

Deaths of Philadelphia kids prompt reform

By Larry Miller
Special to Sentinel-Voice
PHILADELPHIA (NNPA) - A special panel of experts has told the *Philadelphia Tribune* that the deaths of children in the care of the city's Department of Human Services were symptomatic of problems within the city agency that urgently need to be addressed.

The Philadelphia Child Welfare Review Panel, co-chaired by Carol Wilson Spigner and J. William Mills III, was appointed by Mayor John Street in November of last year. It followed a pattern of deaths and a series of investigative media reports on the department and was assigned to review DHS's problems stemming from its policies.

In the wake of those reports, DHS Commissioner Cheryl Ransom-Garner was

forced to resign her post last year and Deputy Commissioner John McGee was terminated.

"We believe the fatalities are symptomatic of underlying problems within DHS," Spigner said during a conference with *Tribune* editors, reporters and panel members that also included Acting DHS Commissioner Arthur C. Evans. "They are fixable but they have to be undertaken with urgency."

Spigner said the panel examined identified cases where children had died between 2002 and 2006.

"Eight had causes that were undetermined, seven were suspicious but there was not enough evidence to show maltreatment," she said. "Twenty-seven died of maltreatment, six were natural deaths, 12 were related to unsafe sleeping practices,

two were unexplained, and four were related to accidents. The majority of the children were under a year old, and about half had a parent who was involved with DHS as a minor with a history of maltreatment. It shows that maltreatment in children is generational. A child who is maltreated has a greater risk of becoming a parent who maltreats their own children when combined with certain risk factors."

According to earlier reports, from 2003 through 2005, at least 20 children died of either abuse or neglect after coming to the attention of DHS including 10 from last year.

Those numbers were originally disputed by former DHS Commissioner Cheryl Ransom-Garner.

"The findings also sug-

gests that when these young adults were in the child welfare system all of their needs had not been met 20 years ago," said review board member Carol Tracy, a lawyer.

"There were issues of ongoing violence in their lives, substance abuse and mental health problems. Children who have been abused and don't get appropriate intervention don't grow up with the skills to become good parents."

Among those cases cited was the murder of 3-year-old Porchia Bennett in August 2003. Porchia's tortured and battered body was found by police officers in her home, wedged between a wall and a radiator. Bennett died from beatings, asphyxiation and malnutrition while in the care of a couple her mother had paid to look after her.

Jerry Chambers, 34, was sentenced to death as well as 73 to 146 years in prison for murdering Porchia. His girlfriend and Porchia's aunt, Candice Geiger, received 17 to 34 years for helping with the fatal beating.

The child's mother, Tiffany Bennett, 30, is serving a sentence of 20 to 40 years. Bennett allegedly abandoned her four young daughters in the squalid South Philadelphia home of Chambers, who was an alleged drug addict.

Marrieon Currie, 11-weeks-old, died after he was immersed in hot water, thrown down a flight of stairs and beaten with a mop handle.

Two-year-old Alayah Turman was beaten to death by her father, Tyrone Spellman, after she pulled out the cord of his X-Box and crashed his video game.

The nine-member panel's recommendations after reviewing the cases and DHS policies is that the agency has some good and bad points but does need reform within its policies and practices.

The panel outlined a series of benchmarks that the agency has to meet over the next two years.

"We found that there were 20 years of previous reports on DHS identifying problems," Spigner said. "We also conducted interviews with the courts, law enforcement, supervisors and client parents and children. In doing this, we found a mix of good things and bad things, good things that can be built on. One of the strengths was the way the agency reviewed the fatality cases and the information they gleaned was excellent. On the other hand,

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Your Horoscope Says... June 14-20

ARIES

The forces that disrupt your life this week are not as big as they seem while you are standing close to them. Move back. See what surrounds the problem area and you'll notice how small it is on the landscape of your life. Enjoy looking at the goodness that is all around your problems.

Soul Affirmation: I keep my attention on the highest and the best.

Lucky Numbers: 22, 46, 52

TAURUS

This is a week when you can be a singular beacon. Shine for those around you. Go inside yourself and find those rays of sunshine that others need. Sure, you're a bit touchy yourself, but that's just the situation in which you can make yourself happy by creating happiness for others.

Soul Affirmation: I avoid negative feelings, especially this week.

Lucky Numbers: 7, 8, 21

GEMINI

Business as usual is good business. Energy is high. Others give back to you what you gave to them the past few weeks. We hope you were generous because what you get this week will be a multiple of what you bestowed.

Soul Affirmation: I give happiness wherever I go.

Lucky Numbers: 6, 13, 48

CANCER

Energy is higher than it has been for a while. You might feel like the sunshine inside yourself provides blinding light. Walk into it. There are no dangers. Put dark glasses on your soul and be cool. Smile and keep stepping.

Soul Affirmation: My mental powers are my greatest assets this week.

Lucky Numbers: 17, 29, 35

LEO

High physical energy means you may roar through the week. Others will have trouble keeping up, so exercise your compassion muscles and be as patient as possible. Keep your best interests in mind because they serve the best for everyone around you right now.

Soul Affirmation: I savor the flavor of the happiness I find in others.

Lucky Numbers: 5, 51, 53

VIRGO

Charm is an extremely effective tool for you this week. Charisma works better than at any recent time, especially at home. Shine brightly and let your glow work for you. Your self-image is your most effective tool.

Soul Affirmation: Time is the greatest peacemaker of them all.

Lucky Numbers: 3, 24, 43

LIBRA

This week, make your special interest pay off in cash. Enough of goodness for goodness' sake. You've got bills to pay. People expect generosity from a bighearted person like you. Ask them for something in return, or they'll drain you.

Soul Affirmation: Intelligent information does not have to come from intelligent sources.

Lucky Numbers: 6, 8, 14

SCORPIO

During the next few weeks, be ready for surprises that await you. Don't make any solid plans with anyone except your lover. This week will bring forth a new dimension in a special relationship. You will come upon a sensational poem that illustrates the love the two of you share.

Soul Affirmation: The search for fun occupies my time this week.

Lucky Numbers: 2, 18, 25

SAGITTARIUS

Stay steady in your pursuits. Temptations are all around you. Attractive

pursuits abound, but stay on course with what you planned to do with all the good energy that has arisen in your life.

Soul Affirmation: I do not allow demands to be placed on me this week.

Lucky Numbers: 17, 28, 31

CAPRICORN

You have made many friends through a social network you've been involved with. Continue to cultivate those friendships this week. Long distance phone calls are worth the money. Your actions will speak much louder than words this week. Prove your love and your friendship. Others might need convincing.

Soul Affirmation: My imagination is the source of my happiness.

Lucky Numbers: 19, 21, 30

AQUARIUS

This is no time to try to be neat. Continue with your messy thinking. Others might not know how things fit together, but your faith allows you to work without a plan this week. Faith will guide you through the chaotic mental atmosphere that surrounds you this week.

Soul Affirmation: I give extra attention to my mate this week.

Lucky Numbers: 20, 29, 37

PISCES

Call a family member and ask for advice. You know the one to call — the same person who has been level headed in the past. Your head is not as level as it should be. Move forward not on your own understanding. Allow advice to have a great affect on your decisions.

Soul Affirmation: I find peace in communing with nature this week.

Lucky Numbers: 29, 40, 55

Incest

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she had lived through, in a healthy manner.

She's only just begun

Today, Jefferson has two daughters and one son. She told her husband that she would not die without educating them about her family and personal history. Feeling that they may have to deal with those things at some point in their lives, she believes that the only way to deal with them is to be up front about it all.

Despite the counseling she has received, Jefferson said that she doesn't consider herself to be fully recovered. She said that recovery is a long process and there are times that she deals with the memories of abuse better than other times.

Taylor was convicted in 1993 on two counts of indecency with a minor, in which he was given 10 years probation, with three years and six months of sexual offenders counseling. He has violated parole at least twice and is currently being held in the Texas Department of Corrections in Pampa.

The *Dallas Examiner* offered Taylor an opportunity to tell his side of the story in order to help those whose lives have been affected by child abuse. However, in a letter that he wrote to *The Dallas Examiner* — in which he admitted to the pain that he has caused himself and other after having committed two offenses which placed him in jail, missing a sexual offender's class and a visit to his parole officer and tested positive for drugs during his probation — he declined an interview explaining that he hoped to write a book and be able to leave his children and grandchildren an inheritance.

Jefferson expressed that in doing this, he would be making money "literally off of the blood of others." She shared her concerns that he did not care about the consequences of his actions and was not serious about rehabilitation.

After hearing that her cousin was due to be released in September of 2006, Jefferson felt inspired to become more active in bringing attention to how the legal system deals with sexual offenders and how much work still needs to be done.

Although she encountered roadblocks that may have caused her to become temporarily discouraged, she found support and encouragement from Tuala Williams, the general manager at *The Dallas Examiner* that gave her the strength to overcome her obstacles and keep going.

So, while fighting the release of her cousin, Jefferson formed Lift Every Voice Family and Community Development Project to increase awareness and prevention of such abuses, as well as to empower those that have been affected by sexual abuse.

Her website, www.marianjefferson.org, contains more information on the organization, information on sexual assault and a message board for survivors.

Robyn H. Jimenez writes for the *Dallas Examiner*.