

The System's Woeful 'Best Effort'
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Social service agencies that reunited Brianna Blackmond (in the District) and Katelyn Frazier (in Alexandria) with the parents who abused and neglected them claim to have made changes in procedures that led to the death of these two young girls. Justice for Children knows of many other cases in which pleas to protect a child were ignored or given a cursory investigation by social service workers, also resulting in the death of a small child.

In one such case, Collin Horridge's father still wonders why 14 calls to the St. Mary's County Department of Social Services weren't enough to save his small son from being beaten and stomped to death. At one point, he says, an agency worker told him to stop calling; eight days later, he received a call from the St. Mary's police department to inform him that his son was dead.

On Jan. 28 a St. Mary's County social worker noted bruising on Collin's eye, but apparently did not look further. If she had lifted the boy's shirt or looked at his legs and buttocks, she might have seen some of the 44-odd bruises and abrasions that were catalogued less than a month later at the autopsy by the state medical examiner. However, instead, she closed the case on Feb. 2.

By Feb. 25 the 20-month-old Collin was dead from severe prolonged beatings and a lacerated liver, right lung and pancreas after Daniel Fowkes stood on his tiny abdomen with his full 185 pounds for at least five seconds. Mr. Fowkes testified that he was performing "CPR." His tears apparently moved the jurors to acquit him on the first-degree murder charge, and he now faces a new trial for manslaughter that begins tomorrow. Maybe this time the jury will see the real victim of this crime, Collin G. Horridge.

Charges against Collin's mother, Tiffany Fairris, have been dropped by the same prosecutor, Richard Fritz, who previously had said, "The failure of [the mother] to act to protect [Collin] from such cruel and inhumane treatment resulted in [his] death."

Collin's older sister still has nightmares and speaks of her brother's death. This little girl has been court-ordered to visit with her mother even though a child therapist concluded that such visits could be traumatic to her. These visits are apparently conducted with the approval of county social services.

Justice for Children has asked Maryland Gov. Parris Glendening to appoint an ombudsman to conduct a full review of the St. Mary's County social services investigations as well as of the criteria used for keeping cases open.

Emelda Johnson of the Maryland Department of Human Resources responded to that request by assuring Justice for Children that a child-fatality-review team would evaluate the investigation to "ensure that corrective action is taken to prevent future tragedies." To date, no report has been made available to the public.

Johnson concluded her letter with the statement that "although there are sometimes tragedies that can neither be predicted or prevented by the best efforts of local departments of social services, children in Maryland are well-served by those charged with management of the child welfare system."

Our questions remain: What protocol should child-abuse investigators follow when gross physical abuse is suspected? Should they just look at the child's head? Is a cursory investigation resulting in a closed case really the "best effort" that can be expected from a social services agency?

We don't think so. Collin Horridge deserved better.

-- Eileen King is regional director of Justice for Children.

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