

HOW YOU CAN HELP REFORM CHILD WELFARE

Some suggestions from Richard Wexler, Executive Director,
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It's a question we get all the time: "How can I help change the child welfare system?"

Below you'll find a few suggestions, but first, a word of warning:

Often, people ask how they can help fix the system because of a personal experience. If you still have an active case with your child protective services agency you should not speak publicly about your case without first consulting your lawyer. (And yes, I know, even as I give this advice that one of the biggest problems someone caught in the child welfare net often faces is that she or he doesn't have a lawyer.)

It speaks volumes about the unchecked power of child welfare agencies that I have to give this advice, but it is a sad fact of life: Child welfare agencies can be vengeful. They can, and sometimes do, make things even worse for families if those families tell people about what the agency is doing to their children.

For those who never were entangled with the system, or who are free of it now, here are a few suggestions:

- **Learn the context.** Often people ask how they can help fix the system because of a personal experience. But every personal experience is different. Take a look at [NCCPR's Issue Papers](#) and other material to get a sense of how your experience compares with how the system functions in general.
- **Take a look at our suggestions for solutions.** Two NCCPR publications outline specific ways to fix child welfare, and model systems to emulate. [Twelve Ways to do Child Welfare Right](#) focuses largely on improving child welfare services and changing financial incentives. [Civil Liberties Without Exception](#) focuses on reforms to bolster due process for families.
- **Approach lawmakers, particularly at the state and local level.** Though the federal government has created a framework within which child welfare agencies must operate, and what the federal government pays for exerts a powerful, and harmful influence, most child welfare policy still is made at the state and local level – and a lot can be changed at those levels. In most states, child welfare is an arm of state government, but in some it's run by individual counties. So once you know which solutions you want to support, approach your state and/or local lawmakers.
- **Approach local media.** Child welfare systems are enormously sensitive to media coverage – just look at the sudden spikes in removal of children after a high-profile

child abuse fatality – what I call a “foster care panic.” Even without changing a law or a policy, changing media coverage can change child welfare. You’ll want to contact:

--Any reporters who regularly cover child welfare.

--If no reporters are assigned to this beat, then you’ll want to contact the “metro editor” or “city editor.”

You also may want to contact the editorial board and any columnists who regularly cover state and local issues.

● **For both lawmakers and journalists:**

--Ask for a face-to-face meeting.

--Make your initial approach in writing. Send a brief letter or, better, an e-mail, explaining that you believe the system harms many of the very children it was intended to help, and ask for a meeting to talk about possible solutions. Do not get bogged down in detail about your own case and do not accuse anyone in the system of being ill-motivated. Just give an overview of how children are being harmed. If you do not get a reply within a few days, then follow up with another e-mail, and if you still don’t get a response after a few more days, follow up with a polite phone call, preferably in the morning.

--If you can get a meeting, it is likely to be brief. Both legislators and journalists have enormous demands on their time. Think very carefully about your most important points and how to make them in a meeting that may not run more than 15 minutes.

--You can provide details in written material, but it must be clearly organized. You can provide a lot of information, but it needs to be divided up into “bite size” pieces. Try to offer an information “cafeteria” with lots to choose from but no one item so long that it is overwhelming. You are welcome to reprint any material on www.nccpr.org.

--If you plan to discuss your own case; again, keep the material you offer and the discussion brief. But offer to provide documentation for any claim you make. If you don’t have the documentation, don’t make the claim.

● **Write to media opinion pages.**

When you see a story about child welfare which makes points you want to reinforce – or with which you disagree – consider submitting a letter to the editor or an “op ed” column.

All newspapers have letters to the editor columns. Typically, newspapers limit the length of letters to between 100 and 250 words – so you’ll need to think of one central point, even if there are many that are worthy of a response. Op ed columns generally run from 500 to 800 words – but it’s harder to get one into the newspaper.

For either a letter or an op ed column be sure to read your newspaper's guidelines for what they will accept (the guidelines usually are available on the newspaper's website) and stick to those guidelines.

If you are writing because you disagree with a news story do not question the motives of the journalists or the news organization – that will only make them even less likely to listen to you. Just use the limited number of words you have to make your case and, where necessary, set the record straight.

- **Consider using the comment section on news organization websites.**

Most news organizations now have comment sections at the end of most stories published on their websites. It is not clear how many people actually read these comments. Also, because such sites allow people to hide behind anonymity, comment sections often are dominated by vile hate speech and personal attacks. It's not worth venturing into those cesspools. But if you see that the dialogue is civilized, you may want to post a comment. But no matter how hateful any comments in such sections may be, don't sink to their level. Keep the focus on the issues.

- **And finally,**

Leave Hitler out of it. Nothing will destroy your credibility, and anger more legislators and reporters, faster than invoking "Third Reich" rhetoric, such as calling child protective services workers "Gestapo." The people you're trying to convince might well cut you off in mid-sentence – and so will I. To see why, take a look at [this post to the NCCPR Child Welfare Blog](#).

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