

STRATEGIES TO PREVENTING UNNECESSARY REPORTS TO CHILD WELFARE

Neglect is included within the definition of child maltreatment but is often not more specifically defined. As a result, states have vastly different standards for determining what constitutes neglect and when to intervene.

Decision Making Resources can aide mandated reporters or screeners in assessing when to report or screen in a case for a child protection response



Helplines offer a safe, stigma-free way for families to seek support and get connected to community and government services.

Training strategies include collecting and analyzing data from families and mandated reporters, training mandated reporters to clarify when to report, recognition of bias, and alternate resources for families

Helplines and Community Pathways

Helplines offer a safe, stigma-free way for families to seek support and get connected to community and government services that can prevent safety issues from escalating to the level of child welfare system involvement. They are proactive, offer intensive support, make referrals and follow up with families to ensure a successful connection to services.

Washington D.C.

- Launched in 2023, run by DC Child and Family Services Agency's Office of Thriving Families
- Includes partnership with community hubs.
- Two ways to access:
 - direct calls placed by residents/community members
 - outreach calls to families who are reported to child protection but where no investigation is warranted
- Three pathways:
 - Call center staff provide service navigation and referral
 - The Community Engage and Connect Unit reaches out to families that have been reported for child maltreatment but screened out before an investigation
 - In-person case management as part of Washington, DC's Healthy Families / Thriving Communities Collaboratives (for people experiencing emotional, psychiatric, or substance use emergencies. This pathway is designed to connect and support families with more intensive needs.

New York City

- Administration for Children's Services staffs the [Support Line](#) to meet the needs of families seeking assistance with challenges such as food, housing, childcare, and behavioral health.
- Families or community members call
- In partnership with New York City Public Schools, ACS' Family Services Division staff revised the annual training for the city's designated liaisons for child abuse prevention, including a slide deck for the liaison to share with school staff and a video. The training's core message is, "You can support a family without having to report a family" if no safety issue warrants CPS investigation.
- In addition to more families calling directly, calls from school personnel are also increasing, with 1,740 inquiries from schools between mid-2024 and mid-2025. At the same time, hotline calls from schools and childcare centers, decreased by 20% between early 2023 and early 2025.

Helplines and Community Pathways

Entry point to prevention services and other resources

Idaho

[2-1-1 Idaho CareLine](#), housed within the state Department of Health and Welfare, is a statewide community information and referral service that has been developing a **special focus on supporting kinship caregivers** by training two staff members to be experts on kinship care.

Ohio

In 12 counties, callers to 211 or the crisis hotline may be referred to the [Family Success Network](#), which provides family coaches to assist with connections to community services, including financial assistance, money management, parenting support, and family success planning.

Connecticut

The [Community Pathways warm line](#) provides resource and referral support to families with children who are impacted by mental health and substance use disorder concerns. The warmline is part of the state's [Family First Prevention Services Act](#) (Family First) plan.

Helplines and Community Pathways

Focus on redirecting hotline callers

Colorado

A [new three-county pilot](#) provides a recorded message to hotline callers, describing child maltreatment and directing callers to 211 to help families access services if the caller's concerns do not meet the criteria for maltreatment.

Hennepin County, Minn.

CPS helps callers determine whether a suspected maltreatment report is warranted. If not, callers have the [option to transfer to a consultation line](#), which provides information about community services for families.

Focus on emotional support and well-being

San Francisco

[Safe & Sound TALK Line](#) pairs volunteers with parents for peer support, serving as a front door for service referrals, including intensive case management.

Washington

[Parent Trust Family Help Line](#) is a place for parents in the state of Washington who need someone to listen to them. The helpline provides service referrals and follow-up as needed.

Larimer County, Colo.

[Supported Families, Stronger Community](#), a project initially funded by a five-year federal ACF grant, is now integrated into the county's human services department. Community navigators provide emotional support to families and help connect them to services.

Mandated Reporter Training & Resources

Professionals who work with children often make child protection reports when there is not immediate danger to a child - but they want to get support for a family. Promising strategies to support mandated reporters to get support for families include collecting and analyzing data from families and mandated reporters, training mandated reporters to clarify when to report, and evaluating decision-making tools (such as community resource guides).

New Hampshire and Ohio

New Hampshire and Ohio have both worked with [Evident Change](#) to develop a statewide [community response guide](#) — an online, real-time tool to help mandated reporters make more equitable decisions by considering a full range of options to help families, including connecting them to local service agencies when appropriate. New Hampshire is also piloting a community navigator program.

Community navigators have lived experience of the child welfare system and provide resources and information **both** families and reporters in screened-out cases.

- For mandated reporters – they support mandated reporters in decision making, understand how to approach families with their concerns in more effective, strength-based ways, and identify community resources for the family.
- For families – they provide peer support (in partnership with the Strength to Succeed program)

Neglect Definitions

The Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) defines neglect as a form of maltreatment but provides little guidance as to what specifically is included within the category of neglect. As a result, states have vastly different standards for determining what constitutes neglect and when to intervene. Cultural differences around parenting expectations can further complicate how definitions are interpreted and applied. Some state neglect definitions are silent about resulting harm to a child or fail to specify that such harm must be serious harm. Most states do not include a reference to risk of harm or provide that such risk must be imminent. There is cause for concern that neglect definitions may be contributing to the unnecessary intrusion of child protection services.

Texas (2021), Maine (2025), California (2022)

Among a number of states to review their statutory definition of neglect and narrow the definition to exclude poverty and specify harm or imminent risk within the definition.

Massachusetts Neglect Definition:

Failure by a caregiver, either deliberately or through negligence or inability, to take those actions necessary to provide a child with minimally adequate food, clothing, shelter, medical care, supervision, emotional stability and growth, or other essential care, including malnutrition or failure to thrive; provided, however, that such inability is not due solely to inadequate economic resources or solely to the existence of a handicapping condition.