

## Four Testimonies to the Harms of Durham DSS May 22, 2023

The following are four testimonies about the harms of Durham DSS, from impacted people, licensed foster caregivers, and an eyewitness.

### **Mrs. Sharon Parks: Impacted Parent**

To Whom It May Concern:

I am a mother of four beautiful children. It brings me great sadness that this giant wound is not repairable.

I was hauled to court and sent to spend time in jail for a crime that was not committed or proven in the end: the court did not reach a guilty ruling. Instead, it left me mistreated with a broken family relationship, one that has become gangrenous and that was ultimately amputated.

When social services came into my family life they left nothing but turmoil and destruction. They cared nothing about ruining my family ties or relationships, broken promises, or finding solutions. All they cared about was going back to their daily lives as if nothing had happened and as if everything else was okay.

My crime was trying to protect my son the best way I knew how as a single mother, living in a strange city without any family or a safety net. I proved to the court over and over that my children were in harm's way but they excused my complaint because they saw me as a poor mother that had no family up here, fighting against a family that had ties with the community (my children's grandparents).

Everything that I stated to the courts and social services is true: they might be long gone but the hurt of leaving one's child broken without the assistance to heal and recover will still be present. When you do not have the funds to reach out for legal advice or counsel, social services think they can do whatever they want without consequences.

### **Mrs. Nancy Hall: Licensed Foster Parent**

According to Nancy Claire Hall, the Department of Social Services (DSS) does not follow up properly when they place children. They should place children with advocates who will speak on behalf of the children, not the state. Some families need two or more advocates, one for the family and one for the foster parent that the child (or children) has been placed with. The reason why families need the advocates is because they are blindfolded in the sense that they assume the state is there to help, but the state does not help.

You see, as a licensed foster parent we face challenges, too. If we are not in the state's face — meaning attending every meeting — then we are black-balled, and that sometimes ends your career as a foster parent. Unfortunately, being blackballed means that they refuse to give proper resources to provide medical care for special needs children. For example, I have a doctor's note for a child who has thyroid issues that cause him to eat all the time. I am not eligible for EBT or SNAP or other child support. I receive no clothing vouchers or funding of any kind. They expect for me to properly care for this child off of my husband's retirement, which was left to me when he deceased.

DSS Child Protective Services should have more incentives to hire more people to allow proper resources and services for families to stay together. It is sad that even with the money being there, these institutions would not offer to help the families, but just place the kids in government institutional homes as mine.

When I first became a social worker, we used to help churches and families. We did not go into the home to deliberately take children out, unless there was proper evidence to do so! I have seen through my use of the spirit that we need more mental health resources for the family and not just medication resources. We need more training in the department on special needs children's diseases, such as autoimmune disorders and mental health conditions like eating disorders; individual educational plans (IEPs) in public schools; and medication training, just to name a few.

When I speak on this, I speak with over thirty years of experience, so I can give you examples. I have a 27-year-old disabled daughter, who I adopted and whose mother was falsely accused of neglecting her by overmedicating her. Her mother didn't know that her daughter's medication reacted with regular milk, which caused the adverse reaction that made people think that the mother was overmedicating. The hospital called Child Protective Services on the mother and immediately the child was removed from her mother, who also had a disability. Later, it was discovered that the child was not being overmedicated. Now to this day, this child has never spoken. Resources were not given to this child, even in my care with me advocating for the family! The sad part is since I have been a foster parent, I have traveled to several hospitals such as Levin Children's Hospital, Duke University Hospital, and UNC Chapel Hill, working closely with many different teams and sometimes having to rely on family members and friends for extra support to make sure these children with disabilities reach doctors on time even if my health was not up to par because DSS did not feel the need to give me any assistance to do all this!

The system has issues that need to be changed, such as when an individual with disabilities can become an adult and age out of the pediatric system in the hospital setting! This puts more work on the family at home and the individual who is being cared for. This can result in trust issues, rebelliousness, fear, and sometimes anger. This also happens with a child/individual with an IEP.

In my opinion, children should not be put out of foster care just because they turn the age 18 with no resources to get help from. They should have a social worker to help advocate with them until they are at least 25 if need be. This damage never leaves. It lives with them forever and the other family members as well.

**Mrs. Priscilla Smith: Adopted a Child Through Foster Care System; Impacted When DSS Took Her Grandchild**

Peace, love, joy, freedom, and justice.

1. The purpose of child protective workers should be to find every resource, worker, and affiliate to work together as a team to keep the families together in the same city.
2. CPS should already have a close knit relationship with outside organizations such as job and family services, community organizations, and thrift stores other than Operation Blessing and the Salvation Army... CPS should know what new organizations are available to give family resources to the family! Some of these organizations should be like the Exceptional Children Assistance Center (ECAC) and Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense for families who have been through the trauma of gun violence. Other resources CPS should connect families to include: family doctors, family churches, diaper banks, and organizations like NC Raise Up and A. Phillip Randolph Institute who give out quality food to the public or Umami's Ummah who has yard sales of quality clothes for very low prices. CPS should look for quality homes and childcare centers and give those centers extra pay for caring for these traumatized children who've been removed from their home and families.
3. Whenever Child Protective Services calls, an investigating officer who is not biased on behalf of the system should investigate both parties: the person who is making the allegations and the subject of the allegations! For the person who's making the allegations, CPS should do a proper investigation on how many times that individual or organization or institution has made calls to Child Protective Services and determine the reason(s) that that person or institution is making the calls.
4. A parent should always be able to communicate with the person who is advocating for their family, i.e., the CPS social worker. If the family member is not comfortable with the CPS social worker, they should have the right to remove that social worker without any injustice done to their case! Every family deserves someone who is a fit for their own unique family!
5. DSS/CPS should give proper training to people by way of free training or a very low-cost training. This should include people of the community without degrees.
6. When a family has an open CPS case with a special needs child, CPS should have a specialist team on call who has experience with the family's conditions or education in the relevant diseases or conditions. This team should be separate from CPS. They should be volunteers who have either a) had family members who have dealt with similar experiences or b) have themselves lived with similar experiences of illness to what the

family is experiencing. Ideally, they should also come from the community so that they do not favor CPS.

7. Most importantly, CPS must never remove the child from the same city or state where the parents are at if it's not a very, very, very extreme necessity! Upon removing a child from the state or city and if the parents are actively involved, then housing should be set up in the state that the child is being placed in for the parents immediately!
8. The parent should have training on all medical conditions concerning a child to the best of the parent's abilities to learn without prejudice!!!!
9. Parents going through these trials and tribulations should not have to move and stay in HUD housing or Section 8 housing in neighborhoods where gun violence is high or gang violence is high or break-ins are high because that only leads to more trauma for the family! I suggest that parents should be able to live in homes where all the utilities are included, homes in the affordable housing bracket and not the projects.
10. An advocate should work with the family after they have earned a child back every three months for a year to make sure no resources are needed!

Thank you for listening.

Miss Priscilla Smith

Durham, North Carolina

### **Ms. Tonia Johnson: Witnessed the Harm**

I'm here to speak my truth about what I think needs to be changed and what needs to be done with Child Protective Services (CPS) of Durham, North Carolina and the CPS system as a whole. I'm speaking because I have experienced the harms of CPS with my own siblings, friends, and the Smith family due to helping [infant, name redacted] Z.S. and his mother.

I feel that they mistreated Z.S.'s mother and stole a lot of his time and his love and his mother's love from them. If they would have taken the proper time and met the call of duty to see where she needed help. At times, we all need help. However, they didn't look at it that way at all! They only thought about the negative part of the situation, which was not allowing her to be a mother or allowing her to love her child the way that she could in the moment. I think that they need to do a little bit more seeing things as they are and more listening to the parent(s). They shouldn't always listen to what someone told them; we all have acted based on a lie before without knowing the full story. If CPS didn't only look at the situation from one perspective it could have gone differently, but I'm assuming that they didn't understand what the assignment was because they only went off of what the UNC Chapel Hill Hospital social worker told them! In the process of just going off of what they'd heard CPS didn't do the proper investigation of cause and what would be necessary to make Zeroniaque, Z.S.'s father Justice, and Z.S. a family as one. Instead, CPS kept them separated and pulled apart in the process of moving Z.S. to the RHA Howell Center away from Durham, NC.

The Department of Social Services did not care if something could have happened to Z.S., being so young and away from his biological parents. In my opinion, if something had gone wrong given all the health issues Z.S. was facing, it would have been on them. See, I guess they didn't know how much love, patience, and time that Z.S.'s mother was willing to spend to learn what it took to take care of her child!!! And she did just that: she learned everything she needed to learn about her only son. I state again: it could have gone a different way than removing a medically fragile child away from his loving mother and father for a year and a half because they also had disabilities and "no home of their own!"

I witness the lack of resources that was given to the Smith family and Z.S.'s father, Justice Glover, from losing DNA testing to not giving the test results back in a proper manner (only by email) to this day; to not paying for CPR classes; to not offering any out of town visits. This is all to the point I made that they could have helped Z.S.'s mother much better than they did.

I could say a lot more because a lot of families have had their children taken away from them on hearsay or false grounds. Documents do not always tell the truth. Documents can be falsified by institutions and most of society doesn't think twice to consider that this can be done because we are taught to trust those such as police, doctors, CPS, and attorneys. This is why we really need to get to know the real truth. We need to respect parents who are willing to give it their all for their child! We need to respect how they feel and what they can do to help!!! We need to see what resources are needed to support the family, not the number of cases with CPS.

These disabled parents almost gave up and had every reason to do so if they were counting on this health care system and this CPS system to help them help themselves. I say this because I offered my home in Dillon, South Carolina for this family to stay so Z.S. could come home. I went to medical training 3x a week with Ms Priscilla for 3 months. The staff never checked any of our hours spent at the NIC unit with Z.S. We asked for training and were told that sitting at his bedside was the training. We'll have worked in the medical field for well over 10 years, myself as a traveling nurse working in all areas of the hospitals and rest homes and having a disabled grandson with similar medical conditions as Z.S. My grandson had a feeding tube and tracheostomy (trac) tube as well! Plus I work with trac patients in the hospitals and nursing homes. None of my training was transferable in order to help Z.S.'s family get him home. It did not matter to UNC Chapel Hill Hospital nor CPS in Durham, North Carolina. So they worked together to put the child in the system and put Zeroniaque at risk of losing her job due to the frustration they caused in not giving her son back to her and Z.S.'s father Justice Glover.

So that is my truth and that's the end of my story.