

Testimony of Aaliya Ingram, Lived Expert

Presented to the New York State Senate Standing Committee on Children and Families and Senate Standing Committee on Judiciary

Subject: Conducting oversight of the Family Court throughout the State, including its resources, operations, and outcomes

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My name is Aaliya Ingram and I am a parent who has been impacted by the child welfare system, or what I choose to call the family policing system. I am also an advocate and a graduate of JMACforFamilies H.E.A.L. Fellowship. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

If you believe that the so-called “child welfare system” is truly about children, you might imagine family court to be a good thing. However, if you listen to the voices in your community—of the people you are serving— you will know that family court doesn’t solve problems for our families. It only creates new ones.

I was first exposed to the violence of family policing through mandated reporting. After my daughter missed too many days of school, her charter school called in a report to ACS.

At the time, I was experiencing difficulties at work, and the commute to school became a challenge. I shared this with the school to help them understand my situation. The principal heard me out, but she said she could lose her license for failing to report the absences to ACS. Mandated reporting makes professionals afraid to slow down for long enough to consider what is actually in the best interests of the family. Instead of asking how she could support me in making sure my daughter could attend school, she reported me.

When ACS showed up at my door, I wasn’t afraid. No one in my life had experienced this system, so my understanding was that you had to be really putting your kids in danger for them to show up the way they did—but I was wrong. It has been years, since July of 2017 to be exact, that ACS separated my family and me.

At the beginning, I thought that family court would be the place where my family would be protected. However, it didn't take long for me to realize that family court is not about family; it's about control.

When I walk into family court, I am aware that I will not be treated as a human being. I am aware that this system was founded on the villainization of moms and dads, especially Black moms and dads. There is a lot of talk about diversity efforts in the courts, but I will tell you that my judge was a Black woman and it didn't change a thing. There is a lot of talk about racial bias training in the courts, but I will also tell you that these issues are far beyond what can be fixed in a 2-hour training. The issue is that our humanity is not recognized by the court system.

If we are going to talk about diversity in the courts, it can't just be based on race. It has to be based on professional experience. We need public defenders as judges. We need people who have dedicated their careers to defending families to be on the bench. We need people who have proved their commitment to keeping families together to be working in the courts.

At the end of the day, I hope that the focus of this hearing is how we can shrink the system altogether. There should not be so many families going through this terror. There's too many false alarms. There are too many families who simply need childcare and stable housing but instead are sent to family court. It is a waste of our resources, and it is preventing us from solving the true root causes of system involvement. If we reduce the size of this system, and send that money directly to families, I can promise you that our families will be safer.

One of the most effective ways to reduce the size of the system is by eliminating the mandate to report. Not only will this protect families from the trauma of the family court system, but it will allow us to take the money saved by eliminating unnecessary reports to give service providers what they need to truly support families.

Thank you.