

A FOSTER PARENT SPEAKS OUT

Mary Callahan is an author of two books, an emergency room nurse, and a foster parent in Maine, a state forced to confront the failures of what was then its Department of Human Services (DHS) when five-year-old Logan Marr was taken from her mother, Christie, only to die in foster care, bound to a high chair with 42 feet of duct tape. The foster mother was convicted of manslaughter.

As new leadership faced up to the problems in Maine, Mary Callahan became a respected voice for reform. Callahan was invited to give a presentation to an Advisory Commission working on restructuring human services in Maine. That restructuring was followed by dramatic improvements in Maine child welfare in the years after Callahan gave this presentation, on August 7, 2003. Sadly, there then was regression under Maine's current tea party-aligned governor. But the system still is better than it was before the reforms.

My name is Mary Callahan. I am a mother, a foster mother, and a nurse. Some of you are already familiar with me from the opinion pieces and letters to the editor I've had in the papers. Some of you have even read the book I wrote on my experiences as a foster parent in Maine. And some of you are saying to yourself, "Here it comes again, Mary Callahan and more of her crazy stories."

I know exactly how you feel. I felt the same way for the first two years I was doing foster care when I had to deal with the birth parents of Marie. Every time there was a case review, they would wait for me in the parking lot afterwards to plead their case.

It was all I could do not to roll my eyes. They tried to tell me that DHS lied about them, that DHS tricked them, even that DHS forced them to say things to their kids that they didn't want to say. I wanted to tell them it was time to start taking responsibility for their own actions.

Then I found out they were telling the truth. The case worker, who was leaving his job, admitted to me that everything the parents said was true, and most of what I had been told about them was fiction, made up by the worker before him who hated the dad and was determined to see him lose his kids.

This would be bad enough if it stood alone.

But I knew what had happened to Marie since she came into foster care. That's when the real abuse began. For six years she lived in a foster home that I would describe as sadistic. She came to me malnourished and reading four years below grade level, thanks to the constant stress she was under. People outside the system are horrified by her story. The people I went to within the system looked blankly at me and waited for me to tell them something they didn't already know.

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That was my first clue that the Child Welfare System in Maine isn't really about the welfare of children.

By the time I wrote my first letter to the editor, I was convinced of that. I wrote that the system should be torn down and rebuilt "from

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the vision on up,” and I still believe it. You may think their vision is to keep children safe. In reality the vision is to keep children safe *from those horrible parents that we hate*. Sometimes it is *those horrible foster parents that we hate*.

The emphasis on hating parents instead of caring about children was never clearer than at the foster parent workshop I attended where a speaker was introduced as The Terminator because of the record she had set in terminating parental rights. They didn't say, “She freed this many children for adoption.” That might have been an even bigger, more impressive number. It was how many parents she had stuck it to. And the shocking part to me was that the audience applauded.

I would have thought, in a business as delicate as this one, where the stakes are so high, that great care would be taken to prevent the hating from becoming more important than the caring, that supervisors would be constantly on the lookout for workers who let their personal biases cloud their judgment or used the families to grind their own axes. Instead the contempt for families can be spoken out loud and even applauded.

The attitude is so pervasive that it trickles down to people on the periphery of the system, like mandatory reporters. I saw an example of that in the Emergency Room recently. A family brought in their 6-year-old son because they couldn't control him any more. He had a mental health diagnosis and was on medications, but that day he was tearing the curtains down and threatening family members with kitchen knives. I took the family back to the crisis area where, I thought, they would talk with a social worker and come up with a plan.

A few hours later that worker came up to the triage booth with a big grin on his face. “I think we've got 'em,” he told me.”

“Who?” I asked.

“Those parents. I've been sitting with them for an hour and I counted 14 times that the child bit himself, hard.” He demonstrated. “The parents didn't do anything. They just looked at him. It's a total parent/child disconnect. I think I have enough to call DHS.”

The delight in that social worker's eyes was the same delight I saw at that workshop in The Terminator's eyes. He was so proud of himself, but what will be the end result of his actions? If those parents manage to keep their child, they will never come to the ER for help again. They will handle their problems themselves at home. And who knows what that might mean? We are creating real child abuse when we react with blame when asked for help.

Since I started speaking out, people have come to me with their own stories. I get e-mails, phone calls and letters, and they fall into two categories. They are either professionals who have seen what I have seen and don't know what to do about it, or they are victims.

By professionals, I mean lawyers and psychologists, even social workers who have seen terrible suffering inflicted in the name of protecting children. An example is a police officer who e-mailed me to say that he accompanied a caseworker once when children were being removed only to hear the worker tell a complete fabrication in court about what they had found when they were at the home and how the parents reacted.

I got this email from a foster parent, “Would anyone out there believe how bad the foster care system is in Maine if they were not involved in it? I set out with the desire to try to help a few children while I still had the energy to do it. I never knew I would be asked to lie, look the other way when some major mistakes were made, be part of a cover-up to hide the mistakes of those who were supposed to be protecting children. I watched my children's medical needs not be met. My voice meant nothing at team meetings. I have had 8 families in my area leave foster care in the past two years. They are good, honest people and that was the problem. They are not willing to be a part of a team that doesn't care about the children.”

Would any of these people go public with me? No. They don't want to become DHS's next victims.

When I talk to people who see themselves as DHS victims, I know I am only hearing one side of the story. But I also recognize that the same

factors come up over and over again, and they are things I have seen for myself. Here are those factors:

[A] foster child asked to move back with me after his kinship placement failed and was told that I said no. Now I ask you to think how that must feel to a child to be rejected by his former foster parent. ... Only he wasn't. I would have taken him back in a second, but his DHS worker didn't like me, so she lied to him.

1) Lying. Everyone claims the department lied about them. I don't doubt it any more because they have lied about me. Just one example, a foster child asked to move back with me after his kinship placement failed and was told that I said no. Now I ask you to think how that must feel to a child to be rejected by his former foster parent. He is already in the system because we have rejected his parents, now he is being personally rejected. Only he wasn't. I would have taken him back in a second, but his DHS worker didn't like me, so she lied to him. His next placement was told not to let him contact me because I supposedly provided drugs and alcohol for him when he lived with me.

2) Divide and conquer. Just as Christie Marr was told to cut ties with her mother, many of the people who call me say they were forced to cut ties with someone important to them. One mother claims she had to cut her father out of her life when he was terminally ill. She never knew him to hurt anybody, but the department said he had, and made her choose between him and her children.

3) The set-up. "She said to call her if I had any problems, that she would be happy to help, and when I did call, she came out with the cops and took my kids." I've heard that more than once. Another set up is the parenting

evaluation. Parents are told if they take it and pass, that it will help them in court. What they are not told is that 95% of the people who take that test fail. They are really taking the test just so the department will have more justification for removing children. I call it the Kiss-of-Death Parenting Eval.

4) Disrespect. Yelling seems to be acceptable behavior. When a parent or grandparent tells me that the worker yelled at them in the DHS waiting room, I believe it because I have seen it happen. I've been yelled at on the phone. As a nurse, I don't even yell back when a drunk berates me in the Emergency Room. I handle it professionally because that's what's expected of me. They don't seem to have the same expectation at DHS.

5) Child removal on a whim. When foster parents contact me it is usually about some child who has been removed with no warning, and apparently no grasp at all on the part of the department of how painful this is for the child. Children are like pawns in a big game, moved more easily than we would move a pet from one household to another. One foster father said he had someone come up to him and ask why he hadn't been to the transition meetings for his foster child. He didn't know the child was moving. What he finally found out was that the caseworker's best friend had become a foster parent and was interested in that particular child, so she was giving her the child like some kind of a gift.

At the center of any of these situations is a power struggle. Parents think they have a certain amount of control over the circumstances surrounding their own children. DHS workers are determined to show them they are wrong. I think we saw that on *The Caseworker Files on Frontline* when the statement "They're not taking me seriously yet," kept being repeated, until the child was finally taken.

What I experience is a system that is about power, control and hate. But you know what never comes up? Love never comes up. The only time we talk about it, we use a euphemism. When we call kids attachment disordered, we are really saying they don't love the new parents we

have given them. And we send them to therapy to fix that. We even say it is caused by a lack of bonding in the first six months of life, another strike against the birth parents. Doesn't it seem illogical to expect kids to love someone just

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because we have plopped them down in their home? And even if we have given them a half a dozen sets of really lovable foster parents, doesn't it make sense that the kids would be afraid to take the chance of loving again and losing again?

And speaking of logic, how logical is it to take a child because the parent moves too much, as we are told the department did to Logan Marr? No one moves more than a foster child and those moves are made alone. Again, we're leaving out the love factor. Think of your own children. What do you think would be harder on them, moving from place to place with you, the parent they love, or losing you and everyone else in your family, then spending the rest of their childhood waiting for you to come and get them, wondering what they did to lose your love, wanting to go back and find you and ask you why. Love doesn't seem to count for anything in this system.

I spend a lot of time with the families of my foster kids now. I see how easily they fall into each others arms, the way they finish each other's sentences, the way they accept each other for who they are and forgive each other. I've

gotten to know the parents myself and I like them. When I went into this business I never thought I would end up saying this, but these mothers who have lost their children to foster care are no different than me. They have just had harder lives. Much harder. Many of them grew up in foster care. And now they have broken hearts on top of it because they couldn't save their children from the same fate.

This state is littered with broken hearts. I see it in my own foster kids and their families. I hear it in the voices at the other end of the phone. I also see it in the Emergency Room when patients come to the crisis unit sobbing because they miss their children so much, children that DHS has taken. One man was actually psychotic in his grief over losing his children, hallucinating that they were still there, looking through the house as if they were just misplaced. And his children had been gone for years. I see it at my other job too, where I teach people to live with heart and lung disease. Three, so far this year, have shared with me their secret pain, that there is a grandchild out there that they may never see again because DHS took them.

And it doesn't have to be that way. Other states have undertaken real reform, working to keep kids with their families in all but the worst of cases and to support those families while they are going through tough times. I've heard some encouraging things lately, things that give me hope that Maine might be going the same way.

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The news coverage on the workshop that was held last week said the department was going to work on preventing child abuse instead of reacting to it, focus on a family's strengths

instead of their weaknesses. But they also said something that frightened me. Someone said they were going to be focusing on “children who don’t get enough attention.” I would have thought it was embarrassing enough when, on *Frontline’s Caseworker Files*, a Maine social worker said that she thought “not paying enough attention” to a child might be the worst abuse of all. This was an absurd statement, on a program about a foster child who had been duct taped to a chair and suffocated.

As a mandatory reporter for as long as there have been mandatory reporters, I can tell you that ten years ago spankings and long timeouts were not reportable offenses. They are now. We shouldn’t be surprised when the number of child abuse reports goes up at the same time that the definition has been expanded. Reports will go up again if the public can be convinced that they should report children who don’t get enough attention. How do they expect to prevent child abuse deaths if they are busy sifting through those kinds of reports and possibly taking those children into foster care? I suggest that if you see a child who doesn’t seem to be getting enough attention, give him some attention!

Letting the people who make their livings off child abuse define it sounds like a conflict of interest to me. Imagine if the health care industry worked that way. Hospitals could mandate hospitalizations for cold symptoms and then reap in the bucks. Insurance companies would just keep paying and no one would listen to the occasional voice of reason saying that there were worse infections to be caught inside the hospital and this was doing more harm than good.

We are losing the distinction between child abuse and parenting we don’t agree with, just as we have long since lost the distinction between poverty and neglect. Pity the parents who have taken on two jobs to provide for their children, to avoid being accused of neglect, only to be accused of not paying enough attention to them. They might as well just give their children to the state at birth. They can no longer win, no matter what they do.

My greatest hope for the future in Maine is

Paul Vincent and the Child Welfare Policy and Practice Group. They have come here to introduce Family Team Meetings to Maine, a program that brings all the players to the table *before* a child removal to explore and possibly choose an alternative. Hopefully this is only the beginning. He has done wonderful things in other states. If he does here what he did in Alabama, I will have gotten my wish, the foster care system will be torn down and rebuilt from the vision on up.

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But even then, I will have one remaining concern. What of those hearts already broken? I said in my book that “DHS means never having to say you’re sorry.” Will that remain true? Will the powers-that-be say, “It’s too late” as Marie’s worker said to me when I asked why she wasn’t returned to her parents after he took the job and realized what had happened to her? Will the grandparents have to go to their graves with their pain and the parents keep coming to the ER when they feel like dying? Will the children keep going to bed every night asking why somebody had to be paid to love them.

Mary Callahan is the author of “Memoirs of a Baby Stealer: Lessons I’ve Learned as a Foster Mother” (Pinewoods Press: 2003).

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