

## The Real Reasons for Child Abuse Deaths

It's easy enough to see how people can leap to the conclusion that the deaths of children "known to the system" must be the result of "family preservation" or the federal law requiring agencies to make "reasonable efforts" to keep families together.

After all, the cases seem so obvious -- especially in hindsight. Often they were *not* the "tough calls." And almost everyone in the system has a vested interest in promoting the idea that it was the fault of a law or a policy over which they have no control. But the real reasons children "known to the system" die are very different. And those reasons are well within the control of many of those who point the finger at family preservation.

**When children known to the system die, it is usually because the system is overwhelmed with children who don't need to be in foster care at all.**

- In most states, a bachelor's degree in any subject is all that is required to become a child protective worker. After hiring, training generally ranges from minimal to none.

- Turnover on the job is constant. The worker who goes to a troubled family is likely to have little experience.

- Working conditions can be appalling. In some child protective offices several workers share a phone, in others workers keep files in their cars or piled under their desks.

- Caseloads often are enormous, often double, triple or more than the average called for in national standards established by the Child Welfare League of America.

These untrained, inexperienced workers with overwhelming caseloads are sent out to make life and death decisions.

And then, when something goes wrong, the people responsible for creating these appalling conditions blame "reasonable efforts" or "family preservation" because the alternative is to blame themselves.

Consider some of the very cases that have gotten the most media attention:

- The case of Adam Mann, killed by his mother in New York City. A city caseworker investigating that case acknowledged that she closed the case after only cursory investigation because she had "60 or 70 other cases" and didn't have time to investigate thoroughly.<sup>1</sup>

- The case of Elisa Izquierdo, allegedly killed by her mother. She was not in a family preservation program. But there was an agency

working with the family. That agency contacted her child protective worker to warn that Elisa was in danger. The worker said he could do nothing because he was too busy with other cases.<sup>2</sup>

- The case of Joseph Wallace, killed by his mother in Chicago. In that case, a family preservation worker recommended that the family *not* be preserved -- he recommended to a judge that the child be removed. The judge agreed. The child was removed, but the records were lost when the family moved to another county. Only then was the child sent home to his death.<sup>3</sup>

Not only was family preservation not the cause of the Wallace death -- family preservation almost saved Joseph Wallace's life. Yet the Wallace death was blamed on "family preservation" and set off a massive foster care panic. (See Issue Paper 2).

One of the reasons family preservation is safer than foster care is because family preservation workers generally are better trained than child protective workers. And because they spend so much time with a family, they are often the first to see when a family can't be preserved -- and, contrary to critics' claims, family preservation workers do indeed place the safety of the children first.

Child protective workers are overwhelmed in part because they are forced to investigate so many cases that either are false reports or involve the confusion of poverty with neglect.

CPS officials and frontline workers know it:

From Washington State: "Child Protective Services staff are faced with violating policy by declining to investigate clearly low risk complaints or spending time and energy [on them] at the expense of having adequate time [for] more serious situations"<sup>4</sup>

From North Carolina: "Current legal definitions of neglect are so broad that protective services intervene in some situations where there is no substantial risk of harm to children ... This ... takes an inordinate amount of staff time for investigating..."<sup>5</sup>

When Florida workers were surveyed about barriers to doing their jobs well 63 percent cited "responding to minor neglect reports" and 64 percent cited "completing reports on obviously unfounded cases."<sup>6</sup>

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## The Real Reasons... (continued)

Commenting on another notorious child abuse death, the case of Lisa Steinberg, child protective worker Keith Richards wrote: "It's fortunate we haven't lost more kids like Lisa than we have, while we're running around checking out three dozen other referrals concerning dirty houses and tiny bruises."<sup>7</sup>

Since these are the real problems, the real solutions involve tough choices -- screening out some cases and either spending more money

or changing how money is spent. A lot of elected officials don't want to do that. And for agency administrators to admit that children die because their workers are overworked and undertrained is for them to admit that the deaths are at least partly their own fault.

How much easier it is for all concerned to scapegoat laws and policies over which they have little or no control.

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1. Carole Langer (producer), "Who Killed Adam Mann," *Frontline*, December 3, 1991.
2. Nina Bernstein, "She Suffered in Plain Sight But Alarms Were Ignored," *The New York Times*, Dec.24, 1995, p.1
3. Joel J. Bellows, et. al., *The Report of the Independent Committee to Inquire into the Practices, Processes, and Proceedings in the Juvenile Court as they Relate to the Joseph Wallace Cases*, Oct. 1, 1993.
4. Governor's Child Protective Services Review Team, *Crisis in Children's Services*, March, 1987, p.21
5. Mary Lee Anderson, Program Manager for Child Protective Services, State of North Carolina, in response to a survey from the U.S. House of Representatives Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families, quoted in transcript of the Committee's hearing, March 3, 1987, p.4
6. State of Florida Study Commission on Child Welfare, *A Survey of Florida's Child Protective Investigators*, April, 1991, pp.10,28
7. Keith Richards, *Tender Mercies: Inside the World of a Child Abuse Investigator* (Chicago: The Noble Press/Child Welfare League of America, 1992).