

## **Child welfare advocate angry**

### **Abused girl's case shows investigators not doing job, she says**

By LISA KIM BACH  
REVIEW-JOURNAL

At least three times before Las Vegas police intervened, Child Protective Services investigated the suspected abuse and neglect of Sabrina Smith's 3-year-old daughter.

Child welfare investigators deemed the reports unsubstantiated and closed the case each time.

At 1:30 p.m. on April 8, two police officers responding to reports of a bruised and injured toddler knocked on the door of Smith's southeast Las Vegas home. When they found the child in an upstairs bedroom, they looked at her and saw:

- Two black eyes, several days old.
- Long lacerations on the back of the child's legs, scabbed over.
- Signs of being malnourished.

While being examined by emergency medical responders, the girl, who weighs only 19 pounds, said "oweeey" and pointed to her stomach, police said.

The girl was taken to Sunrise Hospital and Medical Center. Three siblings were placed in protective custody and transported to Child Haven. Sabrina Smith and her boyfriend, Brian Amis, were arrested and charged with felony child abuse with substantial bodily harm.

It's yet another example of how Clark County Family Services front-line investigators are failing in their mission, said child welfare advocate Donna Coleman.

"The Department of Family Services is investigating these kids to death," Coleman said Friday. "It's just luck that this little girl's not dead."

Coleman's anger is rooted in her opinion that despite months of public study, debate and reports that detail the shortcomings and poor practices of Clark County's child welfare agency, change isn't happening fast enough to save children. Smith's daughter is all too reminiscent of Adacelli Snyder, Coleman said.

Adacelli was 2 years old and weighed 11 pounds when she starved to death in 2005. Child Protective Services closed its case on Adacelli's family about a year before she died.

## **Child abuse deaths miscalculated**

Ed Vogel

1134 words

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1A

English

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By ED VOGEL

REVIEW-JOURNAL CAPITAL BUREAU

CARSON CITY - A state analysis has found that 114 of the children who died in Clark County from January 2001 to December 2004 might have died of abuse or neglect, more than three times the number previously calculated.

After examining death information from a variety of sources, the study found that 11 percent of the 1,041 child deaths in the county during those four years might have been due to maltreatment.

Assembly Majority Leader Barbara Buckley, D-Las Vegas, said the findings in the report are "disgraceful" and "unacceptable."

"One child death is too much, but this is truly shameful," Assemblywoman Sheila Leslie, D-Reno, said.

The higher figure reflects a more comprehensive look at deaths during the four-year time period. Previously, Clark County reported to the federal government that 35 children had died in Clark County as a result of abuse and neglect during those four years.

The numbers reported were used to measure the effectiveness of the state's child protective services.

Wrong numbers mean the conclusions drawn from those numbers were wrong.

For 2002, for example, Nevada's rate of children dying from maltreatment had been posted as one-quarter of the national average, but it now appears Nevada's true rate was much higher.

The Legislature will begin looking into the problem at the January meeting of the Audit Subcommittee, Buckley said.

A committee also will convene to oversee an external review by an independent panel, the Nevada Department of Health and Human Services announced Friday.

"The committee and the panel are to recommend legislative, administrative and systemic changes needed to improve **Nevada child welfare**," the department said in its report about the preliminary numbers.

Willden said the numbers are certain to get even worse when other Nevada counties are added in and more analysis is done.

The state's re-examination of the deaths of children under 18 in Clark County was spurred by five letters sent by the federal Administration for Children and Families to the state after officials there noticed that media reports about deaths of children indicated the actual number was greater than the number being reported by state agencies.

Many stories about the deaths of children have been reported in the Review-Journal, the Sun and on Las Vegas Valley television stations in the past year.

The newspapers and KLAS-TV also have been fighting for access to more information about deaths of children. A few months ago, for example, the newspapers and KLAS-TV sued the county to try to gain access to records regarding 2-year-old Adacelli Snyder, who died in a squalid trailer, starved to death and lying in her own excrement about a year after CPS had closed the family's case.

District Judge Stewart Bell ruled against the media, but hours after that ruling, lawyers representing Clark County took the unusual step of asking the courts to decide whether the public would be better served by the release of such information.

Clark County Manager Thom Reilly, a former Child Protective Services caseworker, is an advocate of opening the records to public scrutiny. Reilly has said he agrees with the media's argument that federal law seems to require providing more information to the public about child deaths, which conflicts with state law that forbids release of the information.

Buckley said she is drafting legislation to open records of children who died due to abuse or neglect.

Senate Minority Leader Dina Titus, D-Las Vegas, said officials should not be pointing fingers yet. She said there needs to be a determination if the problem occurred because of the shift of child welfare services from state to county control.

Gard Jameson, head of Children's Advocacy Alliance in Clark County, said he was disturbed by the high number of children's deaths, but did not want to criticize anyone at this point.

Willden said the death higher figure does not mean that Las Vegas police will begin arresting additional people for their involvement in the abuse or neglect of children.

"The police already have done the investigations," he said. The problem is in the way "these cases have not been properly classified in our system."

## **Hurt foster child dies**

David Kihara

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By DAVID KIHARA

REVIEW-JOURNAL

A 7-month-old foster boy who was in critical condition after being injured died Friday.

"It is with great sadness that we announce today that a child in our foster care system has passed away," Tom Morton, director of Clark County Family Services, said in a statement.

Authorities refused to release the boy's name or any information about how the child was injured and said the matter remained under investigation.

"As the investigation continues, more information will be available," county spokeswoman Gina Olivares said.

The boy died about 1:30 p.m. Friday at a local hospital, said Capt. Terry Lesney of the Metropolitan Police Department's Crimes Against Youth & Family unit.

Police did not know the cause of death, but the boy had head injuries, Lesney said.

"We are continuing to work on the investigation," she said.

The boy was hurt Wednesday at his foster parent's house, in the 2700 block of Dune Cove Road, near Sahara Avenue and Fort Apache Road, police said.

The boy's foster mother called paramedics about 2 p.m., and when they arrived, they found that the child was not breathing, police said.

Authorities took the child to Summerlin Hospital Medical Center but then transferred him to either University Medical Center or Sunrise Hospital and Medical Center, police spokesman Jose Montoya said. He said he did not know which.

The boy had been living at the foster parent's house since January, said Lisa Teele, supervisor of the police's abuse and neglect unit.

Two other children, ages 2 and 3, also lived at the home. They were taken out of the home and placed in protective custody, police said.

Teele on Thursday said the two children were adopted by the family.

Colleen McCarty, Investigative Reporter  
**Lawsuit Filed Against Nevada Over Child Welfare**

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A class action lawsuit was filed Wednesday against the state of Nevada and Clark County for failing to protect abused and neglected children in the child welfare system.

The National Center for Youth Law filed the lawsuit, which also personally names Governor Kenny Guinn, state Health and Human Services Director Michael Willden, and Clark

County officials.

The suit charges the defendants with causing serious harm to child in the system. The suit does not seek money, it asks for system-wide reform.

The suit points out that at least 79 children have died of abuse or neglect at the hands of their parents, foster parents, or other caregivers while under the watch of the Clark County Department of Family Services.

The suit also claims there has been much documentation of the county's failure to protect children in the foster care system and that the system hides "behind a veil of confidentiality meant to protect children and families, but which the county has used to shield itself from oversight and criticism."

Mike Willden, who is named in the lawsuit, spoke recently with *Eyewitness News* about the possibility of a lawsuit.

"A lawsuit on the other hand may be the best thing that happens because it'll ultimately help get services to kids sorely needing services. But it pulls away a lot of resources to go to the lawyer up mode," he said.

The lawsuit had Clark County officials scrambling for a response. About three and half hours following Wednesday afternoon's news conference, Assistant County Manager Darryl Martin talked about the lawsuit.

He says an overall plan for recommendations for improvements will be presented to the board of county commissioners sometime next month.

## **Review highly critical of child welfare program**

City

Mike Kalil

852 Words

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By MIKE KALIL

### REVIEW-JOURNAL

Local authorities did not interview suspected child abuse victims privately, respond to maltreatment reports in a timely manner or conduct thorough investigations, according to experts who reviewed a sample of Clark County child welfare cases.

In short, child abuse or neglect allegations reported to authorities here do not receive a "real investigation," consultant Ed Cotton wrote in a scathing review of the county's troubled child welfare system.

"The fact that over 60 (percent) of the alleged child victims were never seen privately at any point must set off a major alarm that results in clear-cut policy and intense supervisory oversight," wrote Cotton, the former director of New Jersey's Division of Youth and Family Services.

The county released the review Thursday.

Cotton's team of reviewers examined 148 open abuse cases in October.

Their separate review of 1,352 randomly selected foster care and other out-of-home placement cases found:

- \* Documentation of cases is inconsistent.
- \* Almost all county child welfare workers viewed safety assessment worksheets as forms that must be completed rather than a tool to make a decision about a child's safety.
- \* Fewer than half of the children under county supervision were visited by caseworkers in the prior 30 days and half the parents caring for them hadn't been seen in more than 60 days.

Also, county child welfare workers told parents that it's OK for them to strike their children as long as they don't leave marks. "A CPS agency should not encourage parents to hit kids, nor should its agents imply to children that they are somehow able to stop it," Cotton wrote.

Caseworker training is nearly nonexistent and supervision is lax, Cotton reported.

workers' abilities to oversee Southern Nevada's most vulnerable children.

"Children were not being seen in time to properly evaluate their safety, reporting sources were seldom used for corroborating information, collateral contacts were scarce, and judgments made were often in conflict with the facts of the case," Cotton wrote.

"The failure to interview (teachers and other) reporters who have seen bruises and marks on children is unconscionable."

In his lengthy review, Cotton recommended updating policies, boosting staff training, reducing caseloads, implementing better supervision and monitoring front-line workers.

"They've got to hit every piece of it to be successful," he said from Florida Thursday.

Cotton, one of the nation's foremost child welfare experts, said Clark County's system is in serious trouble but not beyond repair.

"Most of the systems I deal with are in crisis. I've seen systems in this bad of shape that have gotten fixed," he said.

## **DEPARTMENT OF FAMILY SERVICES: Child abuse report censored**

### **Report's missing pages listed examples of county agency's failures**

By LISA KIM BACH  
REVIEW-JOURNAL

Specific examples of how Clark County's Department of Family Services failed in its mission to protect abused or neglected children were excised from an independent consultant's report released to the public in December.

The censored material, obtained by the Review-Journal Tuesday, included eight pages of case details that illustrate why independent reviewers for the county were doubtful about the safety of more than one-third of the children in 1,352 cases reviewed by consultants. Child Welfare Consultant Ed Cotton conducted the review for Clark County from May to October of 2006.

"Were you asked by anyone in the department to take out or change anything?" Assemblywoman Susan Gerhardt, D-Henderson, asked Tuesday, when Cotton gave a presentation to the state-appointed Blue Ribbon Panel on Child Death Review for Southern Nevada.

"I wasn't told to take them out; I was asked to consider it," Cotton said during his first appearance before the panel.

Cotton complied with the request from Clark County Deputy District Attorney Mary-Anne Miller. He said it was his understanding that immediate action would be taken in cases where a child's safety was in question.

Cotton doesn't know whether that happened.

"So, has nothing been done to check on the status of the children in this report?" Gerhardt asked.

Clark County Department of Family Services Director Tom Morton couldn't answer that question. Morton said Tuesday was the first day the county had a complete list of the identities of the children in the cases highlighted by Cotton.

Cotton turned over the last of the names to Morton at Tuesday's meeting of the Child Death Review panel.

Morton said he had been directed not to talk about the eight pages in question.

In the end, Cotton agreed to rewrite the eight pages of case details in a more general fashion and release it to the panel.

Panel member Stu Fredlund said it seemed to him that obtaining information from the county has always been a challenge.

"It's a lack of trust," Fredlund said. "Information is not provided, and once again, it's exactly the same old issue."

Gerhardt agreed and added that withholding this type of information does nothing to restore the public's faith in the system.

"If what we're trying to accomplish is to move forward and change the public perception ... this doesn't do much to change the public perception," Gerhardt said.

## **CHILD WELFARE: Inaction on problems with child welfare system unacceptable, assemblywoman warns**

By LISA KIM BACH  
REVIEW-JOURNAL

The worst thing that can happen to Nevada's troubled child welfare system during the 2007 session is nothing, Assemblywoman Sheila Leslie said.

"There has to be a way to regain the public's confidence," said Leslie, D-Reno.

Leslie is sounding the call to action in the wake of serial tragedies and documented poor performance on the part of Clark County Family Services.

In 2006, at least four children taken into protective custody died, one foster child disappeared, and two lawsuits were filed against the county alleging child endangerment.

The year also saw a state review that red-flagged 79 child fatalities occurring between 2001 and 2004. The deaths might have been related to abuse or neglect but were not properly investigated. Another review found that in one-third of the 1,352 Family Services cases examined, independent consultants could not state with confidence that children were safe.

"I don't think the public will stand for inaction," said Leslie, who led a committee of lawmakers charged with examining issues related to children in government custody. "I can guarantee that the issue won't be ignored in the Assembly."

At least 13 bill drafts aimed at some aspect of child welfare or juvenile law will be vying for lawmakers' attention. The changes sought include:

- Prohibiting children ages 6 years and under from being placed in group-care settings such as Child Haven and requiring licensing for such institutions.
- Creating a new position within the Legislative Counsel Bureau to audit and monitor current child welfare cases.
- Giving the children's advocate in the attorney general's office the power to supervise and monitor open cases.
- Increasing public access to information on children who die while in government custody.
- Bolstering state authority over county family services agencies.

Gov. Jim Gibbons during his State of the State address proposed allocating \$7.3 million to boost the daily foster care rate from an average of \$21.50 to \$24 in 2008, and then to \$28 in 2009. Gibbons earmarked another \$8.8 million for child welfare.

Assemblywoman Susan Gerhardt, D-Henderson, said it's also vital that lawmakers look at implementing greater

Colleen McCarty, Investigative Reporter  
**Child Welfare: Goals and Timeline Determined**

March 21, 2007 12:02 AM EDT



Clark County has struggled to reform its child welfare system for more than a year now.

The *I-Team* broke its first story about the under-reporting of child deaths back in November of 2005. Since then, county commissioners have called protecting local children a top priority, and now they have put their pledge on paper.

Investigative Reporter Colleen McCarty remains on the forefront of this issue with the latest.

We've heard a lot in the last year about what needs to be done to keep kids in the Clark County system safe. On Tuesday, those details came with deadlines negotiated with child advocates who chose to debate instead of litigate.

Last summer representatives from the San Francisco-based Youth Law Center and the local chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union met with county leaders to discuss reforming the county's child welfare system.

From those talks a list of goals was born and a timeline to achieve them. Though the resulting statement of commitment is non-binding, Clark County commissioners voted to accept it.

Tom Morton, with the Clark County Department of Family Services, said, "There needs to be a sense of urgency here. And there's a tendency in some systems to be like the student in school who waits until the night before to study for the test. If you set timeframes that are too far off, people will wait to get started."

**Among the goals are:**

- Eliminate police removals of children from their homes without CPS involvement by June 30th.
- Stop placing children under the age of 3 at child haven by the end of the year.
- Implement a plan to recruit, support and retain foster parents by early summer.

Some of these issues are also being debated at the Nevada Legislature. If those bills pass, they would bump up the county's deadlines.

Pressure from the federal government and from the courts could also force things to happen more quickly. But this seems to be a good starting point.

<http://www.klas-tv.com/global/story.asp?s=6256782&ClientType=Printable>