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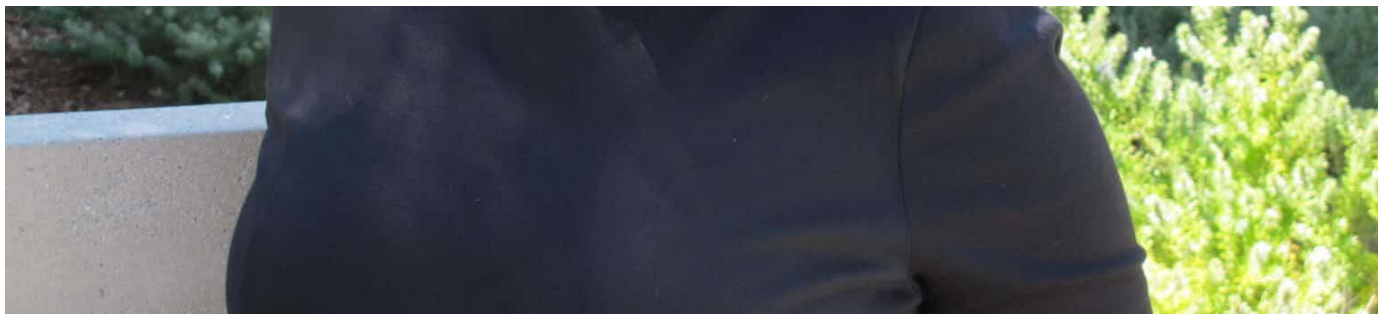
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## Inside Mandated Reporting Reform in Los Angeles County

*Tamara Hunter, director of the county's Commission for Children and Families, shares data findings and talks about what's next for an initiative to address an important pathway into the child welfare system.*

BY JEREMY LOUDENBACK





Tamara Hunter has convened a coalition of child welfare officials, community activists and researchers to examine mandated reporting concerns through the Mandated Supporting Initiative. Provided photo.

**E**arlier this year, Los Angeles County embarked on a far-ranging reform of its network of mandated reporters — professionals who are obligated by law to call child protective services when they suspect child abuse.

A [motion](#) endorsed by county leaders calls for reassessing the role of mandated reporters, citing “the child welfare system’s over-surveillance and harm of marginalized communities of color” as a result of referrals from teachers, police officers and medical professionals. Advocates in [New York City](#) and [across the nation](#) have also identified mandated reporting as a pivotal driver of racial disparities in foster care and unnecessary investigations.

In California, mandated reporting reform has surged in recent years. A [law](#) passed last year prohibits calls to CPS for poverty-related reasons alone. And a [new task force](#) will present the Legislature with strategies to change mandated reporting laws as California [implements a federal law](#) designed to prevent children from entering the care of the state.



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we support kids**

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In L.A. County, racial justice advocates have targeted mandatory reporting as being responsible for the disproportionate share of Black families who end up losing their children to foster care in the nation’s largest locally run child welfare agency.

Leading the effort is Tamara Hunter, executive director of the Los Angeles County Commission for Children and Families.

Over the past two years, she has convened a coalition of child welfare officials, community activists and researchers to examine the issue through the Mandated Supporting Initiative. A data summit she organized last year unveiled new information about reporting trends, while listening sessions with mandated reporters have yielded keen insights about how many families enter the system.

The resulting plan includes monitoring data trends for hotline calls, improving the curriculum for reporters and instilling a new culture of “mandated supporting” to better link families to community-based services when possible. Beyond that, Hunter also aims for legislative advocacy as well as broader “narrative change” about the role the local child welfare system should play in the lives of impoverished families.

In a county that has been marked by several high-profile child deaths over the past decade, Hunter hopes that creating new standards and training will better differentiate families who are truly unsafe from those who may just need community support, like access to food or child care.

“We’ve spent decades conditioning professionals to over-report, allowing the child welfare system to sort it all out on the back end,” Hunter said in her interview with The Imprint. “There is growing recognition that the child welfare system is not the panacea.”

*This conversation has been condensed and lightly edited for clarity and length.*

**You’ve made data a key part of your analysis on mandated reporting. What were some of the most surprising things you learned?**

What was most surprising to me, when we really began to take a look at the data and to disaggregate it by reporter type, was the difference in the rates of substantiated allegations. Educators, in particular, have the lowest levels of substantiated allegations. In 2022, educators were the second-highest group of mandated reporters, with 23% of all reports. And just 6% of those reports were substantiated. I would say that’s really shocking to most people.

Another surprising data point to me was that 33% of reports from law enforcement officers were for emotional abuse. On the surface, you might think, “Well, why is enforcement reporting emotional abuse?” But then once you realize that when it’s coming from law enforcement, an emotional abuse allegation is most likely a proxy for exposure to domestic violence. It also speaks to the scale and scope of domestic violence in this county and its intersection with the child welfare system

We don't have good data on domestic violence for a number of reasons, but I'm very hopeful ▲ that we'll get some of those answers through the qualitative work that we'll be carrying out through this board motion. We'll be looking back at some reports to the hotline to understand some of the factors that influence reporting behaviors apart from straight concern about child safety. I'm interested in understanding what they're seeing, because this will be important in informing the interventions and services and supports that we need to put in place in the community further upstream.

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### What should be included in training for mandated reporters?

For decades, we've conditioned mandated reporters to over-report and allow CPS to figure it out on the back end. With existing training, the main takeaway that many mandated reporters walk away with is the idea that if they don't report, report, report, they're going to lose their jobs, their license or credentials and maybe even go to jail. We've given reporting professionals this tremendous responsibility that is extremely consequential in the lives of so many people and have utterly failed to adequately prepare and support them. We have to fix that.

We believe that an important component of a gold-standard training would be providing information to reporters about the harms of over-reporting. And that means providing information about racial disproportionality, information about disproportionality relative to class, and the fact that over-reporting can actually create conditions in which a child is less safe, because a family will isolate and not seek help when they need it.

In the early stages of this work, when we were doing our stakeholder engagement or “road shows” — engaging partners to become a part of this coalition — we would include a presentation on the data. We would talk about some of the harms of over-reporting, and overwhelmingly some of the first things that we would hear from reporters was, “I did not know this,” and “Wow, had I known, perhaps I would have done some things differently.” ▼

What reporters also shared in our listening sessions is that they feel like they're alone on an island when it comes to making the decision to report, and they often don't have many choices. This work can be viewed as expanding their toolbox. We see it as important to expand the options for mandated reporters from "report or don't report" by adding a third choice, which is a way to link services to families who are in need, but don't require an intervention from CPS. This can prevent future maltreatment and systems involvement.

**A focus on racial disproportionality has been a key focus of the calls for mandated reporting reform. A large body of research has documented the disproportionate rate that many Black parents are reported to CPS agencies, which drives racial disparities at subsequent points in the system. What can child welfare systems do to tackle this issue at this stage?**

We plan to include information on implicit bias in our trainings. However, just knowing that implicit bias exists is not enough. So in our training, we plan to provide concrete guidance to help reporters both identify when implicit bias may be occurring — at those critical decision points — but also to counter it.

Our training will also introduce the notion of a "decision support" process to mandated reporters and their organizations. Research has shown that decisions made by mandated reporters are often inconsistent, inaccurate, and influenced by bias because of a host of factors. Research from the field of decision analysis also indicates that decisions are more sound when they have support in decision-making processes. Examples of decision support processes that can be helpful to mandated reporters include peer consultation, teaming, and the use of decision support tools. The mandate to report is an individual decision, and no one's taking that away from anyone. That doesn't mean that they can't benefit from a support process in which they're talking with their colleagues, or with other folks about what they're seeing and what they're concerned about. Few professions expect employees to make potentially life-altering decisions without the benefit of consultation, but we expect this of mandated reporters.

**In addition to the recent board motion, L.A. County is also beginning to develop a tool that could help reporters potentially steer more reports away from the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS). How will this work?**

We're working with Evident Change to develop a decision support tool that we will be implementing here in L.A. County. Several other jurisdictions, including two other counties



in California — San Diego and Humboldt — are currently or will be using the tool, which is designed to help mandated reporters make more accurate, consistent, and equitable reporting decisions about families who have issues that should be elevated to the attention of DCFS and families who may just need help.

The tool will afford mandated reporters that third option that I mentioned — linkages to community-based supports. It is not enough to simply provide a list of resources to the reporter. In L.A. County, we plan to have a services navigator attached to the tool. This navigator could be a part of a community-run family resource center, for example, or a network of organizations that has access to an array of services to meet families' needs in their communities.

A mandated reporter might use the tool to determine that a family has needs, but doesn't necessarily require an intervention by DCFS. And from there, our goal is to have that navigator engage the family and link them to services.

When there are more serious concerns — issues of potential abuse, for example — the tool is going to take that into account, and the recommendation to the mandated reporter will likely almost always be a referral to DCFS. We're developing this tool together as a county with DCFS, law enforcement, medical providers, educators and community at the table with us. The final product will have been vetted and approved by those here in L.A. County who have the responsibility of being the stewards of child safety.

This goes for all components of our strategy with the Mandated Supporting Initiative. It's important to clarify that we're not asking reporting organizations to take a risk by using this tool, or implementing the training because we believe that these strategies will help their employees make better decisions.

Our goal is not necessarily to decrease the number of reports that go to the child protection hotline. It's to ensure that the families are getting the type of intervention that they need. So our goal is to ensure that families in which there are serious child safety issues do rise to DCFS attention and the families who don't need that level of intervention get the help that they need without the intrusive invasion by the child protective services. Child safety is always paramount.

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At the start of the pandemic, there was significant concern in L.A. County and across the nation that an unseen wave of child abuse could be imminent as a result of children staying at home. Some **researchers** in New York dispelled that notion, noting that an increase in maltreatment did not materialize. Do you take any lessons from the pandemic?

I certainly think it has been instructive. At least in L.A. County, we fortunately did not see massive numbers of children who were harmed as a result of the reduction in reports. A lot of that experience has propelled the movement for reform and elevated the need for narrative change as a key strategy.

The narratives to which we subscribe, they define the ways in which we address a social problem. They define the ways in which we view the people who are impacted by it, and they drive the system's approach to the resolution. So COVID was sort of a natural lesson in narrative change. The calls to the hotline dropped, everyone was afraid that the kids would be seriously hurt because so many eyes and ears weren't on them. And we haven't seen evidence of that here in L.A. County. It's helping in a sort of a natural and, fortunately, in an organic way to shift the narrative that increased surveillance prevents child maltreatment. We don't really have evidence of that.

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The other area is shifting the narrative that the child welfare system is the best and only pathway to ensure that children are safe. Children can have their needs met in the community. Families don't have to be regulated to ensure that their children come to no

they become involved with the child welfare system. Sometimes the harm that children experience when they become a part of this system eclipses that which brought them into the system to begin with. We know about the various pipelines from the child welfare system to criminal justice, homelessness, and back into the child welfare system as parents.

So when you look at that, you have to question the belief that the child welfare system is safe for children. This work is about ensuring that children come to no harm, be it the harm that is caused by maltreatment or the harm is caused by unnecessary involvement with the child welfare system.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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