

## **Testimony of Robert W. Large**

### **Concerned Parent**

### **Before the Kansas Legislature Joint Session of Child Welfare**

**Date: June 24, 2024**

### **Chair Concannon, Vice Chair Gossage, Ranking Member Ousley, and Members of the Committee:**

Thank you for the opportunity to tell my story. My name is Rob Large. I am here as a concerned parent to discuss serious issues I have encountered with the Department for Children and Families (DCF) of Kansas, specifically regarding the misuse of DCF processes which have been used as a weapon to interfere with my parental rights.

### **Background**

I am currently a security guard at Leavenworth High School. I have two children still in school. My daughter is 16 and my son is 14. I live in Leavenworth with my spouse Karen and her two sons. Karen is a high school counselor at Leavenworth.

I have been divorced since 2013. It has not been a good experience. Despite all efforts on my end, it is very difficult to get along and co-parent with my co-parent. We were granted joint custody with no parent having more authority over the other. From the very beginning, I have had to fight for every minute of time with my children. We are to have equal say in medical and educational decisions. To say that this has not been the case is an understatement. My co-parent has made it her mission to go on a smear campaign with the goal of keeping my children from me, maintaining control, and removing my parental rights.

Over the years, I have tried to gain more parenting time with my children. All that I was allowed and that she would agree to was the Kansas minimum. Anytime I would file with the courts for more time, I would be met with some sort of false allegation or legal charge. I was always found not guilty of any allegation, or the legal charge would be dropped because it was false, but it was enough to deny more time with my children.

The issues with DCF began when my children asked me to file for residential custody. They wanted to live with me and go to school where I lived at that time in Weston, Missouri. I knew it would be a battle and that it would be horrible for me and my children, but they wanted it, so I filed. It was soon after I filed that I had my first interaction with DCF.

### **Statement of Problem**

Has anyone here ever used hydrogen peroxide for an earache? My mother used to put it in my ears when I was young, as did many others that I know. I used it on my own children. My

co-parent knew this was something that I did. But suddenly, after I had filed for residential custody, I received a call from a DCF worker saying I was being investigated for medical neglect. Putting hydrogen peroxide in my son's ear was one of the chief complaints. I had also contacted my son's primary physician. He told me that he did not believe that my son had an ear infection and that I did not need to continue giving him the antibiotics that were prescribed for him, so I did not. This was the other complaint for medical neglect. I had stopped his medication. I had let my co-parent know that I had and that it came from the doctor. That didn't matter; I was reported and investigated.

I recall that first phone call from DCF. I had never had any encounters with this agency in my life. I was upset and nervous. I would never hurt my children. The caseworker was on speaker phone because Karen had been reported as well. One of the first things that she said to us was that when she reviewed the complaint, red flags popped up for my co-parent, not for me. She asked me if my co-parent had ever been diagnosed with Munchausen by proxy. This question will resurface several times later.

My spouse and I endured several reports and investigations following this first allegation. All of them have been unsubstantiated. It was the second investigation that brought the caseworker to my home only a couple of months later. She interviewed me, Karen, my two stepsons, and both of my children alone in their rooms. She was pleasant and seemed to have no concerns. It was at this visit that she said she would consider a CINC case against my co-parent. She had several concerns about my co-parent.

Here is the first concern I have. This first caseworker was a very nice lady, and I honestly believe that she had good intentions, but I don't know where they went because months later when she was asked about the Munchausen by proxy comment and the CINC case comment, she denied ever saying either of those things. Karen and I both heard her. We had hoped that someone would help my children and help stop the harassment from my co-parent.

The ridiculous accusations continued. Karen and I were accused of being physically abusive, mentally abusive, having black mold in our house, neglecting to give the children their medication, being drug users, being drug dealers, and much more. I can count 15 times that I have spoken with a worker from DCF about an accusation made about me or my spouse. All of those accusations have been unsubstantiated. My co-parent has also used these investigations as an avenue to file a total of 5 orders for protection against my spouse and me. None of them were granted.

It became very apparent that my co-parent was using DCF as a weapon against me. She would make sure to share all of the investigations with uninterested third parties with the purpose of ruining my reputation and alienating me from my children. As a result of this, I have been held back from picking up my children from school. For example, when my grandmother passed away, I went to pick up my son from school 30 minutes early to get him proper clothing and go to the services. The principal would not let me take him until she confirmed with my co-parent that it was okay. The principal stated that the school had concerns about me picking him up due to all of the DCF investigations. Other examples include the medical providers for my children.

Per court order, I am to be included in all medical decisions and appointments. My co-parent does not comply with this order. Our court-ordered case manager tells me to call the physicians either before or after each appointment so that I can be apprised of my children's care. The issue I have with that is that medical professionals are made aware of the DCF investigations and they will refuse to speak to me or share their medical records with me. They have stated that they need to protect their patient (my children) from me and have also cited HIPAA.

Both of my children have admitted to therapists that their mother has made them make false accusations against me. My son said that his mother instructed him to tell professionals that he wanted to kill himself because of me. He did it. He also said that his mother has made him call 911 on me and say that I threatened him. Both of my children admitted that their mother instructed them to "investigate" me. They were to take pictures and videos of anything in my home that they thought might get me arrested. For example, I lived in Missouri when marijuana became legal. They were to find anything that looked like drugs and take a picture or a video and share it with their mother. To my knowledge, they did this for about six months.

The final accusation that caused the most harm to my family was the one that was completely mishandled by DCF.

Over a year ago, the judge in our case ordered a case manager to be put in place to help with our volatile situation. I did my intake with her right away. Four months later my co-parent had still not complied. I took her back to court to have the judge compel her to comply with the order. She was against it. He told her that if she did not, she was looking at a custody change and possible jail time. After that hearing, she told my daughter that I was trying to have her thrown in jail. My daughter was angry with me. My daughter showed up at my house unannounced; I hadn't seen her in weeks. She said she needed a tampon and could she look in my bathroom. She looked through my bedroom and bathroom trying to find something that she could have me arrested for. She did not find anything, so she emailed her therapist and asked her to report me to DCF. She said that she couldn't find any drugs, but she thought she smelled drugs. Later she would apologize to me for this. She told me what her mother had told her, and she was angry and just trying to help her mother. This story prefaces what would happen a month later.

My co-parent complied with the judge's order for a case manager. We had our first meeting. The case manager told us that we would have our children 50/50 time throughout the year going forward. She also asked me to ask the children if they wanted to go to school in Leavenworth. I didn't think this was a good idea, but I did. My daughter was very quiet. Over the next couple of weeks, she became withdrawn. She was not happy at my home like she used to be. She had a boyfriend and wanted to spend 24/7 with him. I would not let her. Her mother let her stay out after the Leavenworth County curfew. She also let her spend the night with him. My daughter was 15 years old at the time. She had zero boundaries at one home and reasonable boundaries at another. Mom let her miss school on a whim. School is a priority in my home. Schoolwork is a priority in my home. My daughter was not looking forward to having these rules in place in the near future. This is when the ultimate accusation happened.

My children were at my home in July 2023. My daughter was barely coming out of her room. Karen had taken her to her therapy appointment that week, with no concerns, but we had concerns. We made dinner. She came out of her room to get dinner, and we asked her if she wanted to watch a movie with all of us. She said she did but wanted to take a shower first. We waited, but she never came back out. We didn't want to force the issue, so we watched a movie. We went to bed around 9:30 pm. My son had fallen asleep on the couch, so we just left him there. The next morning, around 7:00 am, I got up to get coffee. I had a message from my ex saying she had received a "goodbye text" from my daughter during the night. Panicked, I ran to her room. Normally I knocked first before going into my children's rooms. This morning I knocked and went straight in, frightened of what I would find. My daughter was asleep. I asked her if she sent a goodbye text to her mom. She said, "Sort of." I asked for her phone. I saw that she was on a call. Looking closer, I saw that she had been on a call with her boyfriend all night. I called out for Karen and told her what was going on. Karen said we needed to get my daughter assessed. I called The Guidance Center. Karen started talking to my daughter. My daughter was angry. She was yelling and cussing at Karen, something she had never done in the 10 years she had known Karen. Karen walked away. The Guidance Center said they did not have any therapists in and that I should take her to the emergency room. If she wouldn't get in the car, I should call an ambulance. I told my daughter what we were doing. She was still angry. She said, "All this is going to do is cost you more 'F-ing' money." On the way, Karen asked her if she took anything. She said no. She went through a series of questions that I assumed she had been trained to do as a counselor. I had informed my ex. We got to the hospital, and my angry daughter marched in front of us. They took her back. We waited for about an hour before my ex got there. Then my ex went back with her. Then a social worker showed up to screen her. First, she came out and told my ex and me that we were the problem. I knew that. Then my ex went back with my daughter. The second time she came out, she looked at me with such disgust I could feel it bore through me. She said directly to me, "If I had my way, you would never be around your daughter again." Then she told me that she was sending my daughter home with her mother for her safety. I was told that the tox screen showed that my daughter did not have anything in her system other than THC. She had not overdosed. I found out later that the social worker reported me to DCF for being abusive to the point of my daughter wanting to kill herself. My daughter claimed that I had yelled at her the night before, so she took a bunch of pills with the intention of killing herself. Karen and I went through her room. All of her medication was still in her pillbox. We found six vape pens in her backpack that she brought from her mom's house. Karen called her boyfriend and asked about what my daughter said to him. He had no clue about a suicide attempt. We found that odd since her world revolved around him. She was on the phone with him all night and never told him "goodbye." No one other than my ex has seen the "goodbye text." The following Monday, I called my daughter's therapist to check on things. No one had reached out to let her know, so I filled her in and asked that she do a follow-up visit. Within a couple of days, the therapist visited my daughter. It was during that visit that my daughter told her therapist that she just remembered that I had inappropriately touched her between the ages of 3 and 10. The therapist reported it, as she should. It was rejected. A few days later, my daughter was taken to her general practitioner, where she told the story again. They reported it as well. The report was to be investigated.

The following is how this accusation was handled by the Leavenworth DCF. On a weekday, just a bit before 3:00 pm, I drove to my home to pick up my adult stepson to give him a ride to work. He also works at Leavenworth High School. There was a car outside my house. I approached and asked if I could help. It was a DCF worker. He never got out of his car. I was frustrated. Remember, I have had several investigations, and it becomes harassment in my eyes at this point. I told him that it was not a good time, I had to get back to work, and my stepson was going to be late for work (I pointed towards my stepson, who was waiting nearby). He asked me what I thought happened last weekend. So I ran through what happened with the supposed overdose and suicidal ideation of my daughter. He never asked any other questions. He never asked to speak to anyone else. I did indicate that it was not a good time. He left. He put in his notes that I was uncooperative. Days later, he called me while I was at work. I began talking to him about the overdose situation. He stopped me and asked, "Mr. Large, don't you know what you are being accused of?" I said, "I assumed that I yelled at my daughter so much she wanted to kill herself." That is when he told me that was incorrect and that she said I touched her on the breast from age 3 to 10. I could not believe what I was hearing. I never in a million years thought my daughter would make such an accusation. We had been so close. She had wanted to live with me. She told her therapist she was happier with me. What was happening? The DCF worker then said, "I'm sorry, I have already turned the case over to Platte County detectives since that is where it happened." I retained a criminal attorney. Karen and I were both interviewed by a Platte County detective with our attorney present. It was the worst moment of my life. At that interview, I learned that my daughter had changed her story that the abuse took place starting at the age of 5, not 3. We had gotten divorced when she was 5. My daughter had a forensic interview. The detective finished and closed his case. He recommended no charges. This was in November when I finally learned the outcome of the investigation by Platte County. From July to November, there was a safety plan put in place saying that my daughter should stay with her mother with no contact from her father. The case with DCF had not been ruled substantiated or unsubstantiated. Every time that I would contact DCF about their investigation into the matter and if they were going to make a determination, they would tell me that they were waiting for the outcome of the Platte County investigation. Once I received that outcome, I gave it to them. I asked what they were going to do. At first, the worker said he was going to wrap it up and close it. Then he said it was out of his hands and his supervisor had taken over the case. I reached out to the supervisor for what the determination would be. Their case was still not substantiated or unsubstantiated. I asked if they were going to make a determination since law enforcement was done with theirs. I was given a DCF pamphlet. The pamphlet said by statute I have to be notified in 30 days for all determinations. The supervisor corrected me and told me that DCF has 45 days to make a determination unless they were waiting for law enforcement to make a determination. She also let me know that she would check with the prosecutor's office; however, DCF may possibly substantiate even without Platte County filing charges. This was communicated on January 16, 2024, six months after the report was made and two months after Platte County closed their case. During these months, the safety plan that they wrote for my daughter would expire. If it was brought to their attention, they would simply change the date to update it. I would receive a copy from my ex. I pointed out to them that they were not communicating anything about the safety plan to me and that I only had an expired plan from them and a new plan from my ex. Is that professional? I believe I received one

additional copy after that. During this time, a TDM was called. I had no idea what that was. Karen and I showed up to the DCF office. Present were the case worker, the supervisor, a mediator, myself, and Karen. Via Zoom were my ex and our court-appointed case manager. DCF let us know that the meeting was a team meeting to determine our concerns with the children and what the best plan for them would be. During this process, I was awarded 50/50 time with my son. I was not seeing him due to the safety plan for my daughter. My ex said I could not come to her house to pick him up because of the safety plan. She refused to meet me at a different location, and she refused to bring him to me. Therefore, I had not seen him in months. They discussed whether my daughter should go to foster care. Karen and I felt that she was not safe at her mother's home due to increased suicidal ideation and substance abuse. Karen stated that she was shocked to see that my daughter had not been hospitalized and/or removed from the home, as she had seen several of her students in similar cases in the past. The supervisor berated her and told her she was a professional and should act like one. She went on to say that a bed at a mental hospital would take months to get and removing my daughter would mean a group home. We both knew that was not true. They went on to say that my son reports that his dad never says anything bad about his mother, but his mother tells them horrible things about their dad all the time. It was decided I would get 50/50 time with my son, but my daughter would stay with her mother. After the meeting, the supervisor, who never once made eye contact with me or Karen, told me that she was looking to substantiate the sexual abuse allegation and that she planned to talk to the DCF attorney. I asked her if she wanted to speak to me about it as I was never interviewed or if she wanted to interview anyone that lived in my home at the time of the allegation. She said that she did not need to. She believed she had enough information. So to clarify, I was never asked any questions about the sexual abuse allegation by DCF. Karen was never interviewed. My two stepsons lived with me full-time; as their father had passed away when they were young. They were all there during the time of the alleged abuse, but no one from DCF wanted to ask them anything about the allegation. My youngest son was asked about the allegation. He told them it didn't happen, he didn't believe it, and that he thought it was another one of those lies mom would have us tell people about dad.

By February, I was not getting any answers and still no determination. I honestly wanted DCF to substantiate the report so that I could at least appeal it. Left in limbo, my hands were tied. I tried reaching out to DCF's main office. They would "make a ticket," and I would hear nothing back. My calls and emails were left unanswered. Finally, I reached out to Representative Bueler. I told him about my struggles and concerns with DCF. I just wanted answers. Within a day of communicating with my State Representative, I received an email from the local DCF supervisor letting me know that the case was being unsubstantiated and closed.

### **Impact on Parental Rights and Family**

The number of false reports to DCF has had a significant effect on me and my family. It is apparent that my ex would report me or my spouse for anything she could think of and coerce the children to corroborate the story. My children have become tired and frustrated with the constant interviews by DCF over the last few years. It has caused them severe mental anguish.

All of what I described is called parent alienation, which is illegal. It is also mental abuse. DCF has been made aware of all of my ex's actions; however, I am told that there is nothing that they can do about it.

All of the reports made to DCF, although unsubstantiated, have been effective in taking away my parental rights. Through the delay in actions during the last allegation, I have lost my daughter with no foreseeable reintegration in the future.

As recently as a week ago, I was told by the DCF case worker that although the sexual abuse allegation was unfounded, I am still considered a child molester to DCF unless my daughter changes her story. He also asked me if my ex had ever been diagnosed with any mental disorder. He said that he agreed that my daughter was not thriving in her current situation living with her mother, but he could not do anything unless my daughter was physically injured. He was at my house investigating a report made about my daughter driving to school drunk in April. He said he was just getting around to it. He told me that the key would be for a therapist to let DCF know of their concerns about my children's mother. I let him know that two therapists recently made a report because they had serious concerns, but their report was denied. He said he would go back and check it out.

### **Recommendations for Change**

I do not disagree that claims of abuse should be investigated to protect all children. That is the purpose of this agency. The problem I have is that it has become an avenue for disgruntled co-parents to make false allegations against the other parent. They are able to use these reports as weapons in their campaign to alienate their children against the other parent, therefore causing great distress and mental anguish for the children being used as pawns in a game for an uncooperative parent that refuses to co-parent with the other parent.

I suggest that a mechanism be put in place that would alert DCF of multiple reports on one person that continuously result as unsubstantiated. DCF should investigate the source of the multiple reports and investigate their intentions. If the result is found that the source is using the system to do harm to a targeted parent with the purpose of alienation, then the reporting parent must have some sort of restrictions put in place when it comes to making a report to DCF. They should also be investigated for mental abuse towards their children. Proper actions should take place for the safety and welfare of the children.

I suggest that certain steps should be put in place and must be followed when a person is being investigated. They should know the purpose of the investigation upon the first contact/visit with the case worker. If the worker shows up at an inconvenient time, they should attempt to reschedule with the parent before noting that the parent is uncooperative. The case worker should keep the person being investigated updated and informed about the investigation and what the next steps are. A timeline should be strictly followed. The case worker should make every effort to answer all questions.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I would like to thank the committee for listening to my story. I know that I am not the only parent that has this same struggle. I hate to see an agency that is put into place to keep our children safe and help families being used as a weapon to hurt people.

I hope that my story helps raise some questions about the processes currently being used and opens up some discussions about improving the process.

I am open to any questions that anyone may have.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak here today.