



BRIGHT SPOT

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How are two counties in California transforming mandated reporting?

Child protection agencies, people with lived experience in the child welfare system, community partners, and advocates around the country are using data and research to explore practices and policies that help to ensure child safety while keeping families safely together. Mandated reporting, as currently designed, is a well-intentioned but often overused and misused practice that can inflict harm, compound trauma on children and families, and divert critical resources away from those who need them the most.

Efforts to transform mandated reporting in California — statewide and localized efforts in Los Angeles, San Diego, and several other counties — were rooted in the social awakening about race that followed the murders of George Floyd and other people of color. California's child welfare system is county-administered, with Los Angeles and San Diego having informed the statewide strategy in powerful ways.¹

Efforts in Los Angeles formalized in 2023 when the County Board of Supervisors established a [Mandated Supporting Initiative](#), housed under the Racial Justice Committee of the Commission for Children and Families. The initiative is driven by public and private partners, and focuses on four key areas of change: mandated reporter training; policy; pathways to prevention services; and shifting narratives.

San Diego County efforts began in 2021, advanced by the county's commitment to address inequities in the child welfare system and transform the system into one focused on child and family well-being. At the forefront of disparities was a disconnect between calls to the child protection hotline and the reports being screened in for investigation. As many hotline calls do not escalate to the need for investigation, child welfare leaders saw an opportunity to connect more families to community resources that address their well-being.

This brief describes efforts underway in Los Angeles and San Diego Counties, using a framework of [key levers for mandated reporting transformation](#) that evolved out of a December 2024 Casey Family Programs-sponsored convening that child protection agency leaders, lived experts, and other partners attended.

As they work to redesign the practice of mandated reporting to one that strengthens families, supports community resources, and improves decision-making, each county has both leveraged and informed statewide momentum and policy developments in California, which are described in this brief: [How is mandated reporting being transformed in California?](#)

Start with trends and research

In Los Angeles County, several data trends helped to make the case for transforming mandated reporting:

- Blacks comprise 7.7% of the county's population but Black children and families are the subject of 19% of all reports made to the child protection hotline.
- A 2020 analysis found that 1 in 3 Black and American Indian/Alaska Native children in the county were reported to CPS by age 5.
- A 2021 California study found about half of the Black or American Indian/Alaska Native children in the research cohort were subjects of CPS investigations by their 18th birthday.
- Black children are more likely to be placed in foster care and more likely to “age out” of the foster care system, making them more likely to become homeless and/or involved with the criminal justice system.

In San Diego County, examining and understanding the implications of data connected to mandated reporting — including what groups are most adversely impacted —played a key role in understanding the challenges of transforming the practice and identifying where to start. The county examined the volume of hotline calls, who was being reported, and who was making the reports. One sobering finding was that nearly 1 in 2 Black families will experience a child welfare investigation.

San Diego also took note of statewide data revealing that only 4% of hotline reports originating from the education system were substantiated cases of maltreatment. For law enforcement, the rate rises, but only to 23%. In addition to examining quantitative data, San Diego County conducted focus groups with mandated reporters that uncovered liability concerns related to not reporting, and a lack of awareness about alternatives to reporting.

Mandated reporters, it turns out, want more guidance on how to support families outside the child welfare system, as well as access to someone who can advise them when making real-time decisions.

Engage people with lived expertise

Lived experts co-lead transformation efforts in Los Angeles County as full participants in the Mandated Supporting Initiative. They influence the types of research and data collected, and have helped illuminate what it's like to be the subject of a hotline report — and the fears that children and families experience as a result of CPS investigations. **The voices and experiences of mandated reporters also have been critical.** Reporters have expressed fear over litigation associated with not reporting suspected maltreatment, and have described this fear as a powerful driver of their decisions whether to report.

In San Diego County, **lived experts were central to the design of a [Community Resource Guide](#)** (CRG), which supports decision-making by providing alternatives to a hotline call. Lived experts were involved in developing decision trees, drafting language for the guide that enhances the understanding of mandated reporter obligations and options, and creating reporting scenarios. Lived experts also helped recruit people to participate in a pilot test of the guide, scheduled for Fall 2025. They also have helped **revise and update various other training tools.** San Diego also intends to use lived experts as trainers.

“The highlight of designing the Community Resource Guide was collaborating with our lived experts. They led a huge part of the design and shared a lot of very specific personal experiences and scenarios that influenced the language and examples in our decision tree.”

—Sarah Glass, Deputy Director, County of San Diego Child and Family Well-Being Department

Shift mindsets and build new narratives and tools

Shifting mindsets requires, among other things, rethinking mandated reporter [education, training and tools](#). Los Angeles County recognized early on the need to shift mindsets that hold the status quo in place. Narratives they identified that contribute to outmoded ways of thinking and acting include:

- The work of the child welfare system that has been taking place for decades, including any flawed policies that support it, are necessary to keep children safe.
- Hotline calls are the best way to support families.
- Families need “eyes on them” for their children to be safe.
- Families coming to the attention of child welfare all need services of some kind.
- Families that need support are viewed in a negative light.
- Mandated reporters fear repercussions if they don’t report.

“The most significant narrative on mandated reporting that we must disrupt is the one that holds the status quo bias in place. We have to disrupt the narrative that we must keep doing it this way or children will be unsafe.”

—Tamara Hunter, Executive Director, Commission on Children and Families, Los Angeles County

To support narrative and mindset shifts, Los Angeles County has been engaging in conversations and training with partners to identify specific challenges and opportunities. One strategy includes providing [tools and resources](#) that help people work differently. These tools emphasize the requirements of [AB2085](#), legislation that clarified the statutory definition of general neglect, and intended to improve accuracy and consistency in reporting.

- A [general neglect decision tree](#) and [process tipsheet](#) for mandated reporters.
- An [e-learning training](#) that includes the language of the bill that changed the definition of general neglect and tips for increasing support for families.
- A [website for mandated reporters and families to find supportive resources](#) in their communities.

Providing guidance to — and answering the questions of — mandated reporters can change their responses to situations. Mandated reporters need to feel they are supported so that their decision-making is not influenced by a fear of consequences for *not* reporting.

San Diego County also has been shifting narratives through partner engagement, training, and tool development, focusing on several key themes:

1. **Evolve from a fear-based to family-friendly approach.** A significant effort is needed to move from an approach deeply ingrained in fear associated with not reporting to one that supports family needs.
2. **Support families by leveraging community resources rather than reporting to the child protection hotline.** As internal focus groups highlighted, many mandated reporters were not aware of resources available in their communities to support families. Permitting them to seek support for families rather than report them is important, but permission combined with increased awareness of community resources is key.
3. **Shift from siloed approaches to system partnership.** Strengthening relationships across public systems and with community partners is critical. For example, co-designing and co-leading training efforts will help ensure that the curriculum combines child welfare expertise with that of other child- and family-serving organizations and individuals with lived experience in the various systems.

Engage cross-system partners

Widespread engagement and partnership are necessary but challenging. In Los Angeles County, the low substantiation rates of mandated reporters from the education system (less than 7%) and the willingness of some school districts to engage made them a logical and powerful partner. Scale presents a challenge, however, as the county has 80 different public school districts and 367 public charter schools. Technical assistance has been made available to interested districts and, in support of the Mandated Supporting Initiative, the Los Angeles County Office of Education has developed a [webpage with many resources specifically for educators](#). It includes:

- A [District Readiness Assessment](#) checklist for mandated reporting reform.
- An October 2024 [presentation on mandated reporting reform](#) in Los Angeles County schools.
- A [summary report on a series of listening sessions with educators](#) regarding their experience as mandated reporters.

Los Angeles County also is engaging with healthcare partners who vary in terms of readiness for change. For example, many OB/GYNs believe reform is overdue, while some child abuse pediatricians are concerned that new approaches could compromise safety. With medical professionals and others, Los Angeles County is taking advantage of opportunities as they arise and tailoring approaches with each partner. Outreach also is being made to community service providers that are mandated reporters.

“Child welfare system transformation cannot happen by child welfare alone. It takes cross-system partners, so make sure you have some champions that are coming alongside you on this journey.”

—Sarah Glass, Deputy Director, County of San Diego Child and Family Well-Being Department

San Diego County recognized that effective collaboration requires systems to really understand what one another does and the unique challenges they face. For example, teachers usually are strapped on time, and reporting to the hotline can be relatively quick while connecting families to community resources often will take longer. Child welfare leaders realized they had to paint a clearer picture for some partners of the intrusive nature of unwarranted CPS investigations and the trauma they can inflict. Engaged partners in San Diego include:

- **Education.** Focus groups revealed that educators want more guidance and information about available community resources for families. Teachers are short on time, so real-time, easily accessible information must be available. Educators will be pilot testing the new CRG this fall and county social workers, out-posted in school buildings, will collaborate with school staff to access the CRG and make referrals.
- **Healthcare.** Hospitals play a pivotal role in prevention efforts as they are a primary referral partner to community resources. One of the children’s hospitals is actively engaged with San Diego County, playing an important role in designing the Community Resource Guide and reviewing its own practices.
- **YMCA of San Diego.** The YMCA, which provides a vast array of family services, is partnering with San Diego County to update its mandated reporter training to be less fear-based and more family-friendly, and informed by lived experts who have been co-developing training materials and will help lead trainings.

System partners and lived experts have helped develop enhanced training that builds awareness, provides sector-specific data about reports and substantiation rates, describes the investigation process, provides alternatives to reporting, and attempts to reduce fears around liability through the CRG and collaborative decision-making.

Design better pathways for families to access support

“I’m excited for this to be the new normal and to positively shape generations to come. The prevention and intervention work we’re putting in place has the power to change lives before harm ever happens. The impact will be felt by families and future generations that may never have to experience a child welfare investigation.”

—Diana Venegas, Lived Expert and Litigation Investigator, Dependency Legal Services of San Diego

Los Angeles County has been **leveraging existing resources** and building bridges of access between mandated reporters and community services. The [Family Resource Finder](#) online tool is structured to help mandated reporters and families find support quickly, with a process intended to be no more cumbersome for mandated reporters than contacting the hotline. The [Families Stronger Together Parent Support Line](#) also is available for caregivers as part of the County’s prevention continuum. With funding from the Los Angeles Department of Children and Family Services, a group of lived experts and legal services providers developed this service for parents involved in a child protection investigation. The site provides information about legal rights and community-based resources and encourages parents to contact the support line for additional help. This unique collaboration between DCFS, a local community-based organization, and three legal services organizations offers parents social services, concrete supports, and [pre-petition legal assistance](#) to mitigate child safety concerns and keep families together.

As mindsets shift and awareness of alternative options for seeking family support is elevated, the county expects community resources to be tapped more frequently. Resource providers therefore will need to **build organizational capacity**. As a result, funding and sustainability will have to be a key consideration for Los Angeles County moving forward.

In San Diego County, efforts have focused on **increasing prevention access points** that allow families to obtain services without involving child welfare. Families can self-refer for services or be referred by community partners.

The county offers **evidence-based programs and concrete services** to help families through a crisis, recognizing that economic supports such as assistance with utility, transportation, and medical bills can help reduce family stress and create a safer home environment.

San Diego County also is expanding its [First 5 warmline](#) to serve any family in need, and increasing its focus on professionals seeking help for a family, to help ensure warm handoffs. The referral service [211 San Diego](#) also operates around the clock, connecting families to community resources in over 200 languages, utilizing a database of 6,000 resources that are updated regularly.

¹ The content of this brief was informed by interviews with Tamara Hunter, Executive Director, Los Angeles County Commission on Children and Families, on July 1, 2025; Sarah Glass, Deputy Director, County of San Diego Child and Family Well-Being Department, on July 8, 2025; and Diana Venegas, Lived Expert and Litigation Investigator, Dependency Legal Services of San Diego, on September 3, 2025.

Casey Family Programs

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