

February 21, 2024

*via email* [DSMasterPlan@chhs.ca.gov](mailto:DSMasterPlan@chhs.ca.gov).

State of California  
Master Plan on Developmental Services

Dear Master Plan Committee,

On behalf of The Natalie Project, we sincerely thank Workgroup #4 for its thoughtful recommendations on addressing Mistreatment, Abuse, and Neglect in the Master Plan on Developmental Services, as requested by Governor Newsom.

Our mission is to champion healing and systemic change for people with disabilities and their families affected by the trauma of sexual abuse, which has reached epidemic levels. Natalie Payne, a woman with high-support needs, was raped at her day program in the San Francisco Bay Area with minimal support from the system and little justice. Unable to communicate the abuse other than through behavioral changes, which were misinterpreted as common female ailments by the medical community, we later learned she had a sexually transmitted infection. Her abuser, a male caregiver, had most likely received mandated reporter training but was allowed to change her diaper alone, as stated in the police report. This must change.

Below are the five recommendations provided by the committee:

- Prevent harm to individuals served by the system
- Prioritize critical needs with checklists and timelines
- Increase transparency in reporting and investigations
- Strengthen the DDS Office of the ombudsman
- Create and enforce consequences for misconduct

We commend the committee for advancing the goal of strengthening connections between developmental services and other critical systems. We would like to propose a few additional areas for improvement as well as share this overview of the current system and a SWOT analysis, attached.



## COMPREHENSIVE PLAN FOR BEFORE/DURING/AFTER ABUSE

Given the prevalence of abuse, clients must have a comprehensive Before/During/After Sexual Abuse plan created during the IEP/IPP meeting. This plan, serving clients and their family, should include sexual education, recognizing signs of abuse, reporting procedures, and a clear outline for managing suspected abuse cases with other agencies. It ensures proactive prevention, support during incidents, and appropriate responses post-abuse, with all parties—including the client, family, and caseworker—aligned.

## REPORTING ABUSE

There are significant barriers to reporting abuse, including a lack of awareness, fear of retaliation, and emotional or cognitive challenges.

We propose the following:

- **Engaging the Medical Community:** Initiate awareness campaigns focusing on the prevalence of abuse, its warning signs, and the reporting process, with a particular emphasis on the medical field. It's crucial for healthcare professionals to understand that overmedication can often conceal underlying trauma, such as abuse—and that overmedication itself can be a form of abuse. Additionally, incorporate routine STI testing (covered by Medi-Cal) into screenings, as most STIs present no symptoms.
- **Technology Integration for Communication:** Invest in software like LucIDD, an SaaS platform that bridges communication gaps between caregivers and healthcare providers, prompting evaluations based on caregiver input. The State of Ohio has invested in this endeavor.

Research shows that barriers to reporting persist, even with well-intentioned training. Wearable technology offers an innovative solution, helping overcome fears of retaliation and emotional difficulties in reporting. After initial investment in software like LucIDD, wearable devices integrated into the software, can enhance reporting processes and offer key benefits:



- **Real-Time Monitoring and Alerts:** Wearables can detect unusual physical or emotional states (e.g., bruises, heart rate changes) and alert caregivers, family members, or abuse prevention systems.
- **Data Logging and Incident Reporting:** Wearables automatically log incidents, providing an objective record to support investigations.
- **Emergency Response Features:** SOS buttons on wearables allow individuals to immediately alert others if abuse occurs.
- **Voice and Communication Assistance:** Devices with communication software empower individuals to report abuse directly, without relying on others to interpret their actions.
- **Behavioral Cues:** Wearables can track emotional and behavioral changes, enabling caregivers to detect signs of distress before the individual can verbalize them.
- **Building Trust:** With technology monitoring their safety, individuals with disabilities may feel empowered to report abuse, reducing fears of retaliation.

Our goal is to complement human intervention with technology, enhancing the safety and well-being of individuals with disabilities. By providing tools for proactive intervention, monitoring, and reporting, we can significantly reduce the risk of abuse and ensure a safer environment for people who need support and are in vulnerable systems—while also saving Medi-Cal resources through accurate diagnoses.

## REQUIRED TRAINING ON SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Additionally, mandatory annual training on sexual violence for Providers should be implemented, alongside regular reviews of mandated reporting requirements. Combined with mandated reporting, it fosters a proactive, compassionate approach to identifying and addressing abuse effectively.



## VICTIM SUPPORT

The Regional Center system coordinates services for individuals with disabilities but is not fully equipped to handle sexual abuse cases. While Regional Centers and their providers should be aware of abuse issues, they are not experts in this area. Rape crisis centers offer specialized support but often lack the experience needed to work with individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). To bridge this gap, partnerships between Regional Centers and rape crisis centers must be established, led by a Regional Center Crisis Manager, ensuring that rape crisis centers are properly funded and prepared to meet the unique needs of this community.

On behalf of The Natalie Project, thank you for considering these recommendations. We look forward to continuing our work together to improve the lives of people with disabilities and their families.

Sincerely,



Julie Neward  
Project Director, The Natalie Project



"Natty" is a powerful short documentary that sheds light on Natalie Rose, who has an intellectual and developmental disability and is a #MeToo survivor. Despite the abuse she suffered at a publicly funded daytime care program, it was never treated with the seriousness of a crime. This film calls for accountability and highlights the urgent need for justice and reform in such caregiving environments while celebrating her 40 years of life.

Watch the Trailer to our Film "Natty" [here](#).

