutionally permissible to be prosecuted. I was initially extremely grateful for the original criminal threatening legislation (as it stands today). It was a recognition that the threats received by our staff were not to be merely tolerated, that they would be viewed as serious and that there could be consequences. However, over the last 6 years we have felt when this legislation has fallen short. Situations when serious, true threats have been made against our staff and we don't have an option for another tool in our toolbox. I have spoken directly with State's Attorneys, SA Rory Thibault and SA David Cahill included, about the

needed statutory changes to address what we often encounter- another concerned party warning us about threats to our staff, our foster parents and sometimes even the youth in our care. We have embedded the edict of “See something, say something” into our culture but have yet to meet it in manner that maximizes our response here in Vermont.

I have available here today two scenarios that highlight the need for the proposed legislation we are all discussing today. I would rather not read these aloud so I have put them on two slides, please let me know when you are ready for me to switch to the next one.

In both cases there were ultimately no charges for criminal threatening as the threats were not made to the direct targets.

In our Division we are very frequently able to use the tools already in our tool box, accountability conversations, conduct contracts, teaming with other providers, referrals for violence risk assessments, different kinds of treatment and other options to manage the threats brought to our attention. There are times when we have sought civil stalking orders, the support of our family courts to put in place parameters around family time and other contacts with the Division to address risk. In some cases, we seek law enforcement support to address problematic behaviors and in some cases we get it; in other cases the decision is made often quite hastily that there is no crime so it is improper for there to be a law enforcement response. This is where I see an area of great potential, there is a place for violence interdiction, there is a place for a higher level of accountability, there is a place for a deeper dive into the situation to gather additional information for a more holistic assessment.

I am certainly not asking to have every threat to or towards DCF staff or involved parties charged as a crime. What I ask is that we create statute that allows for additional resources to be utilized in these cases. It is about opening the door for further exploration and intervention methods and creating the possibility of more formalized accountability. Over the last 6 years I have heard time and time again from our law enforcement partners, this isn't a crime and the conversation ends there. Law enforcement, like our Division, are governed by statute into what they can and can't become involved in, but in times when capacity is stretched thin, and the role of law enforcement is in many ways under a microscope, it is easy for things to fall into yes and no categories. What I know is that the area of threat assessment is often many shades of grey and only with further exploration do things become clearer and more effectively addressed. We have more tools than a hammer, but we need the mechanisms to better explore the situations so that we can apply the right ones. In some cases, judicial oversight is the additional implement needed, the use of regular and alternative courts and their processes are openings to more services and methods to disrupt a potential pathway towards violence. Early intervention is effective in so many arenas, and this is one of them, catching things before they escalate or inflict maximum damage on all parties is worthwhile, there is room for restorative work here in many cases, but it needs to come with the potential for more accountability.

I sincerely hope that this legislation moves forward and I truly appreciate the opportunity to be heard on this important topic.

Reported Staff/Foster Parent Safety incidents

