



# REIMAGINE FINAL REPORT



**HOPE**  
**585**  
HOPE. HEAL. THRIVE.



## LETTER FROM THE AUTHORS

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The Reimagine Initiative was born from a shared conviction that systems built to protect families must first believe in families. What began as a series of hard questions about accountability, equity, and care evolved into a collective movement grounded in partnership, courage, and the wisdom of community. Over the past two years, that conviction has taken shape through collaboration among parents, educators, practitioners, and advocates who came together to ask not just how to fix what is broken, but how to build something better. What emerged from that process was not only innovation, but a renewed belief in what becomes possible when trust, compassion, and lived experience lead the way.

This report reflects what we have learned through that journey: that community wisdom is our most powerful tool for change, and that transformation begins when people closest to the problem are centered in shaping the solutions. Through every design session, pilot, and partnership, we witnessed what becomes possible when relationships replace referrals, when trust replaces surveillance, and when families are not penalized but supported when in need. Across every phase of this work, we have seen how care, accountability, and collaboration can transform systems that once responded punitively into ones that nurture, empower, and uplift.

Reimagine has grown from an initiative into a movement for **family justice**. What began as an effort to narrow the front door of child welfare has evolved into a growing network of coalitions and partnerships working toward a shared vision for how our community supports families. We are no longer asking if another way is possible. We are demonstrating that it is. Through the Reimagine Collective and our many partners, we are bringing together leaders, parents, and practitioners who share a deep commitment to redesigning systems around prevention, dignity, and care. Together, these efforts are shaping the blueprint for sustainable change, one rooted in shared accountability and the belief that safety and support must coexist.

As we move forward, we remain focused on deepening this work, strengthening the partnerships that sustain it, and continuing to learn alongside the families and communities we serve. The path ahead calls for persistence, collaboration, and courage. Together, we are contributing to a growing movement that advances a shared vision of **family justice**, rooted in support, trust, and the belief that every family deserves the opportunity to thrive.

As we close this chapter and look toward what comes next, we do so with gratitude for the families who shared their stories, the organizations that committed their time and expertise, and the community that chose hope over fear. Reimagining is not a one-time project; it is a continual act of courage and care. The work ahead will require all of us to remain open, consistent, and rooted in relationship.

We hope this report serves both as a record of what has been accomplished and an invitation to keep going, as a community.

With appreciation and belief in what is possible,

**Brandy Cooper**

Reimagine Fellow, HOPE585

**Dr. Ashley Cross**

Executive Director, HOPE585

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## ABOUT HOPE585

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In 2018, HOPE585 was established as The Hub585, with a narrow but urgent focus: supporting and empowering youth in the foster system. We began by hosting support groups for foster parents, offering respite for teens, and mentoring youth preparing to age out. Year after year, we fought an uphill battle, trying to serve foster families and youth showing deep symptoms of long-standing trauma.

In 2020, we completed our first strategic plan, where we took a hard look at who we were and where we were headed. We focused on establishing our mission, vision, values, and identity. We asked ourselves: *What legacy do we want to leave in this community?* And *What does real impact look like?* This is what we decided:

Although Monroe County sees nearly 400 to 500 children in foster care each year, very few of those children and families are ever fully restored. The system, as it stands, puts little to no effort into healing or reunifying families after separation. So we made a pivotal decision: real impact means preventing child welfare involvement in the first place. Why? Because decades of data continue to tell us the same truth: the current child welfare system is not working. The outcomes are poor, the harm is deep, and the effects last for generations.

## OVERVIEW OF THE REIMAGINE INITIATIVE

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The Reimagine Initiative began with one urgent, undeniable truth: families deserve support that uplifts and honors their dignity, strengthens their resilience, and provides what they truly need to thrive, rooted in their lived reality. In Monroe County and across the nation, families, particularly Black, Brown, and low-income families, too often face separation and systemic harm under the banner of safety. This initiative was born not only from frustration with the status quo, but from a deep and determined hope: that another way is not only possible, but already beginning to take shape.

Over the past year, HOPE585, in partnership with parents, community members, advocates, and cross-sector leaders, has embarked on a bold, community-rooted journey to reimagine child welfare. Together, we've questioned assumptions, surfaced major pain points, uncovered truth, and envisioned new models that center family dignity, relational support, and real hope. Through design sessions, community interviews, policy deep-dives, and developing prototypes for on-the-ground pilots, we've proven what many have long known: we don't need to tweak the current system; we need to create a movement that focuses on narrowing the front door.

The pages that follow chronicle not just activities, but the beginning of a movement towards family justice. You'll read about our collective learning, our growing coalition, and our vision for a "Family Justice" approach that interrupts harm and builds healing at the front door. You'll see how impacted parents, educators, system professionals, and everyday residents are coming together to co-create a future where families are supported and not separated. This isn't just reform. This is a movement.

We offer this report with gratitude, urgency, and resolve. The Reimagine Initiative is not a conclusion. It is a blueprint for what comes next.

## STEERING COMMITTEE ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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The Reimagine Initiative would not have been possible without the insight, commitment, and collaboration of our Steering Committee. This group of trusted leaders brought deep experience, honest perspective, and a shared belief that real change is both necessary and possible. Their guidance helped shape every stage of this work: from vision to implementation.

We are especially grateful to:

- Corinda Reaves, HOPE585 Board Member, RTS
- Diane Larter, Former Systems Leader
- Monica Brown, Greater Rochester Health Foundation
- Gary Domenico, HOPE585 Board Member, Community Member
- Dr. Myra Henry, HOPE585 Board Member, YWCA
- Larry Marx, The Children's Agenda
- Dr. Mical Raz, University of Rochester

## PARTICIPATING STAKEHOLDERS

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- BIPOC Peeeeek
- Cathy Thomas
- Child Advocacy Center of Greater Rochester
- Children's Institute
- City of Rochester
- Coordinated Care Services Inc.
- Corinda Reeves
- Court Appointed Special Advocates of Rochester
- Delphi Rise
- Department of Human Services
- Greece Central School District
- Greater Rochester Health Foundation
- Monroe County Conflict Defender
- Monroe County Public Defender
- New York State Court Improvement Project
- Our Lived Experience Experts
- Rochester City School District
- Rochester-Monroe Anti-Poverty Initiative
- Society for the Protection and Care of Children
- The Children's Agenda
- University of Rochester Medical Center
- Willow Domestic Violence Center
- Wilson Foundation
- YWCA

## HISTORY OF CHILD WELFARE AND MANDATED REPORTING

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Organized child welfare efforts in the United States trace back to 1853 with the founding of the New York Children's Aid Society by Charles Loring Brace (Trattner, 1999). This organization introduced the "placing out" system, which aimed to relocate impoverished children, many of whom had parents who were still living from urban centers to rural families. These placements were intended to meet children's physical needs while also offering the emotional security and structure of a family (Cook, 1995; Nelson, 2020). The Children's Aid Society became best known for launching the Orphan Train Movement, which continued until 1929 and relocated thousands of children from cities like New York to homes across the countryside (Kidder, 2003).

The child welfare movement during the late 19th century was largely framed around a philosophy of "child rescue." Influenced by Brace's approach, this model emphasized removing children from perceived dangerous or morally unfit environments. However, many of these placements lacked sufficient oversight, follow-up, or vetting processes, leaving children vulnerable to new forms of harm (Nelson, 2020). Despite its flaws, the "rescue" mindset helped shape a lasting national belief in the importance of nurturing, family-based care for children.

The concept of child protection as a societal responsibility gained national attention in 1874 with the case of Mary Ellen Wilson, a young girl who suffered extreme abuse by her guardians. At the time, there were no formal child protective services in place. Her rescue was made possible through legal arguments crafted with the help of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, reflecting a significant gap in protections for children (Myers, 2008). The public outcry surrounding her case led to the founding of the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children in 1875, the first organization in the United States dedicated solely to protecting children from harm. Still, these early protective efforts were largely charitable and remained disconnected from state or federal government systems (Myers, 2008).

This early history of child welfare, focused more on moral reform and rescue than structural support, laid the groundwork for the development of modern child protective systems. The shift toward government involvement, mandatory reporting, and professionalized child protection would come decades later, evolving in response to social changes, growing awareness of child abuse, and the institutionalization of systems of surveillance.

## UNPACKING THE HARMS OF MANDATED REPORTING

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In their 2025 article, “Mandated Reporting in the Balance: Reconsidering a Harmful Framework,” Rohr and Friedman take a hard look at how the system of mandated reporting is actually hurting the very families it claims to protect—especially Black, Brown, Indigenous, and low-income families. They explain that what started as a policy to stop severe child abuse has grown into something much bigger and more harmful: a system that watches families too closely, mistakes poverty for neglect, and often makes things worse instead of better.

The authors describe how mandated reporting creates fear and mistrust. Instead of being safe places, schools, hospitals, and social service agencies can feel like traps—where asking for help could lead to an investigation or even losing your children. That fear keeps families from reaching out when they need support. Rohr and Friedman also point out that there’s no strong evidence that mandated reporting actually helps children, but there’s plenty of evidence showing it causes real harm.

They call for a different approach, one that’s based on care, trust, and community, not punishment. They believe families should be supported, not surveilled, and that we need to invest in real solutions that help people thrive. Their message is clear: keeping children safe starts with supporting families, not tearing them apart.

The article highlights how professionals, teachers, doctors, and social workers, are often forced to report families instead of offering support. This makes families less likely to ask for help and more likely to be pulled into a system that separates instead of supports. Rohr and Friedman write that there is no strong evidence that mandated reporting improves outcomes for children, but there is plenty of evidence that it damages trust, relationships, and emotional safety.

“We have built a system in which those most in need of support may be least likely to seek it, for fear that help will bring punishment.”

— *Rohr & Friedman, 2025*

Their call to action aligns closely with the mission of the Reimagine Initiative, which aims to narrow the front door to CPS by centering community, care, and healing over surveillance and punishment. Notably, Melissa Friedman served as a member of the Reimagine Mandated Reporting Working Group, alongside Dr. Ashley Cross and Brandy, the HOPE585 Reimagine Fellow.

## PENALIZING POVERTY

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Over-reporting of poverty related neglect remains one of the most pressing and harmful challenges within New York State's child welfare system. While mandated reporting laws were designed to protect children from serious harm, they have increasingly been applied in cases driven more by poverty and systemic inequities than actual parental neglect. These referrals often lead to unnecessary surveillance, stress, and family separation, disproportionately affecting Black and low-income families, without meaningfully addressing the underlying issues.

In 2023 alone, Monroe County received 8,862 unique reports to the Statewide Central Register of Child Abuse and Maltreatment (SCR), resulting in 7,229 investigations. However, only 21% of these reports were substantiated. Nearly half (49%) of the 446 children in foster care were Black, despite Black families representing a significantly smaller share of the county's overall population. This data mirrors statewide and national trends, where neglect, often indistinguishable from poverty, is the most frequently cited reason for child welfare involvement.

Nationally, approximately 4 million referrals of suspected child maltreatment are made each year. Of those, around 2 million meet the threshold for investigation or alternative response, but only about 600,000 are ultimately substantiated. Among those substantiated cases, 76% involve neglect. These statistics highlight the urgent need to re-evaluate how neglect is defined and reported, particularly when economic hardship is mistaken for willful parental failure.

New York State's current mandated reporter statute reflects this tension. While the law states that "poverty or financial inability to provide for a child is not maltreatment," it simultaneously defines maltreatment to include "failing to provide sufficient food, clothing, shelter, education, or proper supervision, guardianship, or medical care." This contradiction not only creates confusion for mandated reporters but contributes directly to over-reporting, especially in communities already burdened by poverty and structural disinvestment.

# UNPACKING MONROE COUNTY REPORTING DATA

## By Allegation Category Data Refreshed: 3/20/2025

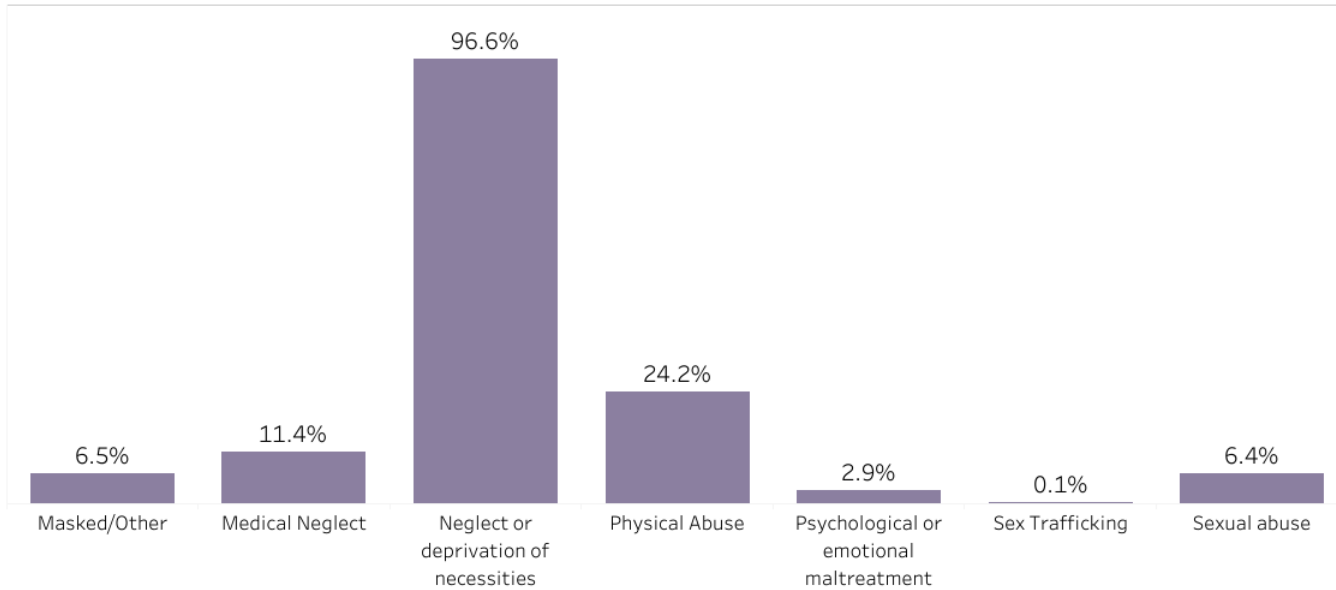


Intake Year: 2024  
Jurisdiction: MONROE  
Allegation Type: Alleged

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2024 MONROE | Alleged Percent of Registered CPS Reports Including a Specific Allegation Category

Total Registered CPS Reports  
**6,768**



In 2024, Monroe County’s alleged CPS reports were overwhelmingly driven by neglect or deprivation of necessities (96.6%), followed by smaller proportions involving physical abuse (24.2%), medical neglect (11.4%), sexual abuse (6.4%), psychological or emotional maltreatment (2.9%), and sex trafficking (0.1%). This pattern highlights that the vast majority of CPS involvement begins with concerns rooted in unmet basic needs rather than abuse, underscoring how poverty-related challenges continue to dominate the reporting landscape.

### By Allegation Category Data Refreshed: 3/20/2025

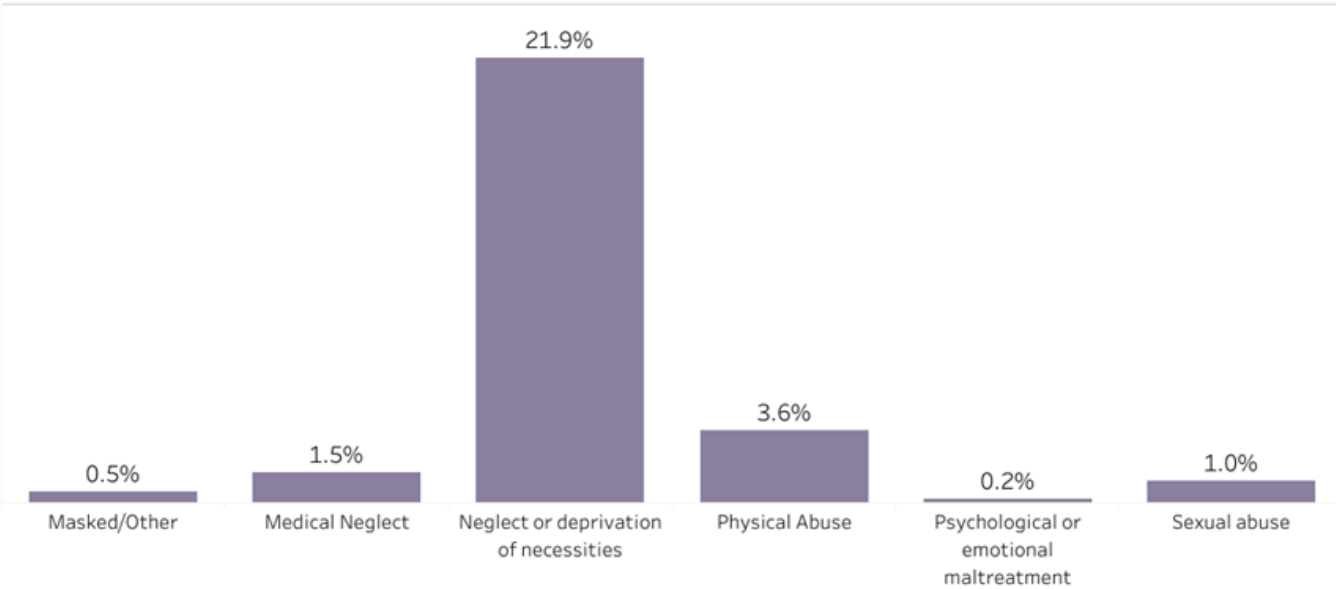


Intake Year: 2024  
Jurisdiction: MONROE  
Allegation Type: Substantiated

[Home](#)

2024 MONROE | Substantiated Percent of Registered CPS Reports Including a Specific Allegation Category

Total Registered CPS Reports  
**6,768**



In 2024, Monroe County’s substantiated CPS reports were overwhelmingly driven by neglect or deprivation of necessities (21.9%), while much smaller proportions involved physical abuse (3.6%), medical neglect (1.5%), sexual abuse (1.0%), and psychological or emotional maltreatment (0.2%). This pattern underscores that poverty-related concerns remain the leading cause of system involvement.

### By Outcome Data Refreshed: 3/20/2025

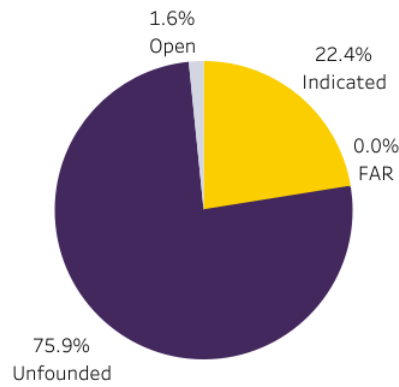


Intake Year: 2024  
Jurisdiction: MONROE

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#### 2024 MONROE | Registered CPS Reports by Outcome

Total Registered CPS Reports  
**6,768**



In Monroe County in 2024, 75.9% of CPS reports were unfounded, while 22.4% were indicated and 1.6% remained open, with no cases assigned to the Family Assessment Response track, showing that the majority of reports did not result in substantiated findings.

**By Source** Data Refreshed: 3/20/2025

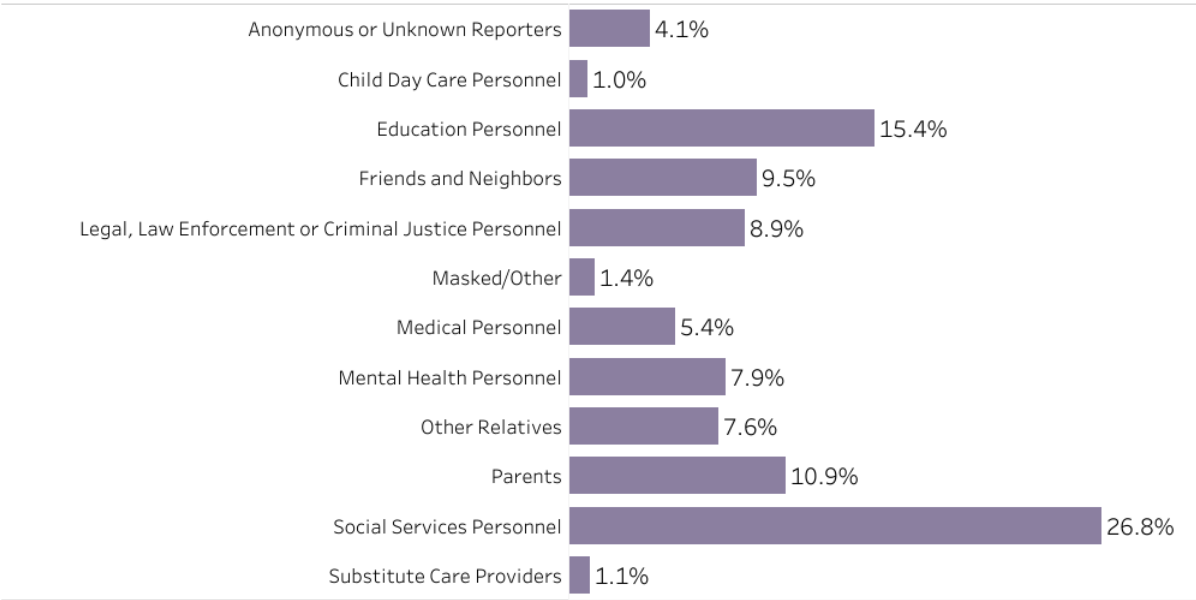


Intake Year: 2024  
Jurisdiction: MONROE

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2024 MONROE | Registered CPS Reports by Source Type

Total Registered  
CPS Reports  
**6,768**



In Monroe County in 2024, the largest share of CPS reports came from social services personnel (26.8%), followed by education personnel (15.4%), parents (10.9%), and friends or neighbors (9.5%), showing that mandated reporters and close contacts of families drive most system involvement.

By Source Data Refreshed: 3/20/2025

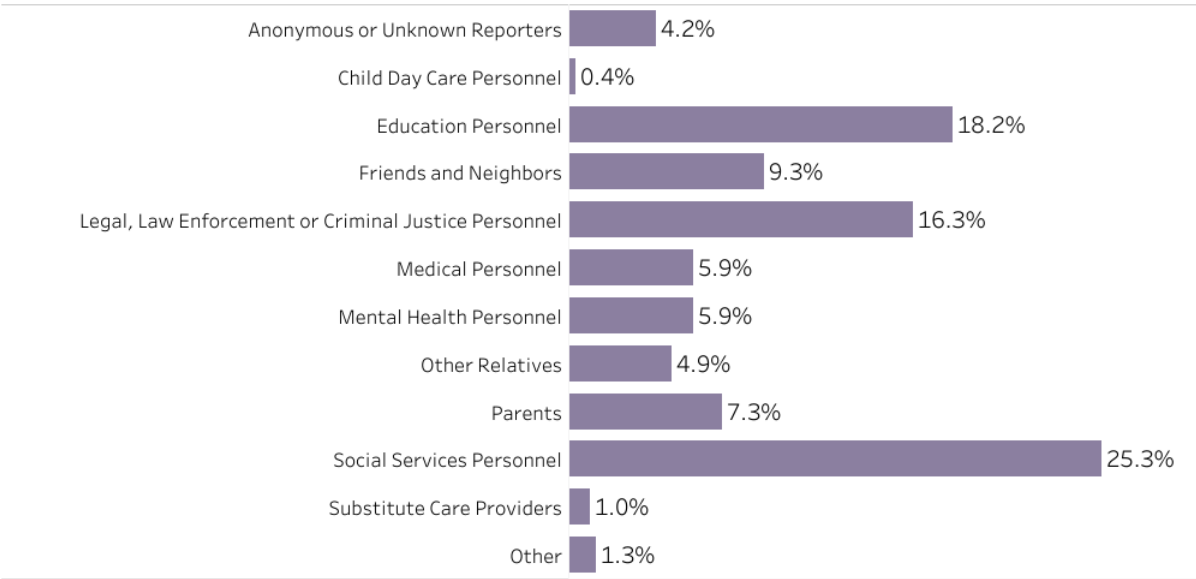


Intake Year: 2024  
Jurisdiction: STATEWIDE

[Home](#)

2024 STATEWIDE | Registered CPS Reports by Source Type

Total Registered CPS Reports  
**143,836**



In 2024, social services personnel were the leading source of CPS reports both statewide (25.3%) and in Monroe County (26.8%), followed by education personnel (18.2% statewide; 15.4% in Monroe) and friends and neighbors (9.3% statewide; 9.5% in Monroe). While Monroe’s overall distribution mirrors statewide patterns, the county shows slightly higher proportions of reports from parents (10.9% vs. 7.3%) and mental health professionals (7.9% vs. 5.9%), suggesting greater involvement of families and service providers at the local level. These similarities reinforce that professionals, not anonymous reporters, continue to drive most CPS referrals, with mandated reporters accounting for the majority of entries into the system.

This pattern underscores a central focus of the Reimagine Initiative: the need to equip professionals, particularly those in schools and social services, with alternative pathways to offer help and connect families to resources without defaulting to a CPS report.

## DEFINITIONS OF ALLEGATIONS UNDER THE NEGLECT CATEGORY

**Maltreated child:** A child under eighteen years of age who is (a) defined as a neglected child by the Family Court Act, or (b) has had serious physical injury inflicted upon them by other than accidental means.

**Neglect:** The failure to provide essential care such as food, clothing, shelter, medical attention, or access to an educational entitlement

Within neglect, several subcategories are recognized:

- **Educational neglect:** When a parent fails to provide a child with an adequate education or ensure their regular school attendance, resulting in impairment or endangerment of the child's mental, emotional, or physical condition.
- **Inadequate food, clothing, and shelter:** The failure to provide basic necessities required for survival and well-being, leading to conditions such as hunger, exposure to the elements, or homelessness.
- **Inadequate guardianship:** When a legal caretaker fails to provide the minimum degree of care for a child, creating or posing a significant risk of harm to the child's physical, mental, or emotional condition.
- **Lack of supervision:** The failure of a caretaker to provide sufficient care or control necessary for a child's well-being, thereby placing the child at risk of harm.
- **Parent's drug/alcohol misuse:** When a parent's substance use impairs or places the child at risk of impairment of their physical or mental condition.

## METHODOLOGY

### Human-Centered Design

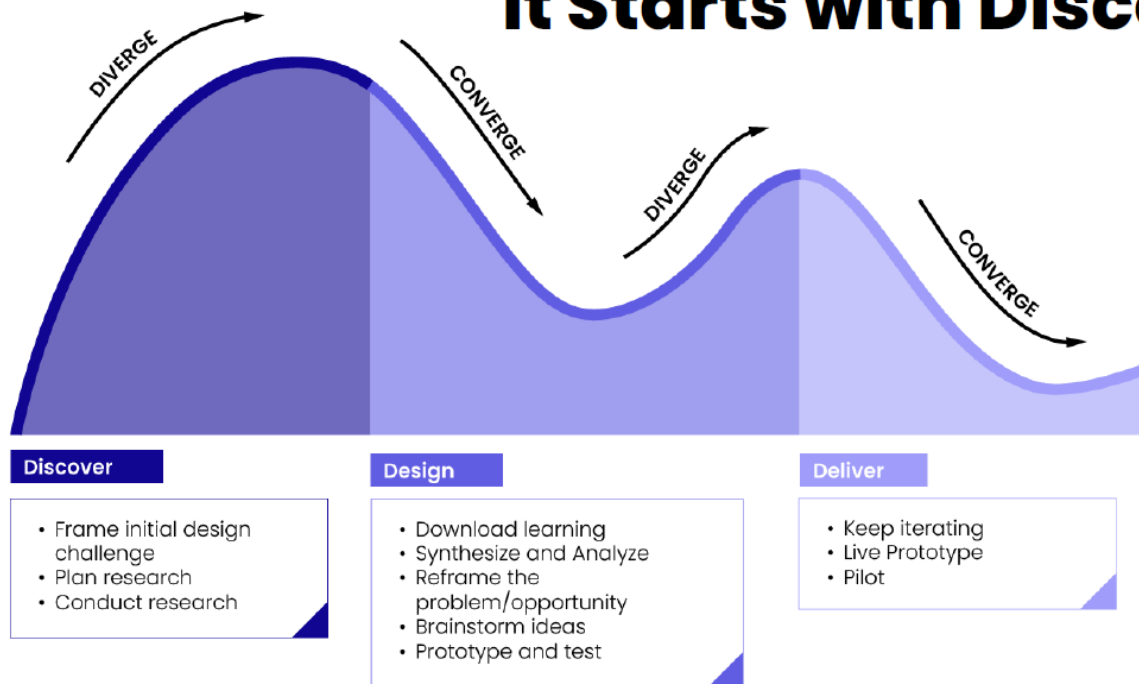
At the heart of Reimagine is a commitment to human-centered design (HCD), a process that centers the knowledge, needs, and lived experiences of those most directly impacted by child welfare interventions. Through our partnership with TogetherNow, a design and strategy firm specializing in co-creation and systems transformation, we were able to move beyond traditional policy development and into collaborative innovation.

Rather than designing reforms in isolation, TogetherNow guided us through a rigorous and relational HCD process that uplifted families as experts, not subjects. Their partnership ensured that every step, from discovery to prototyping to piloting, was grounded in dignity, transparency, and equity.

### Facilitators

Each design session of the Reimagine Initiative was co-led by Angee Brown and Maria O'Brien of TogetherNow, who served as collaborative facilitators throughout the process. Together, they guided participants through Human-Centered Design (HCD) methods, creating a supportive and creative environment to generate community-driven solutions to achieve our united goal of narrowing the front door to CPS.

## It Starts with Discovery



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## Reimagine Kickoff: Good Conflict Session- August 19, 2024

**Session Overview** – As part of our Reimagine kickoff, we grounded ourselves with a *Good Conflict* session led by H  l  ne Biandudi Hofer, who introduced a framework designed to transform divisive tension into meaningful dialogue. The session helped participants examine the “us vs. them” dynamics that often shape institutional and community relationships, providing a shared language for engaging difference with curiosity rather than certainty.

**Key Takeaways** – Through guided discussion and interactive reflection, participants explored how unresolved conflict can fuel misunderstanding and distrust across systems. Using accessible tools and concepts, the group identified emotional and structural roots of tension such as power, recognition, and overwhelm. They also practiced communication strategies that promote empathy, humility, and accountability. The session prepared participants to approach the design process with openness and trust, reinforcing the importance of dialogue that honors complexity and lived experience. By practicing *good conflict*, the Collective strengthened its capacity to build solutions that foster connection, resist binary thinking, and sustain collaboration across Monroe County’s child and family-serving ecosystem.

## Design Session #1: Framing the Challenge- September 17, 2024

**Session Overview**- Launched the Human-Centered Design process and framed our core question: *How might we reduce unnecessary CPS involvement?* Participants brainstormed sub-challenges through the “How Might We” method, laying the foundation for community-led systems change.

**Key Takeaways**- In our first Reimagine Design Session, we launched the Human-Centered Design process with a diverse group of community stakeholders. Participants were introduced to the core mindsets and methods of HCD, including empathy, creative confidence, and iterative problem-solving, as a foundation for reimagining how we respond to child neglect and poverty. Together, we framed the central design challenge: *How might we reduce unnecessary Child Protective Services involvement?* Through interactive activities and small-group brainstorming, participants generated a wide range of sub-challenges in the form of “How Might We” questions. This session laid the groundwork for forming design teams and initiating research that would guide our collective path forward.

## Design Session #2: Preparing for Discovery- October 17, 2024

**Session Overview**- Design teams were formed and trained to conduct community interviews. Emphasis was placed on care-centered engagement and identifying voices often left out of traditional systems work.

**Key Take Aways**- In our second Reimagine Design Session, our stakeholders moved from framing challenges to preparing for discovery-based research using Human-Centered Design principles. With design teams now formed around specific “How Might We” questions, the session focused on developing research plans grounded in empathy, curiosity, and community voice. Teams identified who they needed to hear from, especially those most impacted by CPS involvement, and began crafting interview questions and field strategies. Emphasis was placed on relationship-building practices, deep listening, and uncovering the hopes, fears, and lived experiences that often go unseen in traditional systems work. This session marked the transition from idea generation to direct community engagement, setting the foundation for meaningful, insight-driven design.

### Design Session #3: Synthesizing What We Heard- January 16, 2025

**Session Overview-** Teams reflected on insights from field research, surfacing patterns of distrust, systemic barriers, and unmet needs. Themes emerged to shape the next phase of solution-building.

**Key Take Aways-** Reimagine participants gathered for our third design session to reflect on the community research completed during the discovery phase. Design teams shared insights from interviews, observations, and conversations with families, mandated reporters, and service providers, surfacing patterns around trust, stigma, access, and systemic barriers. The session offered space to process both the challenges and rewards of the fieldwork, while surfacing what voices were still missing or questions left unanswered. Through guided reflection, teams began to identify emerging themes that would inform the next stage of the process: translating lived experience into clear opportunities for change. This session marked a key shift from discovery to synthesis, which prepared teams to move from insight to action in the sessions ahead.

### Design Session #4: Translating Insights into Ideas- February 13, 2025

**Session Overview-** Teams turned lived experience into actionable ideas by drafting new “How Might We” questions and collaboratively brainstorming bold, community-rooted solutions.

**Key Take Aways-** With nearly 50 interviews completed, Session Four marked the official pivot from discovery to design. Participants reviewed synthesized interview findings and created refined “How Might We” questions rooted in the real needs and wisdom of families. Teams then rotated through group brainstorms, building on one another’s ideas to generate creative, community driven solutions. This session sparked momentum, as participants shifted from understanding the problem to envisioning what could be built in its place.

### Design Session #5: Building What We Imagine- March 13, 2025

**Session Overview-** Participants engaged in rapid prototyping, creating first drafts of tangible solutions. Tools like journey maps, storyboards, and role plays helped bring ideas to life and prepare for real-world testing.

**Key Take Aways-** Session Five marked a major creative leap in the Reimagine process. With three refined design challenges in hand, participants engaged in rapid prototyping to bring their ideas to life. Teams selected their most promising solutions and used tools like journey maps, storyboards, mock-ups, and role play to test and refine them. Rooted in lived experience and community wisdom, each prototype was built with feedback in mind, encouraging participants to listen deeply, iterate quickly, and remain open to co-creation. This session embodied the transition from abstract ideas to tangible designs, igniting excitement about the real, practical possibilities for change that communities could begin to implement and own.

## Design Session #6: Refining Solutions through Iteration- May 15, 2025

**Session Overview-** Teams presented Iteration #2 of their prototypes, integrating feedback and advancing toward viable models for community use. The session deepened commitment to co-creation and sustained impact.

**Key Take Aways-** During Design Session Six, Reimagine teams reconvened to share Iteration #2 of their solution prototypes, each centered on one of three core challenges: strengthening a culture of goodwill and prevention, building a sustainable preventative pathway, and equipping mandated reporters to lead with empathy and understanding.

Teams refined and presented **eight solution prototypes** aligned with three core challenges:

1. How might we establish a culture that begins with the assumption of goodwill and effectively provides preventative resources prior to CPS involvement?
2. How might we create and fund a preventative pathway?
3. How might we support mandated reporters and involve the community to approach situations with empathy, cultural understanding, and trauma-informed care?

## Design Session #7: Aligning for Action- June 12, 2025

**Session Overview-** Final prototypes were shared and evaluated. Participants prioritized four refined solutions, each addressing core design challenges. The stage is now set for pilot planning in the next session.

**Key Take Aways-** Design Session Seven marked a pivotal moment of convergence, as participants entered the final stage of the prototyping process. Teams shared their third iteration of solution designs, now more refined, integrated, and grounded in community feedback. Four comprehensive prototypes were presented, each addressing one or more of the initiative's core challenges: building a preventative pathway, supporting mandated reporters with empathy and cultural responsiveness, and shifting toward a culture rooted in trust and care. Participants completed a prioritization survey to assess which solutions were most viable and ready for pilot implementation. The energy in the room reflected growing alignment, clarity, and collective readiness to move from design to delivery. With feedback synthesized and solutions honed, the stage was now set for Reimagine's final session, where planning for community-built pilot execution will begin.

## Design Session #8: Journey At A Glance – July 17, 2025

**Session Overview –** The final design session reflected on the full journey and evaluated four refined prototypes through the lens of desirability, feasibility, and sustainability, setting the stage for pilot launch.

**Key Take Aways-** Session Eight was both reflective and forward-looking. Participants celebrated the progress made and engaged critically with what it will take to move from design to pilot implementation. Consolidated feedback surfaced both enthusiasm and caution: barriers such as sustainable funding, staffing with lived experience, and securing RCSD buy-in remain front of mind. At the same time, there was strong agreement that success means shifting school culture toward support, building family trust, and tracking positive outcomes alongside reduced CPS reports. The proposed pilot, which merges elements of the school outreach team and toolkit, is already taking shape: RCSD is moving forward with an MOU, Hope585 has secured funding for a Navigator, and four high-report schools have been identified. With a clear six-month pilot timeline beginning in September, the session closed with collective energy and commitment to advancing from design to action.

## THEMES OF COMMUNITY INTERVIEWS

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In collaboration with HOPE585 and local partners, TogetherNow trained and supported community members to serve as interviewers and co-researchers. These interviewers, many with direct experience navigating CPS, conducted interviews, gathered insights, and ensured cultural and emotional resonance throughout the process.

### Theme 1: Rethinking Mandated Reporting and Alternative Responses

#### Key Observations:

1. Many mandated reporters feel they have no option other than calling CPS, even when the situation may not warrant an investigation.
2. The environment of the mandated reporter matters—teachers vs. child psychiatrists experience different types of cases and have varying levels of understanding around how to handle social care crises.
3. A previous alternative response initiative (FAR/FARR Team) in Monroe County was well-liked but wasn't sustained.

#### Opportunities & Ideas:

1. Require deeper training for mandated reporters
2. Require family intervention first before making a CPS report when possible.
3. Improve alternative response systems so families receive the right type of intervention (e.g., community-based supports instead of automatic CPS cases).
4. Better communication & coordination between CPS and community providers.

### Theme 2: Expanding Access to Services & Community Supports

#### Key Observations:

1. Lack of respite services was one of the most common gaps identified in the interviews.
2. Material assistance alone is not enough—families need guidance, education, and wraparound supports to help them break cycles of poverty.
3. Families struggle to find and access available services due to lack of centralized information.

#### Opportunities & Ideas:

1. Create mid-level home-based care resources to support families before a crisis escalates.
2. Develop a single, centralized hub for services that makes finding community resources easier.
3. Expand respite care options for families who aren't already connected to services.
4. Create shelter options for single parents trying to save money and gain stability.
5. Ensure hospitals offer Family Peer Advocates to support families navigating psychiatric crises.

## Theme 3: Strengthening Family-Centered & Community-Driven Approaches

### Key Observations:

1. Many felt CPS should be more community-driven rather than government-driven.
2. Families want more say in decision-making around child welfare cases.
3. CPS lacks presence at community events, contributing to mistrust of the system.
4. There is demand for more transparency and education around parent rights.

### Opportunities & Ideas:

1. Shift decision-making authority to families & trusted networks where safe and appropriate.
2. Require CPS to have a presence at community events (like the Rochester Police Department does) to build trust.
3. Create more info sessions & materials on parent rights so families know what to expect when involved with CPS.
4. Develop a transitional space or mid-level housing to help families slowly de-escalate crises without immediate system involvement.

## CENTERING LIVED EXPERTISE THROUGH STORYTELLING

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As part of our commitment to honoring community voice, Reimagine completed three video storytelling projects featuring parents and caregivers with lived experience in the child welfare system. These participants were compensated \$500 each for their time, labor, and the emotional energy required to share their stories publicly. These videos will serve as powerful tools for education, advocacy, and policy transformation, centering real people, not just statistics.

### Chris's Story

Chris's story underscores how families asking for help are often denied the very supports that could keep them together. When CPS became involved with his children's mother, it was discovered that Chris's youngest child was malnourished. The children were in the care of their mother, but Chris, as their father, wanted to take them and simply asked for assistance in obtaining suitable housing, since he was living in a rooming house. Instead of helping him secure that stability, CPS denied his request and placed the children in foster care. His two children spent a year separated from him, even though what he needed was within reach. It wasn't until Chris connected with HOPE585 that things shifted and he was able to secure housing, create a safe place for his children, and bring them home. Today, they remain in his care and are thriving.

### Veronica's Story

Veronica's story highlights how families in crisis are often met with silence from systems that are supposed to help. When she found herself homeless with her children, she made the difficult decision to call CPS on herself, believing it would connect her to support. Instead, an investigation was opened, but no meaningful help came. With nowhere else to turn, Veronica used what little money she had to pay for a hotel out of pocket, just to keep her children safe. But when those funds ran out, she was forced to live in her car.

With an open case, Veronica just knew that she would get the help she was seeking. Instead, throughout this time, Veronica had little to no contact with her CPS worker, despite the open case. It wasn't until she connected with HOPE585 that things began to shift. The organization stepped in to provide assistance finding a place, financial support for the security deposit, and a compassionate response rooted in *support*, not surveillance.

### Lakia's Story

Lakia experienced firsthand how invasive and ineffective an unnecessary CPS investigation can be. Her case remained open for five months with little contact or support from her caseworker, even as she lost her job and housing. Forced to pay out-of-pocket for a hotel while homeless with her daughter, Lakia only learned about emergency housing assistance through word of mouth, not from CPS. It wasn't until her worker referred her to HOPE585 that real help arrived. With support from HOPE585, which included housing navigation and cash assistance, Lakia secured stable housing. Only then did CPS return to close her case. Her story illustrates what families already know: trusted community organizations can meet needs and strengthen families, *without* the trauma of CPS involvement.

## REIMAGINE PILOTS

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As part of this initiative, the Reimagine stakeholders moved from vision to action, translating design session insights, community interviews, and policy research into concrete strategies that could be tested on the ground. What follows are the first two pilot programs developed through this process. Each pilot is designed to demonstrate how we can narrow the front door to CPS by meeting families with care and resources instead of surveillance and punishment.

### Pilot 1 (Planned Approach and Intended Outcomes)

#### School-Based Resource Navigator Pilot

As part of the Reimagine initiative, HOPE585 will launch a pilot program placing a Resource Navigator directly within two Rochester City Schools, School 33 and East Upper High School, to provide early, relationship-centered support to families before their needs escalate into CPS involvement. The pilot is grounded in the belief that schools are natural and trusted entry points for engaging families, and that community-based support is more effective than surveillance in addressing family needs.

The Resource Navigator will work closely with school staff to identify families experiencing challenges such as housing instability, food insecurity, utility shutoffs, or parenting stress. Rather than defaulting to a CPS report, staff will be able to refer families to the Navigator, who will provide immediate, non-punitive support, resource coordination, and warm follow-up, all framed around trust, cultural humility, and lived experience.

We anticipate that the results will demonstrate that families feel supported and respected, and that school staff value having a trauma-informed, community-based alternative to calling the State Central Register (SCR). This pilot is intended to offer a concrete example of what it means to narrow the front door to CPS by meeting families with help and support, while ensuring schools are equipped to respond to need with care.

### Pilot 2

#### Mandated Reporting Toolkit Pilot

The second pilot under the Reimagine initiative will focus on developing and testing a Mandated Reporting Toolkit designed to help professionals navigate their responsibilities with clarity, compassion, and an understanding of the harm that overreporting can cause. The toolkit will be created in response to the widespread confusion, fear, and default-to-reporting culture among mandated reporters, particularly those working in education, healthcare, and community-based settings.

This toolkit will provide concrete guidance on how to distinguish poverty from neglect, reflect on personal bias, explore alternative pathways to support, and understand the legal definitions of maltreatment. It will also include practical tools such as decision trees, conversation prompts, and community resource referral options, equipping professionals to slow down, ask better questions, and seek help without automatically involving CPS.

The toolkit will be piloted through targeted trainings with professionals across multiple sectors, who will provide feedback on its usability and impact. We anticipate that the toolkit will help shift thinking from “reporting first” to “supporting first,” offering a clear framework for narrowing the front door to the child welfare system.

This pilot will underscore that culture change begins with tools that center dignity and offer real alternatives, especially for professionals who want to do right by families but have lacked the guidance and resources to do so.

## LIMITATIONS AND BARRIERS

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Throughout this initiative, several barriers have shaped the pace and scope of our work. Access to data and consistency across sources has been a persistent challenge, limiting our ability to track trends and measure impact in real time. Our partnership with the Rochester City School District began slowly, but gained momentum as direct engagement and collaboration with School 33 and East High School deepened. These relationships demonstrated the value of persistence and trust-building in achieving meaningful collaboration. Other challenges included the time required to align multiple systems and stakeholders. We also had to navigate structural inequities that often complicate efforts to divert families from unnecessary system involvement. Despite these barriers, the progress achieved highlights the importance of sustained commitment and collective problem-solving.

## REIMAGINE COLLECTIVE

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As we transition into the next phase of our work, several key stakeholders are joining the Reimagine Collective to sustain and deepen this vision. These include CCSI, SPCC, the Children’s Agenda, the Department of Human Services (DHS), Rochester City School District – East High School, Monroe County’s Public Defender’s Office, Delphi Rise, Monroe County Conflict Defender’s Office, and the University of Rochester Medical Center/Golisano Children’s Hospital Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. Together, these organizations bring a wealth of expertise and commitment to family well-being, and their collaboration within the Collective will strengthen our shared efforts to reduce unnecessary system involvement, expand supportive pathways, and build a community-centered response to family needs.

## REIMAGINE COLLECTIVE CHARTER

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The Reimagine Collective brings together key partners to coordinate, align, and strengthen our shared efforts to support families and reduce unnecessary child welfare involvement. This group is designed to foster collaboration, accountability, and collective data-driven problem-solving across systems. It also provides support to help mandated reporters access resources and make informed decisions. This support equips them with guidance, tools, and connections to community partners so they can respond appropriately and with confidence.

### Commitments

- Meet quarterly to review progress, share updates, and identify opportunities for alignment.
- Provide a forum for reviewing pilot implementation, sharing feedback, and making adjustments together.
- Contribute data, expertise, and insights to strengthen the work.
- Support ongoing communication, transparency, and shared accountability.
- Uphold the values of dignity, equity, and prevention-first approaches.

### Scope

The Collective serves as an advisory and accountability body, ensuring that pilots and programs are grounded in collaboration, responsive to mandated reporting challenges, and reflective of community needs.

### Next Steps

- Quarterly meetings will be scheduled and facilitated by HOPE585.
- Pilot feedback and updates will be a standing agenda item at each meeting.
- Sub-groups may form around data, policy, mandated reporting, or pilot implementation as needed.

## SOLUTIONS TO ADDRESSING THE OVER-REPORTING OF FAMILIES

### Anti-Harassment in Reporting Law (A66/S550)

During the Reimagine initiative, our Executive Director, Dr. Ashley Cross, Reimagine Fellow Brandy Cooper, and HOPE585 lent enthusiastic support to **New York's Anti-Harassment in Reporting Law (A66/S550)**, which bans anonymous calls to the State's child abuse hotline. Sponsored by Senator Jabari Brisport and Assemblymember Andrew Hevesi, the law now requires callers to identify themselves, while maintaining confidentiality, to deter malicious, unfounded tips. This reform responds to findings that anonymous reports often lead to unnecessary, traumatizing home invasions, with **96 percent** deemed baseless, disproportionately harming Black, Brown, and families affected by domestic violence.

HOPE585 applauds this shift because it curtails misuse of the hotline, preserves caseworker capacity for genuine threats, and safeguards family integrity. This legislative step aligns with our mission: replacing punitive surveillance with trust-based, community-rooted solutions that truly protect children.

### Supporting Families Together Act (A2135)

The Supporting Families Together Act recognizes that unclear definitions of neglect and the fear of penalties have led to decades of over-reporting families for poverty-related needs rather than maltreatment. Sponsored by Assemblymember Andrew Hevesi, this legislation repeals civil and criminal penalties for mandated reporters, granting professionals the discretion to connect families to support rather than defaulting to CPS reports. The measure represents a culture shift from fear-based compliance to partnership and prevention, rebuilding trust between families and the professionals who serve them.

HOPE585 and Reimagine endorses this legislation as a critical step toward family justice. By refocusing resources on early help instead of surveillance, the Act aligns with our belief that child and family well-being is best achieved through collaboration, compassion, and access to support.

### Child & Family Wellbeing Fund

The Child and Family Wellbeing Fund offers a community-driven model for strengthening families before crises occur. Proposed as part of the Child and Family Reinvestment Act, it directs state resources to small, trusted local organizations, especially those unaffiliated with CPS, to build the social, economic, and emotional infrastructure families need to thrive. Grounded in an anti-racist, asset-based framework, the Fund invests in neighborhood stability, community connection, and trust as key strategies for preventing unnecessary system involvement.

HOPE585 supports this approach as a visionary policy solution that shifts decision-making and funding power back to communities. By resourcing grassroots organizations and centering lived experience, the Fund redefines child welfare as collective well-being. It embodies our shared commitment to ensuring every family has the opportunity to grow, heal, and remain safely together.

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