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How are some jurisdictions transforming mandated reporting?

Jurisdictions, lived experts, community partners, and advocates around the country are using data and research to explore what works best to ensure child safety and keep families safely together. Deep-dive examinations into the long-standing practice of mandated reporting are important to that overall analysis. As currently designed, **mandated reporting is a well-intentioned but often overused and misused practice that can inflict unwarranted harm and compound trauma on children and families.**

A range of strategies for transforming mandated reporting are being designed and tested across the U.S., with the goal to design alternatives to child protection hotlines as entry points for providing support to families. These alternatives, which include [warmlines](#) and [community pathways](#), offer prevention-based support to families that have been identified to be in crisis but are in situations that do not warrant the initiation of a child protection investigation.

In December 2024, 13 jurisdictional teams comprised of child protection agencies, mandated reporters, lived experts, community partners, and other advocates and stakeholders gathered to explore approaches to transforming mandated reporting. The convening brought forward information on key issues, challenges, strategies, and early lessons from change efforts. Conversations were organized around seven key levers for change:

7 Levers for Mandated Reporting Transformation

1. **Engage people with lived expertise** to determine the paths forward for systemic change, create mechanisms for shared decision-making, and address historical trauma and harm.
2. **Engage cross-system partners** to determine the paths forward for systemic change and create mechanisms for shared decision-making.
3. **Start with and routinely examine trends and research** in mandated reporting, in order to clearly understand issues; address bias, disproportionality, and disparities; and identify effective alternatives.

7 Levers for Mandated Reporting Transformation

4. **Build a new narrative and shift mindsets** around mandated reporting through the use of messaging, and by acknowledging cultures, behaviors, and harms — all informed through lived experience, data, and research.
5. **Develop reporter awareness, education, training, and tools** to reduce unnecessary and inappropriate reporting to child protection hotlines.
6. **Re-examine existing funding and policy approaches** related to mandated reporting, including the definition of child neglect and laws that hold mandated reporters liable for non-reporting.
7. **Design better pathways for families to access support** within their communities and outside of the child welfare system, including increased economic investments in communities to strengthen families, and building trauma-informed, healing-centered support for children and families.

This brief summarizes each change lever, including key takeaways, challenges, and promising strategies, and highlights experiences that jurisdictional teams and presenters shared during the convening. While this brief is not meant to be an exhaustive description of all challenges or best practices related to transforming mandated reporting, it is intended to elevate key themes that emerged with the hope that jurisdictions considering changes to mandated reporting can gain knowledge through lessons learned to date.

Engage people with lived expertise

Key Takeaways

Transforming mandated reporting will be impossible without [engaging and sharing decision-making with lived experts](#) and acknowledging the lack of trust that has developed among people and communities impacted by the child welfare system. The system needs to build bridges and earn back that trust, and one way of doing that is to make sure that the perspectives of those with lived experience with child welfare can inform the development of strategies that reflect what families actually need to keep their children safe and thriving. Some child protection agencies have hired lived experts, engaging them to provide legislative testimony and inviting them to participate on committees and task forces. Participants in the convening also suggested that agencies partner with programs designed and run by lived experts, and that compensation and reimbursement rates for engaged lived experts need to be revisited. Recognizing past harm and providing appropriate support to lived experts were also identified as critical strategies for successful engagement.

Challenges

1. As a result of past negative experiences that lived experts have had with public systems (such as not being informed of their rights, not being believed, not having their feedback acted on, and not being viewed as capable of growth and change), a lack of trust stands as a barrier to their engaging with the child welfare system.
2. Participants of the convening noted the importance of shifting power back to families and that professionals must recognize that parents know their families best.
3. Participants discussed the harm the child welfare system has inflicted on families. Jurisdictions must acknowledge and address that past harm as they support lived experts, and avoid putting families in situations of having to relive past trauma during the process of their engagement.

Promising Strategies

1. Center the humanity of those with lived experience. Those who the child welfare system has impacted are, first and foremost, people. When they are willing to share their often-traumatic

experiences, system leaders and partners should listen carefully and think about how they would want themselves and their families to be treated. Systems change is critical, but to be sustained, fundamental mindsets must shift regarding families and their capacity for change.

2. Employ lived experts to build relationships with families needing support. Lived experts can form trusting connections with families and are uniquely positioned to have a positive impact. Additionally, lived experts have a significant impact on organizations and teams where they work. [Strength to Succeed](#) is a peer support program in **New Hampshire** with lived expert staff supporting families involved with child protection and juvenile justice.
3. Engage lived experts in advocacy and policy change efforts. Creating multiple avenues for engagement is important, as is recognizing that even one individual's testimony can make a difference. Creating opportunities for both written and oral testimony can broaden the bench of participants, and providing strong support for lived experts as they prepare to contribute their experiences and recommendations is key. Combining data with real-life stories of people who the system has directly impacted is a powerful approach.
4. Engage and compensate lived experts on task forces, advisory committees, and other structures intended to transform mandated reporting. Compensating lived experts for their time recognizes their expertise and the critical role they play. In **California**, 28% of the membership of the state's Mandated Reporting to Community Supporting Task Force were people with lived experience, and they had representation on all subcommittees, influencing all [recommendations](#).
5. Collaborate with programs that lived experts design and lead. These programs have significant credibility with people that public systems have impacted and the community at large. For example, [Rise](#) in **New York City** is a peer support organization that empowers families impacted by child welfare and other family policing systems, and engages them in several programs. Rise trains people with lived experience to become advocates and peer navigators, and also addresses the harms of mandated reporting. Organizations doing similar peer support work should be at the table in discussions about transforming mandated reporting.

Engage cross-system partners

Key Takeaways

Child protection agencies must partner with other systems and agencies to keep children safe, support families, and safely reduce family separation. To transform mandated reporting, convening participants pointed to the importance of communicating and collaborating more effectively across the various entities that interact with families, including the use of structures like memoranda of understanding (MOUs) to formalize cross-system partnerships and sustain them through leadership turnover. A broad, cross-system commitment to work together and be amenable to change is critical to transformation. Promising strategies include system partners creating cross-sector committees, developing new trainings for mandated reporters, and engaging trusted community leaders in the work.

Challenges

1. Different systems (such as education, health care, and law enforcement) approach mandated reporting differently. Engagement may also differ depending on whether child welfare is state- or county-administered. In states with county child welfare administrations, mandated reporter training may be inconsistent from county to county.
2. Given that law enforcement are often the first point of contact with families and the source of a significant number of mandated reports, the nature of these interactions can set the tone for families' engagement and their trajectory during their involvement with the child welfare system.

Promising Strategies

1. Ensure that committees, task forces, or other formal teams include cross-system representation, as well as representation among lived experts. For example, **Maine** established steering and [advisory groups](#), **California** implemented the [Mandated Reporting to Community Supporting Task Force](#) with several subcommittees, and **New Jersey** has leveraged the [Task Force on Child Abuse and Neglect](#), which has a multidisciplinary Subcommittee on Race, Poverty and Neglect that has addressed mandated reporting.
2. Engage across systems to update materials and develop new training, tools, and other resources. In **New York City**, the [child protection agency partners with the school district](#) to provide information sessions tailored specifically for school staff with an emphasis on the range of ways to support families. Similar work is underway in partnership with hospitals, shelters, and other entities that are sources of mandated reports.
3. Create a [centralized intake process](#) for child maltreatment, as **West Virginia** has done, which can make it easier for mandated reporters to call and get consistent information.
4. Establish an Ombudsman's office. In **Colorado**, for example, the [Ombudsman](#) works with child protection and community partners to resolve complaints from children and families. Similar offices exist in many jurisdictions, including [California](#) and [Ohio](#).
5. Partner with trusted community-based partners and local organizations to increase families' comfort level, trust, and engagement as they seek or are referred for services.

Start with and routinely examine trends and research

Key Takeaways

Data and research can help jurisdictions better understand challenges related to mandated reporting, including the volume of unsubstantiated reports (which drain already limited resources), unclear definitions of neglect, and overreporting of specific groups. Promising strategies include collecting and analyzing data from families and mandated reporters, engaging mandated reporters to clarify when to report, and evaluating decision-making tools (such as community resource guides). Additionally, jurisdictions have found success in publishing results on mandated reporting trends and documenting stories of families that have become stronger after being diverted from child protection investigation and receiving the community supports they needed to stay safely together.

Challenges

1. Unnecessary reports cause harm and divert resources from children and families that need them.
2. A large proportion of screened-in reports are due to suspected child neglect. Neglect is not clearly defined within or across jurisdictions and is often conflated with family poverty, which can lead to overreporting.
3. Certain families are disproportionately impacted by mandated reporting. Examining key child welfare decision points by race/ethnicity highlights where disproportionality persists.
4. There are significant differences in reporting, in terms of volume and substantiation, by type of mandated reporter. Transformation may require tailoring approaches to each reporting type.

Promising Strategies

1. Collect and analyze data from lived experts. To transform mandated reporting, it is critical to [understand the experiences of those impacted](#). This information can help shape how to engage more effectively with families and provide them support outside the child welfare system.

2. Collect and analyze data provided by mandated reporters through surveys and focus groups. To better understand what mandated reporters need, jurisdictions like **Maine**, **New Jersey**, and **Ohio** have used survey and focus group feedback to help clarify when to report and when to provide a community resource.
3. Collect and analyze data on the effectiveness of new decision-making tools or processes, and their impact on reporting. Some jurisdictions have begun to implement a community resource guide, which is intended to reduce bias and increase reporting accuracy. In **New Hampshire**, data from a field test of its guide was collected and analyzed prior to implementation to determine whether it would have its intended effect.
4. Utilize the Casey Family Programs [Community Opportunity Map](#) and other tools that provide data on community conditions and can help jurisdictions identify areas of strength and need.
5. Document results and share success stories from efforts to transform mandated reporting, as this helps build momentum for change. **New York City**, for example, has documented a reduction in mandated reports and an increase in community supports. Compared to 2023, reports from schools in 2024 decreased by 11%, from social services by 6%, and from healthcare providers by 4%. This equates to over 2,600 fewer families reported, during a time when a new support line received over 3,500 inquiries.

Build a new narrative and shift mindsets

Key Takeaways

One way to shift mindsets and create a new narrative around child protection is to increase awareness of family and community strengths, thereby removing the negative lens through which parents involved with child welfare often are viewed. Some jurisdictions are using the term “mandated supporting” to emphasize family support as the objective behind mandated reporting. They also are bringing attention to the harms caused by unwarranted calls to a child protection hotline and the unnecessary investigations and family separations that may follow such reporting. Participants of the convening also discussed the importance of disentangling the ideas of family poverty and child neglect, as the former does not equal the latter. Promising strategies include reframing messaging from “child welfare” to “child and family well-being,” focusing on addressing bias and achieving equity, and promoting protective factors to nurture and strengthen families. Efforts need to address the use of language, information sharing, media engagement, and mandated reporter education, as well as organizational culture through staff and supervisor training and education, and by removing any administrative roadblocks that impede transformation efforts.

Challenges

1. Many people within and outside of the child welfare system are unaware of the harms inflicted on children when families are investigated and/or separated. This is a critical theme to elevate both for the public and for mandated reporters, who might be more likely to consider alternatives for support if this was part of the discourse.
2. It is critical to move beyond antiquated, deficit-based biases against caregivers and how they parent. The right approach treats parents with dignity, recognizes their humanity, acknowledges cultural differences, and utilizes empathy. Staff should engage with parents as they would members of their own families.
3. Family poverty is not child neglect, and therefore should not be used as a reason to initiate a child protection investigation or separate families. Instead, poverty-related factors such as food insecurity, housing instability, and a lack of child-care and health care should be addressed through less intrusive (non-policing) means, such as the provision of community supports.

Promising Strategies

1. Broaden the conversation [from “child welfare” to “child and family well-being.”](#) This shift can help deepen partner engagement across systems and community support for families. This includes elevating protective factors, which promote strong families and supportive communities, and helps address family stability before children ever become at risk for maltreatment.
2. Center the importance of equitable practices, within organizations as well as externally, in engagement with the community and other system partners. Participatory practices that engage the community in meaningful and sustained ways is one helpful strategy for doing this.
3. Learn from and leverage narrative shifts already underway across the country. The state of **New York**, for example, is using, “You can support a family without reporting a family,” as a tagline for its efforts to transform mandated reporting. [The Building Better Childhoods toolkit](#) can support organizations in their interactions with media and the public, and builds on the [Reframing Childhood Adversity: Promoting Upstream Approaches](#) guidance developed by the FrameWorks Institute and its partners.
4. Narrative shifts occur along a continuum as opposed to being one-size-fits-all. Different audiences require different messaging, so it is important to be strategic about how to educate and engage each audience. Identify internal and external messengers who can serve as ambassadors to help advance issues of child and family well-being.

Develop reporter awareness, education, training, and tools

Key Takeaways

Jurisdictions need to reduce unnecessary or inappropriate reporting to child protection hotlines, which includes enhancing training and improving hotline responses. Promising strategies include slowing down the intake process, providing a more diverse array of training and education options, using community navigators, and creating tools and resource guides to help provide mandated reporters with a better menu of ways they can secure support for children and families.

Challenges

1. Training for law enforcement on how to engage with families is inadequate. Families of color in particular may fear and mistrust police, compounding the need for improved training.
2. Not all systems are in the same place in how they approach mandated reporting. Tailored approaches are likely needed to engage, train, and follow-up with different entities such as health care, early childcare and education and law enforcement.
3. Training should be consistent, be implemented with fidelity, and focus on the potential harms of unwarranted child welfare system involvement and the trauma that children and families endure as a result of a child protection investigation. Strategies to reduce bias in mandated reporting should be part of any training curriculum.
4. In addition to a child protection hotline, communities need warmlines (unrelated to a child protection agency) that can immediately connect families with support that is available locally.

Promising Strategies

1. [Rebrand reporters as supporters.](#) More than just a change in semantics, this helps mandated reporters better understand their role in supporting families, the parameters of “imminent danger” versus “risk of harm,” and the many avenues they can access to get families to the right kinds of local supports outside of the child welfare system.

2. Develop targeted standards, such as those the American Bar Association and partners are developing through their [STOP \(Stop Overreporting our People\) initiative](#), aimed at addressing bias and racism in medical reporting of Black and Indigenous children.
3. Create a pause at intake to collect more reliable information on the report family's situation. Give hotline callers information on the latest community resources available, provide them clarity on when it is appropriate to report, and offer them other options to seek help for the family besides the child protection hotline.
4. Create campaigns to raise awareness about protective factors that support families. Strengths-based efforts such as [Lean on Me AZ](#) help educate community members on how they can support and strengthen families.
5. Establish community navigators to support families and mandated reporters. In **Florida**, community prevention coordinators with Citrus Family Care Network serve as liaisons to mandated reporters, help triage cases, and support families as they navigate various systems and services.
6. Implement a community resource guide or tool, like the [Ohio Community Response Guide](#), which is designed to support someone trying to decide whether to call a child protection hotline. Effective tools explicitly state alternative options to connect families to resources when imminent danger to a child is not a concern.

Re-examine existing funding and policy approaches

Key Takeaways

Transforming mandated reporting involves several funding and [policy issues](#), including availability of funds for community resources, liability policies that may inadvertently encourage overreporting, imprecise or overly broad definitions of child abuse and neglect, and unclear policies on false reporting. Promising strategies to address these challenges involve engaging stakeholders, educating legislators, leveraging catalysts for change, and recognizing that change requires constant attention.

Challenges

1. Funding is insufficient to provide the level of community services necessary to support the number of families reported unnecessarily to child protection hotline. The strain put on child protection agencies by the volume of reports about families that could be better served through community supports is overwhelming. This burden could be addressed by reallocating funding to community resources and should include taking a closer look at funding opportunities within the federal [Family First Prevention Services Act](#).
2. Most mandated reporters are not going to risk their jobs or expose themselves to liability for failing to report. As a result, they overreport. Mandated reporters need to know that if they are acting in good faith and following jurisdiction guidance, their careers and livelihoods will not be in jeopardy.
3. A lack of clarity exists in [abuse and neglect definitions](#) in federal and state laws, which often encourages overreporting and can result in conflating family poverty with child neglect.
4. Unclear policies on false reports can be unfair to families and overburden child protection agencies.
5. The federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) of 1974, which established mandated reporting, is overdue for a revisit.

Promising Strategies

1. Engage a wide range of stakeholders to identify key issues and opportunities to effect change, including lived experts, legal experts, and partners from other systems. Colorado's [Mandatory Reporting Task Force](#) was created [through legislative action](#).

2. Identify and engage lawmakers from both parties who can serve as champions for transforming mandated reporting. Educate their staff by providing compelling data and powerful stories from lived experts.
3. Share information-based catalysts for change, including news stories of mandated reporting gone wrong and examples of what has worked in other jurisdictions.
4. Push for legislation that clarifies the definition of child neglect, using existing templates. In Texas, for example, [a bill](#) redefined neglect to add that a parent's behavior must show "blatant disregard" for the consequences to the child and to require that a parent's acts or failure to act result in harm or place the child in "immediate danger." In California, [a bill](#) in 2022 redefined neglect to only include circumstances where a child is at substantial risk of serious physical harm or illness, and specifically provides that "general neglect does not include a parent's economic disadvantage."
5. Push for legislation that requires mandated reporters to have enhanced training in bias, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), and child abuse and neglect definitions. Such legislation has passed in California and New York.
6. Push for [legislation that eliminates anonymous reporting](#) and strengthens the rights of parents. In Texas, [a bill](#) required that child protection workers [inform parents of their rights](#) at the start of an investigation into abuse or neglect.
7. Recognize that change is incremental and takes time, so leverage existing opportunities even if they don't fix everything all at once.

Design better pathways for families to access support

Key Takeaways

Jurisdictions face several challenges in developing better pathways to connect families with services, including families' reluctance to seek help due to fears around child protection agency involvement, lack of community cohesion, and insufficient resources. Promising strategies include implementing multidisciplinary teams, utilizing community navigators, establishing warmlines, and enhancing coordination among service providers and systems. Additionally, utilizing [family resource centers](#), providing services at no cost, and supporting mandated reporters with better guidance regarding the array of services available could improve access to support for families and prevent their unnecessary involvement with the child welfare system.

Challenges

1. Many families are reluctant to seek support because of the potential consequences of doing so, such as child protection investigation, child removal, and court involvement. This can be especially true in situations when a community service provider and the child protection agency are known to be affiliated.
2. Communities need greater investment to care for their residents, and formal programs are not always the answer. Funding policies need to be enhanced, resources need to be bolstered, and grassroots peer support needs to be valued.
3. A lack of resources and expertise exists in specific key areas, including support for kinship caregivers, youth with complex care needs, families affected by domestic violence, and families affected by substance use disorder.
4. More high-quality, comprehensive community resources are needed, including emergency/concrete support (to cover housing and utility expenses) and mental health treatment for parents who have suffered trauma. Most jurisdictions lack a coordinated infrastructure, so the public often does not know how or where to access services.

5. In some communities, mandated reporters and child protection agencies lack awareness of available resources and therefore do not refer families to those services.
6. Jurisdictions often lack less intrusive alternatives to child protection hotlines, such as warmlines and decision-aid tools. As a result, mandated reporters may report families to child protection not because they suspect abuse or neglect, but rather as a means to help families get the community supports they need.
7. Even demonstrably successful programs can lack sustainable funding. For example, family resource centers are constantly having to cobble funding together for projects.

Promising Strategies

1. Implement and evaluate multidisciplinary teaming approaches that leverage lawyers, social workers, and lived experts to support families, like [FIRST Clinic](#) in the state of **Washington**.
2. Create prevention infrastructure, including community navigators or coordinators who can link families to services. Larimer County, **Colorado** employs navigators with lived expertise to assess family needs, make referrals, and educate mandated reporters about their options. **Ohio's** [Family Success Network](#) created a centralized referral process, coordinated outreach, common training, and a multi-tiered service delivery system to coordinate and increase access to prevention support for families at the county level.
3. Establish warmlines or similar platforms as alternative access points for families and mandated reporters, such as the [HEARS Family Line](#) in the state of **New York**. [Evident Change](#), Social Current, and the Children's Trust Fund Alliance are launching a new quality improvement center to assess the national landscape and develop an evidence-based model for how community-based helplines can be effective alternatives to improper use of child protection hotlines.
4. Establish and support family resource centers that tailor services in communities and connect within and outside their own states to share best practices.
5. Divert screened-out calls to the child protection hotline directly to community providers.
6. Bolster support for mandated reporters, including providing information on a continuum of support available for families, and clear information and guidance about access and availability.

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