

Chair, Representative Luke Meerman, and members of the Child Welfare Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Dawnika Benson. I am here to share my experience as a former Michigan Department of Health and Human Services employee, and how the practices within DHHS have resulted in a lifetime sanction I was never informed of a sanction that has profoundly affected my career, my stability, and my life.

I began my work with the State of Michigan DHHS in April of 2011 as a foster care worker. For the first two years, and again after returning in 2015, I served families with pride, purpose, and a deep sense of calling. As someone who experienced abuse and neglect as a child, I knew firsthand what it felt like to fall through the cracks. My personal mission was to ensure no child I served would ever be able to say, as I once did, that the system failed them. My dedication was not just professional, it was personal, and it shaped every decision I made.

As a foster care specialist, I thrived. I had a strong record, strong outcomes, and no disciplinary history. I never received a write-up in more than a decade of service, never called off work, and consistently went above what was required because I believed the work mattered.

After two more years, I was promoted not into foster care supervision, where I had excelled, but into CPS supervision, where it became clear that some expected me to fail. Instead, I excelled again. I sought out all the training that was never provided but nonetheless expected. I committed myself to the safety of children and the integrity of the process.

But along with that promotion came a shift sudden, sharp, and damaging. I faced consistent bullying for asking questions or challenging practices that I believed compromised children or families. I was placed under a supervisor who, instead of developing or guiding her team, seemed intent on belittling, isolating, and undermining me. For the first time in my career, I was placed under multiple internal investigations none of which alleged anything I had done directly. Instead, they focused on actions of staff members and were used to build a narrative that I was failing as a supervisor.

The situation became so severe that I began experiencing intense stress responses to the point where receiving a call from the office triggered physical symptoms. My therapist diagnosed me with severe PTSD resulting directly from my work environment. She pulled me from work and provided DHHS with documentation after every session. Despite this, I was told I could not request reassignment. The environment that had once given me purpose now left me feeling destroyed.

Ultimately, I resigned. I left the career I had poured my heart into because it had become a threat to my health, my stability, my family, and my life. And even after leaving, I never fully recovered from what that period stole from me.

Years later, after rebuilding my education and experience earning another Master's degree and working across several agencies I was offered a position serving individuals connected with the Michigan Department of Corrections. My background check cleared, but I was unexpectedly

contacted and informed that the State of Michigan had issued a lifetime sanction against me. I was told I was ineligible to work for the state or any of its contractors or affiliates.

This was the first I had ever heard of such a sanction. I never received a letter. I never received notice. I never had the opportunity to respond, appeal, or even understand what the basis was. Yet this sanction effectively blacklisted me from an entire sector of work a sector I had served for most of my life.

Despite this, I continued to rebuild. I accepted a position as Director at Wolverine Human Services, a private agency with previous challenges in its relationship with the state. I made it my mission to repair that relationship. I rewrote programs, updated policies, strengthened oversight, and invited state leaders to observe the progress. I received praise, including from Mr. Starling, who noted significant improvements in the reduction of physical incidents and complimented my leadership. Local emergency personnel echoed the same.

But accountability brings pushback. Staff who were being held to new standards, or were under investigation themselves, retaliated by filing false CPS complaints against me. In August 2025, I became the subject of allegations of verbal abuse allegations investigated by two individuals I knew by reputation from my time with the state: Kerri Rupe and Venus Decker.

From the start, the investigation lacked transparency and integrity. I was never informed that I was the subject of the allegations until the end. My staff later reported that during their own

interviews, they felt intimidated doors slammed, voices raised, and pressure applied to change their answers to fit a predetermined narrative.

When I was finally interviewed, I answered every question truthfully. I was then told that “every staff member said the opposite of what I said.” Based on my knowledge of the staff involved including one that was under investigation at the time and another recently returned from suspension I questioned whether that was accurate.

When the final report was released, my concerns were confirmed. The report prepared by Ms. Rupe contained false statements, omissions, and personal opinions unsupported by testimony. She added allegations no staff member ever made including claiming I called a youth “worthless” and “a fuck-up,” statements that no witness reported and that I have never made. She omitted critical context, including the youth’s history of over 200 incident reports for severe behavioral challenges, and ignored testimony regarding the conduct of staff involved.

Fortunately, I had recorded my interview and those recordings proved that certain statements attributed to me, or to staff, never occurred. My attorney submitted formal requests for amendment. Those requests were ignored. I requested review. I was ignored again. And because that report was allowed to stand, my professional credibility and my ability to continue serving vulnerable populations was put in jeopardy once again.

I have now taken steps to pursue legal action, not because I seek revenge, but because my career, my credibility, and my reputation have been permanently harmed by false allegations and an investigative process that lacked transparency, fairness, integrity and accountability.

This is the second time DHHS has taken something from me first my career, then my ability to work in my field at all. I will not allow this to be swept under the rug, because I know I am not the only one. When systems operate without oversight, without due process, and without accountability, good professionals are pushed out and vulnerable children are the ones who suffer.

My story is not about bitterness; it is about accountability. It is about ensuring that no worker is ever sanctioned for life without notice, without explanation, and without a chance to respond. It is about ensuring that investigations are conducted fairly, transparently, and without intimidation. And most importantly, it is about ensuring that the child welfare system in Michigan protects not only children, but the integrity of the professionals who serve them.

Thank you for your time. I welcome any questions.