

A Community Approach to Child and Family Wellbeing: Massachusetts' Initiative to Reduce Child Neglect

Coalition Platform: What We Stand For

Strengthening systems that prioritize prevention and support families early

Who We Are

Massachusetts' Initiative to Reduce Child Neglect is a statewide coalition that brings together leaders from state agencies, family-serving organizations, individuals with lived experience, and communities working together to shift the way the Commonwealth supports families. Convened by the Children's Trust, the coalition's purpose is to advance strategies that connect families to support and develop alternative avenues for support so that filing a report to child protective services is no longer seen as the first or only option.

The coalition is guided by two steering committees (state and community) whose members serve as decision-makers and sector representatives. Working groups, organized by sector, provide design input and help shape solutions. The Children's Trust will play the backbone role in building collaboration amongst partners, providing "behind the scenes" support, and guiding work forward between meetings.

The coalition is engaging a diverse group of critical stakeholders in this work. It aims to reach mandated reporters, including teachers, healthcare providers, social workers, and others who regularly interact with families and whose frontline roles position them to recognize early signs of stress. It is also engaging nonprofit leaders, agency executives, legislators, and other decision-makers who have the power to shape policies and invest in upstream solutions that support children and families.

Our Vision

A Massachusetts where all children and families have the agency to access and use equitable, culturally responsive, and effective community-based supports, when and where they need — so all families can thrive.

Our Goal

To support families, mandated reporters, and community organizations in promoting wellbeing and preventing unnecessary involvement of child protective services by:

Strengthening and expanding existing pathways of support

Creating new pathways where gaps exist

Building clear, accessible systems of support

The Challenge

Every year, thousands of families in Massachusetts are reported to the Department of Children and Families (DCF), but more than half of those reports are screened out because they do not meet the legal requirements for abuse or neglect. Most of these parents want nothing more than to nurture and protect their children; when they struggle, it's usually a sign that systems have failed them, not that they have failed their children. Yet, these families still experience trauma from system involvement, trust between families and the professionals who support them is often broken, and opportunities for early intervention are lost.

90,000

Average reports made each year to DCF.



more than half of those reports are screened out.

The current system is not designed to consistently support families:

- Families who are screened out but may need additional support are not automatically connected to services, leaving families vulnerable. Yet, mandated reporters often believe filing a report will trigger these services.
- Screened-out reports can follow families, affecting employment and relationships.
- Often, families who are screened out want to do right by their children but are navigating overwhelming circumstances without enough support.
- Many screened-out reports stem from poverty-related challenges or systemic barriers. In Massachusetts, 69% of reports to the Department of Children and Families are for neglect, disproportionately impacting BIPOC families. Families of color, who often face systemic barriers to economic security, are disproportionately reported to child protective services, despite similar screen-in rates across races.
- A staggering 24% of all reports to the Department of Children and Families involve Hispanic or Latino families, despite only being 13% of the Massachusetts population.

This overreliance on reporting has significant consequences: it perpetuates trauma, erodes trust, burdens the workforce, and misses opportunities to address root causes before they escalate.

Why We Exist

We believe families should get the support they need before they reach the point of crisis and that filing a child welfare report should never be the only door to help. Our purpose is simple: to build alternative pathways that strengthen families and prevent unnecessary child welfare involvement so that families have access to the supports they need, when they need them.

This work is not about changing how DCF handles reports or delaying response when children need protection. It's about building a system where most families never reach that point.

While a reduction in unsubstantiated child protective services reports will be an outcome of this work, our primary goal is improving family wellbeing by making sure alternative pathways exist and that families and mandated reporters are aware of these supports and services.

Guiding Principles

Our work is grounded in the following values:

- **Family-Centered:** We believe that all parents want what's best for their children, but too often, families lack the resources, support, or opportunities they need to thrive. We value families as partners in designing systems that support them.
- **Cross-sector:** We partner across state agencies and community-based organizations.
- **Equity:** We address systemic inequities and acknowledge the disproportionate impact of child welfare involvement on families of color, recognizing that many challenges stem from structural barriers rather than individual choices.
- **Culturally Appropriate:** We honor the diverse backgrounds, traditions, and experiences of families, and we adjust our approaches so support feels respectful and relevant.
- **Data-Informed:** We use data to learn, adapt, and improve, and we pair those insights with the lived experience of families and practitioners to guide decisions.
- **Strength-Based:** We focus on building family strengths rather than responding to perceived deficits.
- **Prevention-Focused:** We intervene early and upstream, addressing challenges before they escalate into crises.
- **Trauma-Informed:** We seek to minimize harm, repair trust, and create environments where families feel safe asking for help.

Call to Action

Together, we can change the status quo. Massachusetts' Initiative to Reduce Child Neglect is a call to build a coordinated, equitable, and prevention-focused system that supports families early.

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Community Steering Committee

Parent Leadership and Engagement: Sue Covitz, Executive Director, Families First

Family Members with Lived Experience: Charles Lerner, State Director, Massachusetts CASA Association

Legal: Marisol Garcia, Deputy Director, Health Law Advocates

Human Services: Nancy Allen Scannell, Executive Director, MSPCC

Education: Chelsea Prax, Program Director, American Federation of Teachers (AFT)

Healthcare: Heather Forkey, MD, Director of FaCES at UMass Memorial Children's Medical Center and Professor of Pediatrics at the UMass Chan Medical School

First Responder: TBD

Philanthropy: TBD

Backbone Team

Jennifer Valenzuela, Executive Director, The Children's Trust

Matthew Kincaid, Founder & CEO, Overcoming Racism

Liz Marotta, Director of Marketing and Events, The Children's Trust

Melissa Oomer, Strategy Consultant, to provide strategy and coalition-building expertise

Dimple Patel, Director of State Policy, Casey Family Programs, for MA/National policy and coalition-building expertise

kate warren barnes, Senior Advisor for Wellbeing and Systems Transformation, to provide child welfare and partnership expertise

State Steering Committee

Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS): Mary McGeown, Undersecretary of Human Services

Executive Office of Housing & Livable Communities (EOHLC): Chris Thompson, Undersecretary, Division of Housing Stabilization

Dept. of Children and Families (DCF): Jesenia Collado, Assistant Commissioner for Protective Operations

Dept. of Early Education & Care (EEC): Joseph Rucker, Deputy Director, Field Operations

Dept. of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE): Rachelle Engler Bennett, Associate Commissioner, Student Family Support

Dept. of Mental Health (DMH): Funmi Aguocho, Assistant Commissioner, Office of Behavioral Health Promotion and Prevention | Andrea Oliveira Goncalves, IECMH Statewide Policy and Initiatives Lead

Dept. of Public Health (DPH): Elaine Fitzgerald Lewis, Director, Bureau of Family Health & Nutrition, State Title V Maternal and Child Health Director | Beth Bostic, Division Director for Children and Youth with Special Health Needs, Bureau of Family Health & Nutrition

Dept. of Transitional Assistance (DTA): Delrose Newman, Assistant Director of Family and Community Engagement

Dept. of Youth Services (DYS): Cecely Reardon, Commissioner | Lisa Belmarsh, Assistant Commissioner for Support Services

Office of Attorney General (AGO): Liza M. Hirsch, Director, Children's Justice Unit | Flora Chang, Children's Justice Unit

Office of the Child Advocate (OCA): Cristine Goldman, General Counsel | Melissa Threadgill, Sr Director of Policy & Implementation