

LETTERS

# Trying to make some kind of sense out of a tragic DCF case

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HEART IN PICTURES/ADOBE

## The reaction should not be to remove more kids from their families

We are all horrified at the death of A'zella Ortiz and the abuse suffered by her siblings. What went wrong in this case should certainly be determined and addressed. We agree, however, with the Globe [editorial board](#) that it should not prompt more children to be

removed from their homes to suffer the [trauma of separation](#) from their families and the negative effects of state intervention (“Why couldn’t DCF save A’zella Ortiz’s life?” Dec. 16). A strong reactive impulse of this sort often follows [such tragedies](#) — what child welfare system critics call “[foster care panic](#).”

Such panic here would exacerbate an existent tendency. The Department of Children and Families places children in foster care at a higher rate, and keeps them there longer, [than the national average](#), with removals disproportionately affecting [Black and brown families](#). As the Globe noted, the [vast majority of confirmed reports of child maltreatment are not for abuse but, rather, for neglect](#), and are often rooted in the unavoidable consequences of poverty.

A focus on out-of-home placement is reflected in DCF spending. Less than 10 percent of the [DCF budget](#) is earmarked for “Family Support and Stabilization,” while most of its more than \$1.5 billion budget funds out-of-home placements (for example, nearly half a billion for congregate care).

The harm arising from this emphasis is not limited to the trauma of separation. Some children suffer neglect and even serious abuse in Massachusetts’ [foster](#) or [congregate](#) care settings. For many others, long-term [outcomes underscore why removal should be used only as a last resort](#). Youth in state custody drop out of high school at [more than twice the rate of their peers](#), are [five times less likely to get a college degree](#), and are more apt to become criminally involved. One-third who age out of DCF custody [experience homelessness](#) by age 21.

It would be a profound irony if failures to keep some children safe drive responses that place many others at risk and diminish their futures. An emphasis on preventive services that address the impact of poverty would protect more kids more effectively.

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Kate Nemens

Legislative advocacy director and supervising attorney

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## **DCF failed to use its own resources to protect A'zella Ortiz from harm**

[Why couldn't DCF save A'zella Ortiz?](#) Because the Department of Children and Families failed to use its own resources. DCF did not need more funding to seek the advice of its own legal department. That advice would surely have been to file a care and protection petition, thus involving the Juvenile Court. Ortiz and her siblings would then have been assigned lawyers; the judge would have provided oversight; court clinic evaluations could have been ordered; and a guardian ad litem, who serves the best interests of the child, could have been appointed.

More funding is always helpful, but a cardinal rule of public health is to use your own resources wisely. DCF failed to use its own resources and thus couldn't save A'zella Ortiz.

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