Mary Callahan

For many years, Mary Callahan of Lisbon, Maine was a foster parent. Over and over, children were placed with her who she felt could have remained safely in their homes had the birth parents simply received the same financial assistance she was getting as a foster parent. She felt that the child welfare system in Maine focused too much on keeping children in the foster care system as opposed to reuniting them with their families.

Realizing that she was part of the problem, Mary began passionately advocating for change throughout her state. In 2003, the Governor of Maine, John Baldacci, named Mary to a key reform panel that helped enact change in Maine’s child welfare system. Specifically, she helped Maine refocus on keeping families together when possible.

Thanks, in part, to Mary’s contributions and unwavering commitment to the rights of parents and children, Maine’s foster care system has improved significantly. In 2009, the transformation of the child welfare system in Maine was a finalist for the Harvard Kennedy School of Government’s Innovation in American Government awards. Many feel that the positive changes would not have been possible without Mary’s contributions.

We had the pleasure of interviewing this inspiring individual.

By: Elizabeth Ottman, J.D. Candidate 2017

Tell me something interesting about yourself.

While I no longer foster children, I now foster dogs! I currently have 6 small dogs.

I have also written three books. The first was about raising my autistic son (Fighting for Tony) and another was about my experiences as a foster parent (Memoirs of a Baby Stealer: Lessons I've Learned as a Foster Mother). My third book was about and for patients with lung disease (Breathe Out: Living Life to the Fullest, with Emphysema, COPD, or Smoker’s Lung).

What made you interested in child welfare?

My parents took foster children, so I grew up knowing the child welfare system. Similar to most foster parents, I assumed the kids were coming from horrible homes and I was helping them. After my first couple of foster kids, I began to realize that was rarely the case.
How long have you worked in child welfare?

I am no longer a foster parent and now work as a nurse, but I was a foster parent for around 15 years. In total, I fostered 12 kids and adopted 2 of them.

What was one experience that had a big impact on the way you think about reunification?

The case of Logan Marr had a huge impact on me, as well as the entire state of Maine as far as child welfare reform goes. Logan was a little girl who was put in foster care and was killed by her second foster mother, a former case worker with Maine's Child Welfare Agency. She was duct taped to a high chair in an unfinished basement and died of asphyxiation. Logan could have been safely kept with her mother; however, Maine's child welfare system focused on placing kids in foster care rather than coming up with solutions to keep families together. Logan's tragic story brought Maine's child welfare issues to light, but it is far from an atypical case, which is why I decided to start talking to try to help reform the system.

You can read more about Logan's story here: [http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/fostercare/marr/](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/fostercare/marr/)

What were some of the weaknesses of the child welfare system in your area?

When I became a foster parent, Maine had one of the worst child welfare systems in the country. We had a higher percentage of kids in care than all but 3 other states, virtually no reunification with birth parents, and the state was philosophically opposed to kinship care. Additionally, similar to most child welfare systems, there is a financial scheme at work within the child welfare system in Maine where those working for the system have a financial incentive to keep kids in the system. Funding for the foster care system is better when more kids are in the system, while funding for prevention is lacking. Until this financial system changes, I think it will be difficult to see any lasting change.

Describe some efforts you have made to improve child welfare practices in your area.

Once I fully appreciated the extent of the issues within the system, I realized that if I wasn't part of the solution, I was part of the problem. It's difficult for foster parents to speak out against the Child Welfare system because they have so much power. They can take your children, your financial support, and your reputation if they want to.

I had less to lose than most. My children were grown and I had a fallback career as a registered nurse, so I realized I was in the best position to help. I began by going to a public hearing to discuss issues within the system. Pretty much all of those speaking out against the system were parents - I was the only foster parent.

I made a three-minute speech stressing that the system was taking kids from places that weren't that bad, putting them in places that weren't that good, and completely ignoring the bond that exists between a parent and child. The parents were very appreciative to have someone from within the system speaking out about the unfairness of the system and how it is stacked against parents/reunification.

I also learned that Eddie Dugay, Representative for Maine's 33rd District, was leading an 80-mile march to the State Capitol during a Maine winter to bring attention to child welfare reform. I decided I had to be part of it, as did nearly 100 others. We made the journey in 4 days. Because a large snow storm hit while we were walking, the march received a lot of media attention and shed light on the deficiencies in the Maine system. The group that walked became the beginning of the Maine Alliance for DHS Accountability and Reform (MADAR).

In January, 2003, Governor John Baldacci saw that there were problems within Maine's child welfare system, and the head of DHS suddenly resigned. New leadership came in and made all the changes possible. Governor Baldacci put me and other members of MADAR on a committee to help reorganize DHS. At the first committee
meeting, each member of the group found a copy of my book, *Memoirs of a Baby Stealer: Lessons I've Learned as a Foster Mother*, waiting for them.

The committee moved slowly and I attended many long tedious meetings that didn't seem to promote much lasting change. We were running up against brick walls all the time. That said, the numbers did improve. There were fewer children in foster care, and new leadership at CPS started emphasizing kinship care as opposed to putting the kids with strangers.

In March 2004, MADAR picketed DHS in Portland and also organized the Unfair Fair, which was a series of exhibits about the injustices of the system.

**Do you think there are any public misconceptions about the child welfare system? If so, what are they?**

I think the main misconception is that the public thinks the parents are always horrible and the state is always good. It is a much more complex issue than something that black and white. It’s important to listen to the parents and to hear their side of the story. Perhaps the issues with the child are stemming from a medical condition, special needs, a rumor, or some miscommunication.

These parents are not always drug addicts who abuse their kids – in fact, in my experience, that is rarely the case. A lot of times these parents just need help, and the state doesn’t always provide it. Instead, they react immediately by taking the child away, which is traumatic for both the parents and the kids. At least, that is the way it was before the reforms here in Maine.

**What advice would you give to judges, directors, legislators, governors, or the President about how to improve the system?**

My main concern is that there were not enough fundamental changes implemented to ensure lasting change. I worry about the system drifting back to what it was before.

One thing that would guard against that would be a change in the financial scheme at work in child welfare systems across the country. When those in power benefit financially from keeping kids in the system, there is a high risk of potential mismanagement and abuse. If it’s more profitable to have kids in foster care, where is the incentive to reunify the children with their parents?

A series of financial incentives both for governments and for private agencies that provide must of America’s substitute care encourage keeping children in foster care and discourage keeping families together. These incentives should be reversed. States and private agencies should be rewarded for safely keeping families together and penalized for leaving children trapped in foster care.

**What is one thing you recommend in working with parents to increase the likelihood of reunification?**

As soon as your kids are taken into custody, request a "Family Team Meeting." This is a meeting where the parents can invite whoever they want and everyone works together to try to come up with a plan on how to get through the difficult time. They can bring people who support them to vouch for them as good parents, or people who can maybe offer alternative placements for the children so that they do not have to go with strangers.

I would also recommend that parents try their best to remain calm and reasonable. I know it's asking an impossible task - who would be able to remain calm and reasonable when your child is being taken from you? But fake it if you can. Once you are known as being "crazy" or "angry," it will just make it that much harder to get your kid back. You don't want to provide the state with any additional reasons to keep your children from you.
Finally, know your rights. Do what you can to educate yourself and be your own advocate. When we picketed someone carried a sign that said: "If you don’t know your rights, you don't have any." That is so true.

**What advice would you give to other professionals who work in child welfare? Or to individuals considering working in child welfare?**

I think it’s important to remember that kids want to be with their families even if they aren't perfect. For these kids who are being taken out of their homes, their world is getting turned upside down. It's important to fully comprehend the enormous impact that removing the kids from their homes and placing them into the system will have on the rest of their lives.

Additionally, keep in mind that a lot of these parents are young ex-foster kids themselves. Shouldn't we be trying to help them become better parents? It’s a vicious cycle where support services for parents could really make a difference.

Most importantly, be sensitive, be compassionate, and trust to your gut.