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Child Well-Being Doesn't Require Family Policing

BY RICHARD WEXLER

This is what America's "child welfare" systems call a success story: A family is victimized by a false allegation of child abuse. After they are cleared, they miss one doctor's appointment for their child, so they are accused again. After authorities "carefully consider" their situation, they are referred to a prevention program while constantly monitored. After release from the program they have to fight their way out of the state's central register of accused child abusers. In an interview, in the presence of someone from the program, they praise the program.

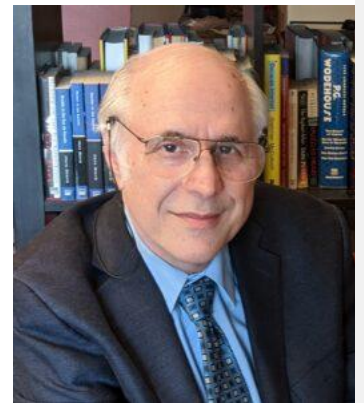
In fact, while the 0-5 Program in Clinton County, N.Y., administered by an agency called Youth Advocate Programs, may have merit, everything else about this story illustrates the failure of what should properly be called "family policing."

Consider how things played out for the family at the center of [The Imprint's story about this program](#) — and what a system that wasn't hellbent on policing families could have done instead.

Shortly after birth, the daughter of Mary Moore and Dylan Matthews Carroll is diagnosed with a rare brain bleed disorder. Local doctors refer the family to a specialist more than an hour away at the University of Vermont Children's Hospital, where the infant spends two weeks in pediatric intensive care. Apparently, they also did something else: contacted New York's child abuse hotline to report the parents for suspected child abuse.

Given that the child was safely in a hospital in Vermont, they could have at least waited for the specialist to give an opinion. But, of course, medical professionals are "mandated reporters." Whether they were true believers in reporting anything and everything, or were just afraid to do anything else, they added to the stress of a family with a hospitalized newborn who was in no immediate danger of abuse.

The Vermont doctor determines that the infant has not been abused; she has a medical condition.



Richard Wexler



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Because the parents can't afford gasoline to drive back to Vermont for a follow-up appointment, they miss it. How many middle-class Americans have missed a single doctor's appointment for their children without getting into trouble? But, perhaps because of the earlier — false — report, someone, it's not clear who, calls in another report.

The hotline accepts the report and refers it to the Clinton County Department of Social Services for investigation. The family is back under a microscope. Even though caseworkers should know, through their own investigation, why the parents missed the appointment, the allegation apparently is “indicated” — the New York term for what most states call “substantiated.” The family is immediately listed in the state's child abuse blacklist, its central registry of those accused of child abuse and neglect.

There is no indication that it ever occurred to anyone in New York or Vermont that there was another possible approach: Instead of calling the hotline, reschedule the appointment and send gas money.

So now we get to what Clinton County family police are patting themselves on the back for: They did not put this infant into foster care. But the scandal here is that it ever could have crossed the minds of anyone at the Clinton County Department of Social Services to do that, and that it required “careful consideration” before diverting the family to the 0-5 Program while still keeping them under surveillance.

The program was genuinely helpful in part because it provided — wait for it — gas money! It also helped because, according to 0-5 Intensive Family Coordinator Mary Mitchell, Moore “needed help forming that bond with her daughter that she didn't get a chance to have when she was born.”

But Moore's interviews with *The Imprint* suggest the bond formed immediately. “It just got so real when they put her on my chest,” she said. But then, among other things, the family police stepped in. Perhaps any “bonding” problems had something to do with being unable to stay close to her daughter in a hospital more than an hour away and having to cope with two false accusations of child abuse.

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Or maybe it was the additional stress of having to fight her way out of that central registry she never should have been on in the first place.

There are other oddities in the story of Clinton County's use of this program. According to Commissioner of Social Services Christine Peters, who has worked at the agency for 20 years, Clinton County's participation came about because “We were looking at our statistics and said, ‘We got a lot of kids in foster care that are under 5. Those are children that we wondered, A, how did they end up in foster care, and B, how do we get them back home faster?’”

Well the answer to A is: Because you put them there. And why did it take 20 years to ask?

At another point, the story notes that all participants were white, reflecting local demographics..

But while the 0-5 Program's participants were all white families at the time this story ran, the same cannot be said about Clinton County foster care. While the county is 93% white, at least 20% of the 73 children [in foster care on Dec. 31, 2022 were not](#). The raw numbers are low, but it sure makes one wonder why there would ever be a time when not a single non-white family was being served when one in five foster youth are children of color.

Peters and the folks at 0 to 5 probably will be a hit on the child welfare conference circuit, perhaps even bragging that it's part of that latest buzz phrase, a “child and family well-being system.”

But this approach amounts to, at best, out of the fire and into the frying pan. It is certainly not as harmful to a child as foster care, but it doesn't help children to impose the enormous stress of constant needless surveillance on their parents.

In her groundbreaking research, UC-Irvine Assistant Professor Kelley Fong — who embedded with child welfare agencies for her

the assistance.

But the bigger picture she found was of a system that drove families away from seeking help, made them guarded in every interaction with “helping” professionals and added enormous unnecessary stress by forcing them to, in effect, roll the dice: Would they get a program like 0-5 or would it be foster care? As Fong writes:

“Motherhood for marginalized mothers is precarious not only because adversity — this confluence of poverty, trauma, racism, hardship, and exclusion — makes child-rearing challenging. It is also precarious because of how the United States tries to assuage this adversity: by passing it off to CPS for investigation.”

A system that really gave a damn about child and family well-being would have handled the case differently.

It would be a system in which things like 0 to 5 were available without a child abuse investigation. It would be a system in which, instead of rushing to report families like this, professionals would be able to say: “Hey, there’s this program that can help you bond with your baby and provide you the gas money to get to follow up appointments.”

And if the professionals still insisted on calling the hotline, the hotline operators would screen out the call and tell callers about better options. And if the hotline operators still insisted on passing on the call for investigation, the investigators at least wouldn’t mark it “indicated” and place families on a blacklist.

But, of course, that assumes a willingness to risk not calling the hotline, a willingness on the part of family policing agencies to see curbs on their power, and a prevention program that doesn’t require a referral from those agencies.

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