



BRIGHT SPOT

# SAFE STRONG SUPPORTIVE

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## How is mandated reporting being transformed in California?

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 and compound trauma on children and families, diverting critical system resources away from those who need them the most.

Statewide efforts to transform mandated reporting in California evolved from several years of focus on and investment in supporting families, preventing child maltreatment, and addressing racial disparities. The efforts to transform mandated reporting 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, but state work has buoyed and, in some cases, laid the foundation for local efforts. At the same time, early efforts in counties like Los Angeles and San Diego have informed the state's strategy in powerful ways.

[Shifting from Reporting Families to Supporting Families](#) is a comprehensive report detailing the work of California's Mandated Reporting to Community Supporting Task Force, which was guided by a vision to "keep children and families together, safe, well, and strengthened by the resources they need to thrive." The report includes 14 recommendations to transform mandated reporting in California — proposals that could also be pursued in other jurisdictions.<sup>1</sup> To support implementation of the recommendations, the State of California [codified into law](#) a mandated reporting advisory committee as a part of the state's Child Welfare Council.

This brief summarizes the state-level efforts in California, and is organized using [seven key levers for mandated reporting transformation](#) that evolved out of a December 2024 Casey Family Programs-sponsored convening that child protection agency leaders and lived experts attended. For details on local efforts in Los Angeles and San Diego Counties, see: [How are two counties in California transforming mandated reporting?](#)

"It is important not to look at this work in isolation. It is an offshoot of efforts to create a holistic approach to prevention and child and family well-being. The focus on mandated reporting emerged from looking at disproportionality — which hotline calls led to system involvement and which were unsubstantiated."

—David Swanson Hollinger, Chief Deputy Director, California Department of Social Services

## Start with and routinely examine trends and research

The California task force had a strong focus on research, aided through the [California Child Welfare Indicator Project](#) that allows the state and its counties to access recent and historical data. Several data trends pointed to the need to rethink the front end of the child welfare system. Understanding and sharing data on these trends was foundational to informing the task force's recommendations.

1. **Reporting and substantiation rates.** Each year, over 400,000 children are reported to child protection services, yet only slightly more than 1 in 10 of those reports are substantiated. There is variability in substantiation rates across types of mandated reporter, ranging from 4% to 23%. ([Task force report, Figure 10, page 32](#))
2. **General neglect.** Nearly half of hotline reports concern general neglect (about 200,000). While California passed legislation to clarify the definition of neglect, changing behavior will take time. Historically, data suggests that general neglect includes issues tied to poverty including housing, food, and utilities. ([Task force report, Figure 2, page 8](#))
3. **Disproportionate outcomes.** Though racial disparities in reporting dissipate when poverty is considered, once Black and American Indian/Alaska Native children are known to the system, they are more likely to be placed into and remain in foster care. ([Task force report, Figure 4, page 11](#))

## Examine existing funding and policy approaches

General neglect historically has accounted for nearly half of all CPS reports in California, according to [data from the California Child Welfare Indicators Project](#). This high rate has been due in part to the ambiguity in the statutory definition of general neglect. [Assembly Bill 2085](#), signed into law in 2022 and championed by the [Children's Law Center of California](#) and other advocates, added necessary specificity to the definition, including new language stating directly that "general neglect does not include a parent's economic disadvantage."

General Neglect definition *before* AB 2085

(1) The negligent failure of a person having the care or custody of a child to provide adequate food, clothing, shelter, medical care, or supervision where (2) no physical injury to the child has occurred.



General Neglect definition *after* AB 2085

(1) The negligent failure of a person having the care or custody of a child to provide adequate food, clothing, shelter, medical care, or supervision where (2) no physical injury to the child has occurred, (3) but the child is at substantial risk of suffering serious physical harm or illness. (4) General neglect does not include a parent's economic disadvantage.

This change in definition was intended to reduce unwarranted reports of suspected child neglect to the child protection hotline and increase support to families without involving CPS. Specifically, it sought to eliminate inaccurate reports of general neglect for reasons related to poverty, while at the same time addressing racial disproportionality by reducing unnecessary general neglect reports, which data show are more likely to involve families of color.

Reducing the number of unnecessary hotline calls also has another positive impact — decreasing the strain on the child welfare system and allowing resources to be directed at children and families needing help the most.

Less than a year after the release of the task force report, some of its recommendations already have resulted in direct legislative action. In July 2025, California's governor signed [SB 119](#), which enacts three provisions related to mandated reporting: (1) the formation of the Mandated Reporting Advisory Council to implement the task force recommendations and continue the work to transform mandated reporting and eliminate disparities in the child welfare system; (2) develop a standardize curriculum for mandated reporters with the participation of lived experts; and (3) require that county prevention plans provide information for mandated reporters regarding the resources available to support families in their communities.

Recent legislation based on a task force recommendation proposed eliminating the requirement for mandated reporters to report general neglect. In practice, this would mean that in lieu of a CPS report, mandated reporters could contact community-based organizations directly to address inadequate food, shelter, medical care, or child supervision. Though the bill did not pass, the issue of mandated reporter liability remains part of the unfolding work of the Mandated Reporting Advisory Council.

“It is important to address liability as we go through this shift,” said Janay Eustace, president & CEO of the Child Abuse Prevention Center. “People need to know that as long as they are acting in good faith, using decision trees for example, it’s not going to jeopardize their career.”

## Engage people with lived expertise

“Lived expert engagement was fundamental to the integrity of this process. This isn’t just about changing a set of policies and practices but really recognizing the human aspect of this and the impact on individuals and families. It was often uncomfortable for well-intentioned folks — who have spent careers in the system trying to do good work — to realize that often the outcomes were devastating for those they served.”

—David Swanson Hollinger, Chief Deputy Director, California Department of Social Services

Extensive efforts were made to include lived experts within California’s task force. Twenty-six individuals with lived experience in child welfare participated in the task force, representing 28% of all members. Each of the five subcommittees (Narrowing the Definition of Neglect; Mandated Reporter Curriculum and Training; Potential Legal/Liability Issues for Mandated Reporters; Policy and Practice Reforms; and Research and Data) included people with lived experience. Members later organically formed a sixth subcommittee — the Lived Experience Group — to reduce feelings of isolation and help process experiences.

The final report included a statement from lived experts ([task force report, pages 2-4](#)) to the [California Child Welfare Council](#), an advisory body that supports collaboration among the multiple agencies and courts that make up the child welfare system. In the statement, the subcommittee prioritizes specific recommendations and encourages the council to adopt all task force recommendations.

The report also emphasized the need to include lived experts in *implementing* the task force recommendations. One specific call out is in Recommendation 9: “Require the California Department of Social Services’ Office of Child Abuse Prevention to develop, with participation of individuals with lived expertise, a standardized curriculum for mandated reporters.” ([Task force report, page viii](#))

In June 2024, following the presentation of recommendations, Dr. Mark Ghaly, secretary of the California Health and Human Services Agency, said: “The way the task force has approached this work, with the deep and transparent engagement of individuals with lived expertise throughout the process, is a model for how we should be doing the work of the Child Welfare Council and across the state.”

## Build a new narrative and shift mindsets

California’s efforts include a focus on the need to shift not just policies and practices, but mindsets as well. The task force included a recommendation specific to changing narratives across the state. ([Task force report, Recommendation 14, page viii](#))

The task force report points to several mindsets that require a shift:

- **Reactive to proactive.** In general, the child welfare system is designed to respond to reports of maltreatment *after* harm has occurred to a child. A greater investment in keeping families strong and children safe — *before* maltreatment ever can occur — is a principal tenet in California’s mandated reporter transformation efforts.
- **Community support is needed.** Families should not fear human service organizations but unfortunately, some are reluctant to seek support for fear that their reaching out could lead to a CPS investigation and child



removal. By moving to a more supportive approach and narrative, the child welfare system can position itself as an ally to families and communities rather than an antagonist.

- **More supportive, less harmful approaches with families.** California stakeholders believe that data suggest that mandated reporting has grown beyond its intended use of reporting suspected maltreatment to keep children safe. Evidence shows that a significant number of families are reported to CPS but that a relatively small proportion of those reports are substantiated as maltreatment. Advancing this narrative shift involves increasing awareness of this data, as well as research about the traumas associated with child welfare investigations and child removals.

“Mandated reporters are workers who often are overwhelmed on the job and therefore not always making good judgment calls. We want to get to those children who really need that help, not the child who comes to school in the cold without a coat. Sure, we need to make sure that child gets a coat, but things like that can become open cases, and that's what we want to stop.”

—Roger DeLeon, Co-Chair, Mandated Reporter to  
Community Supporter Task Force and Professional with Lived Expertise

## Engage cross-system partners

Engaging partners is key to transformational change on any complex issue. California leaders recognized this and were able to build on existing cross-system infrastructure and collaboration within the state to ensure this effort involved a range of different systems and perspectives “The state's Child Welfare Council provided the credibility, leadership buy-in, and cross-system authority needed to drive the work forward,” said David Swanson Hollinger, chief deputy director of the California Department of Social Services. Engagement across systems include:

1. **Inviting representatives of multiple public systems to take part in the task force.** These include the state Departments of Education, Public Health, Health Care Services, and Justice, as well as the Health and Human Services Agency.
2. **Communicating the vision and the role each partner plays in child welfare.** The task force quickly recognized the need for a point of reference on why this work is so critical. It landed on a vision statement: “Keep children and families together, safe, well, and strengthened by the resources they need to thrive.” This “North Star,” as the task force called it, provided direction for members and the different systems and agencies they represent.
3. **Sharing data with cross-systems partners.** An impactful way for systems to better understand their role in mandated reporting is to share numbers on hotline reports and subsequent substantiations from those reports. ([Task force report, page 32](#)) Overall, about 1 in 10 reports is substantiated, with reports originating from the education system having the lowest substantiation rate (4%) and law enforcement the highest (23%).

## Develop reporter awareness, education, training, and tools

“We must re-examine our training and support for mandated reporters, as well as our policies and practices to ensure that we are centering child safety and strengthening families through prevention. We need to better understand and address over-reporting and oversurveillance, especially around general neglect, and critically examine how bias contributes to harm experienced by our historically underserved students and families.”<sup>2</sup>

—Debra Duardo, Los Angeles County Superintendent of Schools

Creating better education, training, and support for mandated reporters, including decision-making tools and resource guides, is another important lever for transforming mandated reporting.

Training-related recommendations include:

- Additional recommendations emphasize increasing awareness of available community services in county prevention plans, training mandated reporters on how families can connect to those resources, and ensuring that families ultimately decide on whether and how they utilize these supports.

California has been working across systems to support families and prevent child welfare system involvement for many years. This includes leveraging the federal [Family First Prevention Services Act](#) and making significant state investments, namely \$222.4 million in 2021 to support and/or expand prevention services. These investments have included a major focus on building robust “community pathways” that connect families to support outside of the child welfare system, thereby reducing the need for unnecessary reports to the child protection hotline.

In 2023, the Prevention and Early Intervention Committee of the California Child Welfare Council proposed [seven recommendations focused on community pathways](#). The recommendations address a range of implementation issues such as definition, oversight, access, and financing, and begin with an explicit call to create a dedicated task force focused on mandated reporting.

As counties develop their community pathways, the state emphasizes that services need to include evidence-based practices, and that primary and secondary services must be tailored to the needs and strengths of families and communities. Emphasis also is placed on creating an integrated system of care that acknowledges the diversity of family strengths and needs, and therefore cannot be addressed by any one system acting in isolation. A fiscal workgroup has been established to advise on strategies for sustainably funding a community pathways approach, including the use of federal Title IV-E dollars.

<sup>2</sup> [Shifting from Reporting Families to Supporting Families](#), page 33. Mandated Reporting to Community Supporting Task Force. September 2024.

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