

# Massachusetts Mandates, Missteps, and Missed Opportunities: Family-Led Insights to Prevent Unnecessary Reports of Neglect

## Story Banking

This project utilizes a story banking process, a qualitative method for ethically collecting personal narratives, to document the experiences of eleven adults who have experienced reports of child neglect in Massachusetts.

## Key Questions

This project asked lived experience experts to describe their experiences with reports of child neglect, also known as a 51A.

The project then asked individuals to provide their recommendations on what could have prevented the 51A neglect from being filed.

## Setting a Foundation for the Work Ahead

The report is not designed to be a comprehensive research project or a panacea. Instead, it provides a roadmap of possibilities for where this work on systems transformation can take hold by centering the voices of those impacted by reports of child neglect.

## Lived Experience Reflection

*“So the first report of neglect happened when my son was in third grade and he's now 18, so it's a little while ago. But it was so life-changing to me that I still really want to talk about it”.*

# Lived Experience Reflections: Workforce

Mandated reporters, such as educators, healthcare providers, and social workers, play a pivotal role in initiating reports of child neglect. Community members described harmful encounters with mandated reporters that led to unnecessary neglect reports due to poor training, bias, and a lack of context.

## Recommendations include:

- Specialized training for mandated reporters in **trauma-informed care**, neurodiversity, and **cultural humility**.
- **Encouraging pre-report engagement** with families when possible.
- Increasing cross-sector collaboration and shared accountability for unsupported reports of neglect.
- **Publishing annual data on screened-out reports** of neglect by the school district to inform retraining.

## Lived Experience Reflection

*“Please, please, please break out of your silos and work together. Streamline things for families. Find more innovative solutions aligned with the types of family engagement we want and need”.*

# Lived Experience Reflections: Programs

Community members who shared their stories emphasized the need for trauma-informed, inclusive, and accessible services that recognize the widespread impact of trauma, understand its signs and symptoms, and respond with practices that prioritize safety, trust, empowerment, and healing. **More than half of the community members who shared their stories were unaware of existing community-based programs or were hesitant to engage due to concerns about mandated reporting.**

## Recommendations include:

- Creating a **warmline** to divert families from unnecessary reports of neglect, especially for those associated with poverty.
- **Extending Early Intervention services** to age five.
- Expanding **respite care, flexible childcare, and co-locate services** for families in public housing.
- Investing in **poverty alleviation, mental health, and substance use treatment.**
- Enhancing support for **neurodiverse and disabled children** to prevent misinformed educational neglect reports.

## Lived Experience Reflection

*“I want to ask decision-makers at the state and leaders of programs to consider whether they would accept the quality of services and programs they provide to our children for their own children.”*

# Lived Experience Reflections: Policy

Community members called for reforms to both formal legislation (Big P policies) and internal agency practices (little p policies). They emphasized the need for transparency, equity, and safeguards against misuse.

## Recommendations include:

- Codifying **protections against retaliatory or frivolous 51A filings.**
- **Reforming mandated reporting laws** to prioritize support over punishment.
- Expanding data collection and interstate access to specialized care for families.
- Investing in **family preservation, legal advocacy, and parental rights education.**

## Lived Experience Reflection

*“I think the warm line would be the best solution and the most fiscally responsible. There are already tons of resources available. It'd just be a matter of making sure that the caller, like the person calling in, has access to resources based on what the family needs. It would also cut costs, and it would likely create a collaborative approach”.*

# Lived Experience Reflections: Community

Community members highlighted the importance of informal support networks and community-based care. Many described how neighbors, peer advocates, and trusted professionals helped them navigate systems.

## Recommendations include:

- Launching a **public awareness campaign** about the impact and process of child neglect.
- Investing in **mutual aid, peer support, and trauma-informed, healing-centered community care**.
- Strengthening **social connections** to reduce isolation and prevent system involvement.

## Lived Experience Reflection

*"I was happy in my home and my community. Basically, a 51A for neglect and stuff changed everything. I didn't feel like me or my siblings were being neglected. Like, we didn't have the best things, we didn't live in the best neighborhood. We was healthy, but we wasn't rich. You know what I'm saying? I feel like I was happy at my home and everything".*

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## Conclusion and Call to Action

This report affirms **that lived experience is a form of expertise**. The stories shared reveal that families know what they need, but systems fail to listen, respond, or support them effectively. Preventing unnecessary reports of child neglect requires a shift from mandated reporting to **mandated supporting**, where families are met with care, not punishment.

This report is intended for anyone who cares for, works with, or makes decisions affecting children and families. At its core, this report seeks to shift the narrative from one that centers surveillance and punishment to one that honors the hopes and dreams of families and recognizes that involvement with the child protection systems often causes harm and trauma that can derail those aspirations, along with the well-being of children and families. The insights offered here lay the groundwork for cross-sector transformation. They invite Massachusetts and the nation to build a child and family wellbeing system rooted in **trust, dignity, and hope**.

## Lived Experience Reflection

*"I don't know, like, everyone's story, but I really feel a certain way about child protective services. I feel like protecting the children also means getting help for the parents. I don't think, like, we were neglected. I think that, like, if anything, my mother's mental health was neglected".*