

**Senate Judiciary Committee**  
**Subcommittee on Human Rights and the Law**  
**Hearing on The Human Rights of Foster Children**  
**October 25, 2023**

**Written Testimony of Rachel Aldridge**

Chairman Ossoff, Ranking Member Blackburn and members of the Subcommittee.

My name is Rachel Aldridge. I am only here today because of a broken system that led to the murder of my 2-year-old daughter, Brooklynn.



In 2018, the Georgia Division of Family and Children Services, better known as DFCS, utterly failed to honor its responsibility to me and my daughter. My life will never be the same. Nothing can bring back my beautiful, sweet, and innocent Brooklynn. But I hope that my testimony can save another child's life and prevent families from having to go through what I experienced. That is why I took the first plane trip of my life to address this Subcommittee.

DFCS is supposed to protect children like Brooklynn. Instead, they violated my rights as her mother. They placed her—against my wishes—in a home with plainly unsuitable caregivers, setting off a chain of events that led to her murder.

The woman who killed my daughter is now serving a life sentence without parole. It took years to expose the systemic failures that led to the preventable death of my child.

Here's how the system failed Brooklyn and me.

Before DFCS got involved, I had sole uncontested custody of Brooklynn.

On January 14<sup>th</sup>, 2018, Brooklyn was removed from my care. That happened when I was wrongfully arrested and detained in jail for a week. The police called DFCS to the scene of the arrest. DFCS was supposed to make sure Brooklynn was in a safe home while I was in jail. I had already arranged for my sister (a registered nurse) and brother-in-law (a federal law enforcement agent) to take Brooklynn on the day of my arrest. They knew Brooklynn and are close family members. She adored them. They also are certified foster parents.

Yet DFCS refused to honor my wishes and rejected them as responsible caregivers for Brooklynn. Instead, DFCS placed Brooklynn in the home of her father. He was not actively involved in her life. He is not a certified foster care parent. More importantly, he did not have custody of Brooklynn. The DFCS case worker wrote a Child Safety Plan for Brooklynn without my agreement.

I was released from jail days later. My first stop was Brooklynn's father's home to pick up my daughter. I was so worried about her because she had never spent a night away from me. Brooklynn was very excited to see me. I expected to take her home.

But her father said no. He said DFCS had awarded Brooklynn's temporary care to him. He showed me the paperwork and said I had signed it. However, that document was completely different than the one I signed. The DFCS Safety Plan, he showed me, said that if I took Brooklynn, he had to call law enforcement.

Brooklynn's father had a live-in girlfriend. She was caring for Brooklynn while he was at work. I was very worried about that because I believed his girlfriend was using methamphetamine. I saw her messages with drug dealers. Since Brooklynn's father often worked overtime shifts, I was very concerned about leaving her alone with his girlfriend.

I felt I had no choice and left Brooklynn at his home. I was distraught when I left her that night.

The next day I spoke to a DFCS supervisor. She told me Brooklynn's father had temporary custody of her. I shared my concerns with the supervisor about his live-in girlfriend caring for my daughter and the signs of meth use in the home. I begged the DFCS supervisor to move Brooklynn to my sister and brother-in-law's home where she would be safe.

The supervisor ignored my pleas.

Brooklyn died on March 6, 2018. The cause of death was blunt force trauma to the back of the head. The girlfriend was convicted of murdering Brooklynn.

I filed a wrongful death lawsuit against the DFCS case workers. My complaint alleged:

- The Child Safety Plan provided to Brooklyn's father was not discussed with me. I did not agree with it. I also was not given a Child Safety Brochure to explain my rights as the custodial parent. If that had happened, I would have asserted my rights and taken Brooklynn home that night.

- DFCS did not check the criminal history of Brooklynn's father or investigate his live-in girlfriend who was a secondary caregiver in the home. If DFCS had done that, they would have discovered that DFCS *itself* had pursued a child neglect case against the girlfriend.
- DFCS did not take immediate action after I repeatedly told them my concerns about the live-in girlfriend's suspected drug use.
- DFCS should have drug tested the girlfriend and they did not. She later admitted to using meth the entire time Brooklyn lived with them. The system meant to protect children failed Brooklynn at every level. From management down to the case worker - repeatedly - they failed to follow the policies in place meant to keep my child safe and they violated our rights.

Brooklynn's death cannot be in vain. Nothing will bring her back. I'm here today to seek change. We need better oversight and training of the system. If someone had just listened to me and checked out my allegations, Brooklynn would still be alive.

I am grateful for the support I've received. I'm grateful to my attorney Brent Savage for all of the work he has done.

Senators, you can stop this from happening again. You have the power to change the system. Please remember Brooklynn. Thank you.