

N.J. child welfare agency failing despite overhaul

By John P. McAlpin
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

TRENTON, N.J. — The body of a 7-year-old boy found in a box in a Newark basement nearly a year ago prompted a shake-up at New Jersey's child welfare agency. The agency reviewed all open cases, hired 366 more employees and received \$30 million in emergency aid.

Despite those changes, four adopted boys — one of them 19 — were found earlier this month malnourished and weighing less than 50 pounds each.

Their adoptive parents were charged last week with starving them, and on Monday, nine child welfare employees were fired and the state announced another review of recently compiled safety assessments of children in state care.

Social workers had visited the boys' house in Collingswood as many as 38 times in two years, state officials said. Some of those visits had been ordered of all children in state care after the Newark death last January.

Gov. James E. McGreevey said Monday the state is investigating whether criminal charges should be filed against the caseworker.

"It's inconceivable how a caseworker could go there and not detect these atrocious conditions," McGreevey said.

"Have they reviewed the cases? Are they seeing all the children in the home? Why did they fail to follow up on signs that these children were ill? Why didn't they ask for the latest medical records on the children? These concerns speak to the core culture of the division," said Cecilia Zalkind, executive director of the Association for Children of New Jersey, a child advocacy group.

Agencies in other states have had similar tragedies and ordered reforms. But New Jersey's child-care system continues to confront such horrific abuses despite additional staff members and emergency funding.

Susan Lambiase, an attorney for Children's Rights who sued the state in 1999, called New Jersey's child welfare agency one of the worst in the nation.

"This was one of the worst I have ever seen.

It's still very bad," she said. "We knew it was a system that had been in crisis for over a decade. We know that a lot has to be done. This horror story that we are all learning about exemplifies that it's worse than we all imagined."

New Jersey's Division of Youth and Family Services came under intense pressure for reform when the body of 7-year-old Faheem Williams was found decomposed in a storage box in a Newark basement. His twin brother and their 4-year-old half brother were discovered alive but emaciated in an adjoining room.

In 1999, Children's Rights filed a class-action lawsuit against the state to force reforms.

The state settled that lawsuit and agreed to review all child welfare cases — more than 14,000. During those inspections, 31 children were removed from their own homes, foster care and other living arrangements.

DYFS supervises 58,582 children, including youngsters awaiting adoption. Critics contend the latest reforms and the safety inspections are not enough.

State inspectors said they are reviewing all reports filed by the caseworkers and managers who visited the Collingswood house. All caseworkers are required to offer extensive reports detailing the condition of each child and house they visit. DYFS managers in each field office must review those reports and consult each case worker on each child's status. Both practices were ordered after officials learned DYFS caseworkers did not visit the Williams children.

"People who made bad decisions will be held accountable," McGreevey said Monday. The 19-year-old remained hospitalized Monday in a cardiac unit, while the other boys, ages 14, 10 and 9, were doing well in foster homes, Camden County Prosecutor Vincent P. Sarubbi said on ABC's "Good Morning America."

Authorities said the boys were locked out of the kitchen and fed a diet of uncooked pancake batter, peanut butter and jelly and cereal. The boys told investigators they also gnawed on wall-board and insulation. They were found after a neighbor discovered Jackson rummaging through trash for food.

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— James E. McGreevey
New Jersey governor

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Twins' condition upgraded, now 'guarded'

DALLAS (AP) — The conditions of Egyptian twins Ahmed and Mohamed Ibrahim were upgraded from serious to guarded Sunday as they continued to recover from surgery two weeks ago to separate them.

The 2-year-old boys were born joined at the head.

Dr. James Thomas, chief of critical care services at Children's Medical Center Dallas, said both boys continue to improve.

Mohamed is off all intravenous medications, the hospital said in a Web site update Sunday night. Ahmed could be taken off the IV medications Monday. Both children are tolerating full formula feedings.

"Mohamed's therapy is going well and today he was able to throw toys with his left

hand at various staff members when they got in range," Thomas said. He said Mohamed giggled and laughed when playing the games.

The hospital said Ahmed is undergoing therapy workouts twice a day and is making good progress. Thomas said much of their days is spent with therapy and resting.

The twins were separated in a 34-hour procedure that ended Oct. 12.

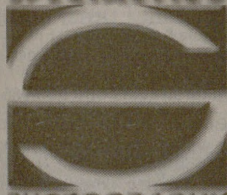
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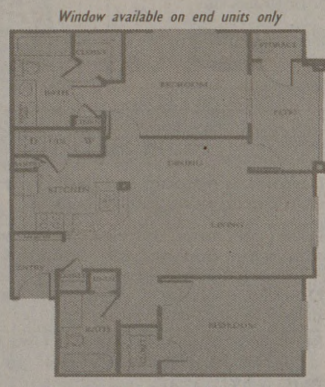
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