

To the Honorable Governor Nikki Haley,

My name is Sebrina Slagle, previously Sebrina Spivey, and first I would like to thank you for taking the time to read this. I am writing you because my children were taken from me after going through a "battle" with Dillon County DSS and my aunt Mary Craft (now Mary Philips).

In January of 2010 my life changed forever. My mother picked me up after my classes at Florence Darlington Technical College, and we took my then youngest child, Lauren Spivey, to McLeod hospital. She hadn't been eating like she should've been, and we had noticed spots that looked like old bruises kept showing up on her. She was seen and admitted quickly since my mother worked there, and we then began waiting as they did an x-ray and other testing. My mother and I walked down to the Radiologic Technician's room to talk with the man reading her x-rays. She asked him if he had seen anything, and he answered that he had seen a fractured rib but with her being a 9 pound 11 ounce baby that was born naturally it was very likely that was done a birth. We went back to the room and then I spoke with the nutritionist trying to get any answers about what was going on with my baby. She told me that the spots are consistent with the back of a car seat, since she wasn't keeping her food down it was very possible that just sitting her in her seat or even picking her up would cause those bruise-like spots.

The DSS caseworker Belinda Butler came into our room and introduced herself, I was shocked that she was there. I thought that we were trying to figure out what was wrong with my baby, yet here is DSS coming to take her away. She told us that she needed to take pictures of Lauren for their records, I couldn't move. My mother told her what had happened as she showed her the spots on Lauren (mind you, neither of them could see any right off hand, my mother had to look for them and point them out to Belinda). Belinda left and I told my mother that if DSS were involved in this then we wouldn't get the kids back. She looked at me and told me that I couldn't think like that; I told her that I have heard nothing good come of the Dillon County DSS.

Later that day, my mother and I spoke with Dr. Ugali (she is the doctor that had the most interaction with Lauren) and she explained the x-rays with us. Dr. Ugali told us that the fractured rib was starting to callous over which meant that it had to be a minimum of 14 weeks old (Lauren was born on September 23, this is between January 14-16). I was relieved that there was an explanation other than abuse for why her rib was fractured at such a young age, I was thankful that DSS wouldn't have to be involved with this (because, well who really wants to see DSS when they are honestly trying to figure out what is going on with their child?). When we got back to the room, Lauren had been taken to PICU (where she would stay until released from the hospital) and Belinda Butler was waiting in the room. My mother had gone down stairs since she too was relieved to have some answers, and I am alone with the one person in the world that shouldn't be in my child's room. Belinda tells me that I need to give her the

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name of someone that can keep my two children, that hasn't seen them since October until the case is over. As you can only imagine, my heart and soul came crashing to the ground. Not only had she just told me that DSS wasn't done with me, but I also have to give my kids to someone until they can figure out that there was no need for them to be involved in the first place. Well my mother is automatically out of the mix. I think about my aunt Faith, but decide against her because she has too much going on with her home life and school. The next person I think of is the last person I should have ever let cross my lips, my aunt Mary. I tell her my aunt Mary, even though she had seen them most of every week since they were born. I didn't want them to get caught up in the system and to go to someone they didn't know.

We went to a "meeting" with Belinda Butler and Shannon Grainger (an officer with the Dillon County Sheriff's Office) they were already starting up with the bullying. She had printouts of the photo's she had taken of Lauren. I was utterly disgusted at what had happened. The same spots that were so hard for anyone to see were now jumping out at my mother and I as ugly and purple as realistically possible. Shannon began his bad cop role with threatening jail time, in hopes of getting a confession I guess. They finally tired of getting nothing from people of whom had no clue what happened to Lauren, so they let us leave. We couldn't see Lauren, so we left, and I called my then husband (Marcus) crying because of what had transpired. He was as furious as I was confused and hurt. I went home to an empty home and cried until my headache put me to sleep.

We were told to have a psychiatric evaluation done, we did and we both passed it. Then we were supposed to see a counselor for marriage and individual counseling. We tried several different ones and DSS kept shooting them down until we finally just used their counselor. We were supposed to see the counselor on Thursdays, but she seemed to rarely make her appointments with us.

Belinda and Shannon called my mother, Marcus, and I to the sheriff's office for an interrogation as they called it. It was more so them telling us what happened and trying to pit us against each other in hopes of yet again trying to get someone to crack. If they had put as much effort into finding out what really was wrong with Lauren, and then realizing it was a huge misunderstanding, then our lives wouldn't have turned out the way they had. That wasn't the case.

I went to Mary's home and visited with Kaylani and Lauren as long as she would allow. She watched me like a hawk and constantly tried to pull my attention away from Kaylani and Lauren. As I left, Kaylani screamed and cried because she didn't understand why she couldn't come home with her mother (I don't understand how if a child is crying to go with their mother, you can say that they are being abused by their mother and she can't have her children). The

longer the case dragged on, the less we (my mother, Marcus, Marcus' family, and myself) could see Kaylani and Lauren.

At some point the case was transferred to another caseworker, Becky Stutler. While visiting one day with Kaylani and Lauren, I asked Mary if I could use her computer, and she said it was okay. She had a typed letter to her lawyer stating that she thought Marcus and I needed to be given a drug test. Why would this woman need to say anything like that if she was only working for her benefit? She knew good and well that neither of us were on drugs. I let it slide because if we take it at her request then that is one less thing they can bring up later. We took our drug tests and passed them also. I noticed that Mary and Becky were becoming very close, and Mary was now saying that my children were her girls. I was hurt that someone I had trusted with my children seemed to be doing everything in her power to keep me from getting them back. I couldn't confront Mary because she was already abusing her power of temporary custody.

Things kept getting worse. We went to court, Marcus' lawyer and my lawyer approached us and told us that DSS wanted one or both of us to go on the central registry. I could only think about the fact that Marcus was in the military, and I was in school to become a nurse. My hopes had officially shattered. I asked them if there was any way that neither could go on the list since we hadn't done anything, and they told us no. So I told them that I would go on the list because he would lose his security clearance if he were to go on it also. All I have ever wanted to do was help people, and now that wouldn't be possible. Everywhere I could get employed to help others would check my background, see that, and turn me away. The photos that Belinda had taken (and doctored) of Lauren in the hospital were given to Judge Henderson. He seemed to become biased at that very moment, and have his mind made up as to the outcome of our case and lives. Dr. Mentor (the admitting doctor for Lauren, she had no contact with her except for admitting her, also a friend of Mary) blatantly lied on the stand. She went against everything that anyone in the hospital that had contact with Lauren said. She told the judge that the fractured rib was less than two weeks old and could only have happened if Lauren were squeezed really hard around the rib cage and was "power driven". Marcus' lawyer and my lawyer seemed to not want to do anything simply because this was a pro bono case for them. Nobody that had actually been in contact with Lauren at the hospital was subpoenaed for court. I'm sorry this is my children's life, our life, and nobody seemed to want to do what it took to prove that Lauren wasn't abused and that somewhere along the line someone had messed up.

After court Shannon Grainger came up to Marcus and I with warrants for our arrest, and said that we could either go home and we could be arrested there or we could just go to the jail house and turn ourselves in. We went to the Dillon County jail, and waited to be taken back. Our mothers were able to find the money for our bonds, so we were there for only a short while, but the fact that we had to be there at all was completely unnecessary and over the top.

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In the time between this court date and the next court date (which was the final hearing), Mary moved her husband out and her ex-husband in. The day before our court date, Mary moved her husband back in and kicked her ex-husband out.

We met with our lawyers a few more times before the next court hearing, and again discussed what happened from the very beginning, and what we can expect the next time we go to court. Marcus and I had the understanding that this was it and we would have our children home with us before long. At court, DSS brought up the fact that we hadn't finished the amount of visits set by them to see the counselor, they seemed to overlook the fact that it was the counselor's fault that we hadn't finished our sessions with her. Because of that, Mary was given custody of Kaylani and Lauren. The judge said that when we had established a stable home and employment, we could come back for custody of Kaylani and Lauren. Before we had left the Darlington County Courthouse, Mary had blocked me on Facebook and posted that it was over and she finally had the girls. She also thanked Becky Stutler (they were and still are friends on Facebook) for what she had done in our case.

Over the years Mary has lied to Kaylani and Lauren about who I am, who she is, who Vanessa and Connor are to them, and why they are with her. Numerous times Lauren has asked my mother and myself why I hurt her when she was a baby (Kaylani has also chimed in saying that Lauren was right because that is what their mama had told them and she wouldn't lie to them). Lauren has told Vanessa (her sister) that she wasn't her sister, she was her cousin. Kaylani drew me a picture one day of two girls and a woman, and explained that the girl (off by herself) was sad because she gets yelled at for being different. As you can imagine, this broke my heart because I can only imagine what Mary is doing behind closed doors.

I am now trying to get my girls back, and am encountering the same problems as before. No one seems to want to do their jobs. We had our initial hearing to get everything started, and Mary's lawyer said that he thinks DSS should be involved (my case has been closed for almost 6 ½ years, but Mary now has a case open against her and her husband). She has been telling Kaylani and Lauren that I hurt Lauren when she was a baby, and that I used to be their mother but she is their mother now. It infuriates me to no end that she would do this. By telling them this it hurts their self-esteem, and make them not want to be with me (the latter being the reason for her to do it). She has also gotten my grandmothers and grandfather to go along with her made up life and story. Everyone in my family (except for my mother, my husband Cecil, and Marcus) is afraid to go against Mary's wishes. This is the first year I have been able to see Lauren for her birthday since her first birthday. Mary has been going against the visitation order set by the judge every year by not allowing any of us (Marcus and his family, my mother and myself) to see them except for when it suits her and by taking them out of town for every holiday and special occasion.

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I have missed out on so much of my children's lives because nobody wanted to admit they were wrong. Lauren wasn't abused. Her "bruises" were just spots caused from a lack of nutrition because she was lactose intolerant and we didn't know it. Her fractured rib was caused at birth and went unnoticed because newborns cry, and nobody gives a newborn an x-ray because they're crying.

In short, I am just asking for answers and more so help. I just want what is right for my children. They deserve to be happy; they deserve to grow up with their sister, brother, and mother. Vanessa and Connor deserve to grow up with their sisters, instead of seeing them when it is convenient for whomever has them. I hope that this reaches you before it's too late for them to live a happy life instead of a life riddled with confusion and heartbreak.

Sincerely,

Sebrina Slagle

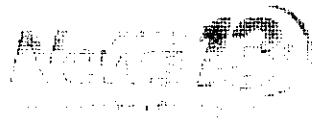
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SC senators say changes needed at DSS to protect children

By Editors (<http://wbtw.com/author/editors/>)

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SC senators say changes needed at DSS to protect children (Image 1)

By Robert Kittle

Several South Carolina state senators say they'll try to make changes at the state Department of Social Services after looking into problems at the agency.

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Prior to a court hearing, single parents should consider a less adversarial system, such as mediation or arbitration. Parents who are considering custody mediation or arbitration will benefit from a better understanding of both processes. Here are few key benefits and differences between mediation and arbitration.

Mediation

Child custody mediation is an excellent forum to assist single parents in handling their child custody cases.

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- Mediation
- Custody
- Arbitration
- Dispute Resolution
- Child Custody Mediation

- The case is discussed with an arbitrator
- It's a formal, structured process
- An arbitrator, a neutral third-party, is appointed to the case, and the arbitrator functions as a judge

In mediation:

- A mediator, a neutral third-party, is chosen for the case
- The agreement is non-binding in court
- The decision is determined by the parties involved in the case
- All parties discuss the case with each other
- It's informal and there are no rules, which apply in binding arbitration
- It's confidential
- There is a speedy settlement

Arbitration

Arbitration is beneficial for parents who have trouble communicating with each other or for parents who prefer a more structured process. In arbitration:

- The decision is binding in court
- The decision is determined by law



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Combination of Mediation and Arbitration

It's possible for mediation to be binding, which is sometimes referred to as binding mediation. The process generally starts with non-binding mediation and then becomes arbitration, if the parties don't agree. As such, the entire, combined process is referred to as binding mediation.

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How to Choose Between Mediation and Arbitration

Parents should consider whether it's possible to make a decision in an open, informal manner. If parents prefer the structure of a court-like setting, arbitration may be a better alternative. It depends on the parties involved, as well as their level of communication. Mediation is similar to collaborative law with the exception that it is not binding in court.

There are several benefits to custody mediation and arbitration, as an alternative to a formal court process. Parents should make a joint decision, based on their needs and the needs of their family.

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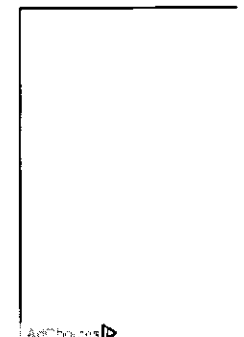


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Single Parents Essentials

Parenting Slideshows

"It is the whole system. I feel like our system is broken," Paige Greene told a special Senate DSS Oversight subcommittee Wednesday. She's the executive director of Richland County CASA, the guardian ad litem program for abused and neglected children in Richland County.

The subcommittee also heard from Kelley and Robert Heidt, whose 5-year-old granddaughter was taken from her parents because of an anonymous phone tip alleging that the girl's father had sexually abused her.

"A couple of minutes of their time to look into that phone call would've proven there was nothing to it," says Kelley Heidt. "But they kept her in foster care 31 days away from our families." Her granddaughter continues to have nightmares, she says.

She says the anonymous tip came from someone who overheard a group of 5-year-old girls talking on the playground and one of them said something inappropriate. "It was another little girl on the playground who said something. It wasn't even my granddaughter. But they didn't even bother to investigate. They didn't ask one person," Mrs. Heidt says.

DSS later admitted that they made a mistake and there had been no abuse.

While the Heidts' granddaughter shouldn't have been taken from her home, according to DSS's own lawyer, Laura Hudson, vice-chair of the State Child Fatality Review Committee, says sometimes DSS is too slow to take children out of dangerous homes.

She told senators about one case. "The child was in North Carolina with grandparents, came back into South Carolina. It appears, and I'm saying it appears, allegedly, that the caseworker in South Carolina never saw the child. The child ended up dead. The child had cigarette burns on her private parts. She had bruises. It was a brutal, brutal example of consistent abuse. If our caseworker in South Carolina had actually looked at that child, they might've been able to prevent that death," Hudson told senators.

Charleston attorney Ellen Babb says putting a child in foster care doesn't guarantee the child is safe, though. She told senators the story of a baby named Aidan.

"DSS workers knew that the foster mother was keeping the infant in a sweater box," she said. "Little Aidan died in that sweater box, in blankets." She says that foster mother said she planned to foster other infants and would continue to put them to sleep in the same sweater box.

Oversight subcommittee member Sen. Joel Lourie, D-Columbia, said in some cases DSS is taking children out of homes too quickly while in other cases putting them back in their homes too quickly. "It leads me to question the whole way the management and the implementation and the process is working at all," he said.

The subcommittee wants to hear from DSS director Lillian Koller next week to answer their questions. Koller had been on a limited work schedule after a medical issue last month, but Gov. Nikki Haley, who appointed Koller to head DSS, said Thursday that Koller was back at work.

"We are both mothers," Gov. Haley told 7 On Your Side. "We both talk about the issues she faces, and no one is more committed or more heartfelt than she is to make sure that we save every child that we can."

Despite the horror stories senators heard, South Carolina's child death rate is actually down. In 2009, 73 children died after DSS got involved with them and their families. In 2013, that number was down to 58.

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