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## Prominent New York Court Official Fired on Eve of Testimony About Child Welfare Issues

BY MICHAEL FITZGERALD



Angela Burton says she was fired just before she planned to speak to officials about how federal child welfare law “dictates antiBlack family policing.” Provided photo.

Unlike in the world of politics, sudden terminations in the lower-profile field of child welfare and the family courts rarely reach the public. When leaders are fired or demoted, few hear what’s gone on — or the significance.

But when Angela Burton was fired last month, the top advisor to the New York state court system wanted people to know why. Burton has given public talks on child welfare reform nationwide and abroad, highlighting the growing calls for a radical rethinking of how this country views its foster care system: less as a protector of abused children than a destructive force for low-income families of color. As a rare insider making such claims publicly, Burton says her planned remarks to members of Congress in the U.S. Capitol and to a civil rights panel of prominent New Yorkers cost her a job.



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Tweeting on July 25, Burton called out the 1974 federal Child Abuse and Prevention Treatment Act, stating that she had intended to speak about how it “dictates antiBlack family policing.” But, she added, “my bosses said NO, my remarks would ‘undermine public confidence in the court’s impartiality’ & fired me.”

Burton and some of those allied with her argue that her removal illustrates the growing resistance to new and proliferating voices for change.

“You may be a good person, with a desire to make change from the inside,” New York activist Joyce McMillan stated in a tweet, “but you will be fired if you attempt to make real change from the inside.”

In an email, Richard Wexler — an outspoken critic of the foster care system who heads the National Coalition For Child Protection Reform — compared Burton’s termination to other recent high-profile firings and demotions in the child welfare field nationwide, including a college dean who was **ousted** from his post at a Texas school of social work in December after delivering sharp criticisms of CPS.

A spokesperson for the Office of Court Administration (OCA) declined to respond to a request for comment on the circumstances of Burton's firing, stating that the agency does not "publicly discuss personnel issues or decisions." The court also declined to discuss how its [conflict-of-interest and impartiality rules](#) for employees apply to staff such as Burton.

Burton insists there were no other performance or conduct issues that factored into her dismissal.

"It was made clear to me that there are constraints around speech while employed by the court system, but it was more general. When it was brought to my attention that they did not like me to speak about these particular things, I just couldn't abide by that," she said in an interview. "It was a disagreement about my right to speak as an individual, even though I'm employed by the court system."

The talks included a July 19 briefing for Congress members in Washington, D.C. that focused on the emerging issue of "[hidden foster care](#)," a controversial practice where CPS removes children from home and places them with relatives without court oversight. On July 21, Burton was scheduled to speak to New York advisors for the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, in an online hearing about the impact of the child welfare system on Black families.

Burton had participated in similar events before, delivering impassioned speeches about how the system surveils and punishes poor families — particularly in Black communities. Her planned remarks for the civil rights advisory committee argued that systems need to "prioritize funding for family support and de-prioritize funding for family policing," and that "racism is hiding in the discretion" left to child welfare agencies and judges by vague legal standards.

Instead, she received pushback from her colleagues in an office run by Deputy Chief Administrative Judge Edwina G. Richardson-Mendelson, a one-time candidate for the hotly contested seat to [replace](#) former Chief Judge Janet DiFiore last year.

A July 12 email from another top aide for Mendelson-Richardson stated that Burton's remarks would be problematic, concerning "matters well outside court administration or operations," and centering on "policies and practices of an agency that regularly appears before our courts." The directive reviewed by The Imprint advised that she was denied permission to speak, "to ensure that the Courts maintain public confidence in their impartiality," unless she altered her upcoming statements.

Two days later, after Burton told Mendelson-Richardson she could not continue in her role

received shortly thereafter offered no further explanation.

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— ANGELA BURTON

Burton, who was [celebrated](#) by the New York State Senate in 2019 for her “noble aims and accomplishments” as an attorney and advocate, says she typically spoke against the child welfare system without using her title or mentioning her employer.

“This episode really shows the depth of resistance to change — there’s a recognition that this oppressive system is cracking, because the truth is being told about it,” Burton said. She also said she is not the only person in the courts offering such views. She pointed to the court’s own review in 2020, produced by a former White House Cabinet member, which [described](#) the system as “dehumanizing,” with a “demeaning cattle-call culture” for families of color.

“My goal was to share and bring in the voices of people who are experiencing the harms of the system in all of its various iterations, in order to elevate that perspective and bring some awareness and hopefully some change in the way things are done,” Burton said.

Burton joined New York’s court administration in June 2022 as special counsel for interdisciplinary matters, after a roughly 30-year career in academia and state government.

She has advised on or co-authored several influential reports issued by the courts and related institutions. One, produced for the New York State Bar Association, identified “a pressing need for an intense examination of the devastating impact of racism in our child

welfare system.” Another, commissioned by former Chief Judge DiFiore, [identified](#) a “crisis” in parents’ legal representation statewide.

Prior to joining the courts administration, she spent 10 years in the state’s Office of Indigent Legal Services, where she helped lead efforts to improve the quality of legal representation for parents in family court. In 2019, she was [recognized](#) by the state’s bar association with an award for “individuals who have done outstanding work to improve New York’s child welfare and juvenile justice systems.”

Burton is notably blunt on social media, frequently tweeting hashtags such as #abolishCPS and #endfamilypolicing and tangling with those who question her positions.

“Your numbers and methods are TRASH. Leave Black people alone,” she responded recently to a scholar who was defending [research](#) that questioned the extent of racism in child welfare systems. “Racist garbage in, racist garbage out. We don’t need CPS. CPS is Slow extractive Genocide for Black people in America. We know what you’re up to.”

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Her recent calls for change also include a co-authored [essay](#) in the academic journal Family Court Review, which explored how “judges’ exercise of discretion perpetuates anti-Black racism in the family policing system,” and urged judges to “tightly constrain their own tendencies to silence, punish, and regulate Black parents.”

This year, Burton established a work group for child welfare-impacted families to share their expertise with a judicial commission chaired by Karen Peters, a retired judge. Peters, who still sits on the court system’s [influential ethics committee](#), praised Burton’s work ethic and dedication, as well as her contributions to the report on legal representation for parents.

“She’s a very thoughtful, hardworking, interested, and committed person,” Peters said.

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