



COMMUNITY

Parents Demonstrate for Change to Child Protective Services (CPS) System in San Bernardino County

by *Breanna Reeves* and *Aryana Noroozi*
November 23, 2022



(From left): Savana Villanueva, Aimee Durante and Bobbie Butts protest along with fellow parents and community activists against San Bernardino County Child Protective Services (CPS) and the Juvenile Court System outside of the San Bernardino Juvenile Justice Court on November 16, 2022. Credit: Aryana Noroozi, Black Voice News Newsroom / CatchLight Local

Breanna Reeves and Aryana Noroozi I

Anton Elementary School is located on the same street block as the San Bernardino County Juvenile office and juvenile court.

Across the street from Anton, parents, sisters and brothers designed signs that condemn Child Protective Services (CPS) and drew pictures that depicted their children being taken away.

On Nov. 16, advocates, families and supporters gathered near the school to march to the San Bernardino Juvenile Court to address the practices of CPS and the juvenile courts. With nearly 6,000 children identified as having placement within the Child Welfare System/Case Management System in San Bernardino County, families at the rally criticized CPS for terminating their parental rights and quickly adopting their children to others.

A 2022 Human Rights Watch report called **“If I Wasn’t Poor, I Wouldn’t Be Unfit”** noted, “Every three minutes a child is removed from their home and placed in the foster system. Black children are almost twice as likely to experience investigations as White children and are more likely to be separated from their families.”

More than a dozen people joined the rally which settled in front of the juvenile office. One by one, parents took the mic to air their grievances with CPS and shared stories of their children being taken away in the dead of night, without an explanation.

“Our community needs help. We need protection and most of all, our children do, because CPS is a placement not a parent,” said **Bobbie Butts**, assistant director of the Family Reunification, Empowerment & Equity (FREE) Project at Starting Over Inc.

Organized by Butts and Daisy Gonzalez of Starting Over Inc., Yvonne Trice of A Mother’s Voice and **Crip Justice**, the rally was also designed to be a space for support and resources for families. Members of the **Time for Change Foundation**, a local nonprofit that supports families with low income in their quest to find housing and provides wrap-around services, also helped organize the event.



Bobbie Butts, assistant director of the Family Reunification, Empowerment & Equity (FREE) Project at Starting Over Inc., speaks to protestors after the group arrived outside of the San Bernardino Juvenile Justice Court on November 16, 2022. Butts is assistant director of the Family Reunification, Empowerment & Equity (FREE) Project at Starting Over Inc., a Southern California organization that supports those facing homelessness and reentry from prison. Her work is inspired by her own experience in 2011 when her children were placed in custody of CPS. In 2018, Butts regained custody of her children and now helps others navigate their parental rights. (Aryana Noroozi, Black Voice News Newsroom / CatchLight Local).



A protester poses for a portrait outside of the San Bernardino Juvenile Justice Court on November 16, 2022. She later spoke to the group, sharing her experience of CPS arriving at her home at 10 p.m. and removing her children for reasons she says she still does not know. (Aryana Noroozi, Black Voice News Newsroom / CatchLight Local).



Left: Yvonne Trice, founder of A Mother's Voice, leads protesters in a chant as they march in front of Anton Elementary School on November 16, 2022; Right: Yvonne Trice speaks to parents who have had their children taken by CPS about grappling with their anger outside of the San Bernardino Juvenile Justice Court on November 16, 2022. Trice lost her son to gun violence and supports other parents who have lost their children to the CPS system, encouraging them to lean into faith and positivity. (Aryana Noroozi, Black Voice News Newsroom / CatchLight Local).



Protesters march past Anton Elementary School after striding down the block from the San Bernardino Juvenile Justice Court where they protested and spoke outside the building on November 16, 2022. Cars honked in support, some stopping to ask about the rally while children also cheered during their recess. (Aryana Noroozi, Black Voice News Newsroom / CatchLight Local).



Outside the San Bernardino Juvenile Justice Court building on November 16, 2022, protester Erica Norato listens to mothers speak about their experience of losing custody of their children and fighting to get them back in their care. Many never regained custody. (Aryana Noroozi, Black Voice News Newsroom / CatchLight Local).



Ana Tasch holds a sign advocating for family reunification over adoption outside of the San Bernardino Juvenile Justice Court on November 16, 2022. Tasch says she understands the issue from the child's perspective as she was placed in the foster care system as a child but removed at age 12 due to abuse. (Aryana Noroozi, Black Voice News Newsroom / CatchLight Local).

Case riddled with errors, misunderstandings and misrepresentation

Aimee Durante is a program assistant at the foundation and shared her personal experience with the court as a parent whose children were removed from her home. Durante said that after 23 hearings and seven years, she proved her case: that her children's removal was a case of fraud.

"This guardianship has been riddled with errors, misunderstandings and misrepresentation or all three... There is no question that the mother is able and capable of providing for, nurturing and raising her children. While the mother is correct, this case has not met the standard of showing by clear and convincing evidence that parental custody was detrimental to the children," Durante quoted as she read the court documents.

"Guardianship order was established as a result of fraud, misrepresentation and procedural errors. Unfortunately, the law prevents this court from providing the mother's requested remedy at this time, seven years later."

Despite the court's acknowledgement of wrongdoing, Durante never regained custody of her children.



Aimee Durante, program assistant for "Time For Change" listens to fellow mothers share their experience of their rights being terminated on November 16, 2022. After 23 hearings and seven years of fighting her case, Durante said she proved that her children's removal was a case of fraud. While the court acknowledged this, she never got her children back. (Aryana Noroozi, Black Voice News Newsroom / CatchLight Local).

CPS Failures

Time for Change Foundation founder Kim Carter was also in attendance and spoke to the crowd about the harm children face once they enter the foster care system. This year, San Bernardino County **settled** a lawsuit for \$7.5 million in a case that alleged that a county social worker was aware of sexual abuse in the foster care system and failed to report it.

“San Bernardino County [and] CPS are on notice,” Carter warned. “My kids are damaged in your care...and still you are holding my kids hostage. Enough is enough. CPS, hold a mirror up to yourself and see what you’re doing [and] quit acting like you know better for our kids when your track record shows you don’t.”



"Time for Change" founder Kim Carter speaks to protesters before they begin their march to the San Bernardino Juvenile Justice Court on November 16, 2022. Carter spoke to the irreversible abuse children face once they enter the foster care system. This year, San Bernardino County settled a case which alleged a county social worker was aware

of and failed to report a case of sexual abuse in foster care. (Aryana Noroozi, Black Voice News Newsroom / CatchLight Local).

The price of one mistake

Rayanne Zertuche attended the rally with the Time for Change Foundation as a mother whose parental rights were terminated. Zertuche said that CPS is always ready to fight against parents and lacks sympathy and understanding. She was afraid to speak up for her children because she believed CPS would categorize her as aggressive.

“I feel like that made me discouraged to fight and want to speak up. But then again, because I didn’t speak up, it made it seem like I didn’t want my kids, but I do love my babies,” Zertuche explained. “I feel like there should be more of a connection when it comes to the CPS worker. I know that they’re there to try and do their job, but at the same time it’s just a paycheck to them. It’s not really what’s best for the children.”



Rayanne Zertuche poses for a portrait before marching to the San Bernardino Juvenile Justice Court on November 16, 2022. Zertuche says she felt discouraged to speak up because she feared being viewed as aggressive. She says she has a good relationship with her children's foster mom and is currently working on a social biography packet: a collection of documents like photos, character letters, videos, grades, certificates, pay stubs, to demonstrate good

qualities and contributions to society, her support system, and ties to the community. The packet is presented to the judicial system and held in the court in hopes of humanizing defendants and to allow children to look up to their parents even if they are adopted. (Aryana Noroozi, Black Voice News Newsroom / CatchLight Local).

Despite working to get her life back on track, Zertuche said she made one mistake and it resulted in her losing custody of her three children, who are now in the process of being adopted. Zertuche said she is lucky because she has a good relationship with the foster parent and is able to see her children often.

“God brought me here today”

“I think it was God that brought me here today,” Savana Villanueva said while she made signs. Villanueva said she recently showed up to court with the necessary documentation and certificates to show that she is making progress in her life, but the courts did not review them, and instead her parental rights were terminated.

“I fixed my life and worked hard on getting my children back, and they just shoved it off and brushed it off like it was nothing,” Villanueva explained. She said she is planning to appeal the court’s decision and plans to get her children back in her care.



Villanueva speaks outside of the San Bernardino Juvenile Justice Court to fellow protesters about her experience losing her rights as a mother to CPS, November 16, 2022. Villanueva said she completed the necessary steps and paperwork to regain guardianship of her children but the court disregarded it. (Aryana Noroozi, Black Voice News Newsroom / CatchLight Local).



Savana Villanueva and Rayanne Zertuche embrace after Villanueva spoke to the crowd outside of the San Bernardino Juvenile Justice Court on November 16, 2022. (Aryana Noroozi, Black Voice News Newsroom / CatchLight Local).

Last year, advocates, allies and organizations supported **Senate Bill 354** which took effect this year. The bill eliminates obstacles that restrict children from being placed in the custody of a relative caregiver who may have a past conviction (unrelated to children). Butts was one of the leading advocates of this bill and now gives presentations on stakeholders regarding what changes the bill brings.

Working together and creating change

“Together we can create a power that’s strong enough to send CPS back to where it came from, to the racist origin of the whole entire CPS system,” Starting Over Inc. founder Vonya Quarles said during the rally. “You deserve your children. Your children deserve you. How are our children centered in the separation of families? I can tell you: they’re not.”



A family begins to cry as Yvonne Trice (right), founder of A Mother's Voice, leads the group of protesters in a prayer outside of the San Bernardino Juvenile Justice Court on November 16, 2022. The family was leaving the Juvenile Court when they encountered the group speaking about the challenges of losing custody of their children to CPS. The family spoke with organizers who gave them signs to hold to join the protest. (Aryana Noroozi, Black Voice News Newsroom / CatchLight Local).

Several recently signed laws are set to take effect in the new year following the end of the legislative session where Gov. Gavin Newsom signed bills focused on restoring rights to system-impacted children and families. Before the Sept. 30 deadline, Newsom signed **Assembly Bill 2159** which prohibits courts from terminating family reunification services of a parent who is in custody before being convicted of a crime and **Senate Bill 1085** which clarifies instructions for social workers that homelessness or poverty alone are not suitable reasons to remove children from their homes.

With these bills signed, advocates and community organizations continue to support legislation that improves the rights of children and their families who have come into contact with Child Protect Services.

As parents continue to speak up about the damage caused to families by CPS, community-based organizations continue working to make changes to juvenile and criminal justice systems to mitigate the harm done to thousands of children and families. According to

Human Rights Watch, 62,000 parents of children had their parental rights terminated in 2019 in the U.S.



Vonya Quarles, founder of Starting Over Inc., speaks about abolishing CPS and its' racist origins outside of the San Bernardino Juvenile Justice Court on November 16, 2022. Starting Over Inc. is a Southern California-based organization that helps those who face homelessness, reentry from prison, and losing their parental rights to CPS. (Aryana Noroozi, Black Voice News Newsroom / CatchLight Local).



Protesters hold signs protesting the practices of CPS outside of the San Bernardino Juvenile Justice Court on November 16, 2022. Jacque Elmer (right) recently regained custody of her children who were placed in federal foster care as the family is from the Colorado River Indian Tribe reservation in Parker, Arizona. Elmer spoke about her 10-year-old son facing suicidal thoughts after his experience in foster care. (Aryana Noroozi, Black Voice News Newsroom / CatchLight Local).

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