TESTIMONY SUBMITTED TO

JOINT COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN, FAMILIES, AND PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

AND

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON POST AUDIT AND OVERSIGHT

February 12, 2014

My name is Lisa W. and I am a member of the Board of Directors for Parents Helping Parents. I am also a parent who has been an active participant in several different Parent Helping Parents support groups over the past seven years. While attending these meetings, I have become familiar with the challenges that parents face both by observations, group discussions, and from first-hand personal experience. I submit this testimony for your consideration on behalf of Parents Helping Parents and on behalf of the many parents I have met who were involved with the Department of Children and Families.

It might help if I provided a brief background about Parents Helping Parents. PHP was established in 1979 under the name Parents Anonymous of Massachusetts. We are under contract with the Department of Children and Families to provide approximately 20 parents support groups at various locations across Massachusetts and to operate the Parental Stress Line, 800-632-8188, a 24-hour helpline for parents. Our services are free, confidential, and anonymous. We do not ask anyone for last names or addresses. Our goal is to prevent child abuse by creating a safe place for parents to discuss challenges they face raising their children.

Because the services offered by Parents Helping Parent are provided on an anonymous basis, I have found that parents are able be more open and honest about their feelings that arise from the sometimes arduous task of raising children. In our society, we often see images of what the “perfect family” looks like. Parents attempt to live up to an expectation that may be a difficult standard to achieve, resulting in feelings of embarrassment, inadequacy, and shame. Consequently, Parents Helping Parents believes that we can offer a unique perspective that you may not hear elsewhere.

What I have observed in my groups is that parents who contact us while their case is open with DCF are frightened. If DCF has already removed their children, they are afraid they may not get their children back. If their children are still living at home, they are afraid DCF will take them away. Fear is the dominant emotion that parents have toward DCF. In short, parents feel completely disempowered in a part of their life that is extremely important to them – how they raise their children.

I have experienced these feelings first-hand when I was going through my own personal divorce. I answered the phone and when the person on the other end of the line said they were calling from DCF, my heart dropped, I lost my breath, and I immediately began to panic. As the woman was speaking all I kept thinking was the name of the organization. I couldn’t concentrate on the voice on the other end of the line trying to relay to me the heinous crimes I was being accused of. All I was thinking was the power of the DCF system and that they were going to take my child away even while intellectually knowing nothing happened that would warrant this.

This being said, it is not impossible for a DCF worker to develop a cooperative, mutually respectful relationship with the family they are assigned to help. But in our experience, it takes great skill and patience to be successful at this, in part because of the fear and distrust that families have about the DCF system.

When we read the information that has been made public regarding the Jeremiah Oliver case, we are not surprised that Jeremiah’s mother said that she was moving to Florida and asked that her case be closed. Parents are under a great deal of stress when they deal with DCF so it is no wonder that parents will say anything to get their case closed as fast as possible.

The parents who go to PHP support groups often talk about how the child welfare system might be changed so that families would seek DCF’s help instead of fearing its authority. One idea that has come up often in our groups is finding a way to allow families to change their worker without fear of repercussion or retaliation. Parents often feel that their worker isn’t a good match for their family. Sometimes personalities clash. Sometimes there is a misunderstanding. Sometimes there are cultural differences that are difficult to bridge. Whatever the reason, allowing a family a voice in this matter would provide them with some power to obtain the services that would better help their family.

This is not the only way DCF could give parents more responsibility. For example, instead of prohibiting parents from attending their child’s medical appointments and parent-teacher conferences, parents could be required to attend. Instead of grudgingly allowing parents to see their children once a week in a DCF conference room, parents could be required to see their children every day and play with them or help them with homework. Parents want to be involved with their children and this involvement helps in the healing process and is an opportunity to provide hands-on coaching to a parent.

One of the principles that DCF has adopted is “family engagement”. We agree with this principle but how do you engage families when fear is what characterizes the relationship? The answer is that DCF must find more ways of empowering parents rather than disempowering them. Who knows what Jeremiah Oliver’s mother would have done if our child welfare system was designed to support parents rather than test them. Maybe, just maybe, instead of saying that she was moving to Florida, she would have asked DCF for a different caseworker.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony.