

HEADING OFF CHILD ABUSE

With DYFS 'reeling' in crisis, advocates call prevention the key

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By Martin Espinoza
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While the state scrambles to reform its troubled Division of Youth and Family Services, children's advocates who are trying to stop child abuse before it happens say their work is being overlooked. The oversight, they say, will only mean more trouble in the future.

"At this moment, prevention appears to be taking a back seat to the more pressing needs of child safety," says Janet Rosenzweig, executive director of Prevent Child Abuse-New Jersey, in New Brunswick. "In the long run, that's not good."

Cries for reform have reached a deafening pitch in the aftermath of the death of 7-year-old Faheem Williams, who eight months ago was found dead in a relative's basement in Newark, his body battered and emaciated. DYFS had closed Faheem's case 11 months earlier without investigating an allegation of abuse.

Since then, efforts to reform DYFS have been called for by Gov. James E. McGreevey, ordered by the courts, and drafted by the state Legislature. It was the legislative effort that caught Rosenzweig's attention.

Rosenzweig, whose private, nonprofit advocacy group promotes education and awareness, says that missing from Trenton's efforts to restructure DYFS is a focus on prevention, specifically something known as primary child abuse prevention, which targets families in the general population with services and activities before any sign of abuse or neglect surfaces.

"Prevention can spare kids pain and suffering, spare families pain and suffering, and it can spare the government a lot of money it spends cleaning up the problem after the fact," Rosenzweig said.

Nipped in the bud

This year, taxpayers will spend some \$560 million on DYFS, including \$30 million in additional funds that have been earmarked for reforms, DYFS spokesman Joseph Delmar said.

What's more, taxpayers will also have to pay \$5 million in legal fees resulting from the lawsuit filed against the state by a New York City-based children's rights group. The suit, an effort to force DYFS to implement emergency reforms, was settled June 23.

And, a recent federal audit may result in the state having to return as much as \$10 million in federal aid because DYFS was found to be performing so poorly in critical areas.

According to DYFS, every year since 1993 the agency has received more than 67,000 requests for intervention and services, including "referrals for child abuse/neglect, family problems, juvenile problems, adoption and others."

But, Rosenzweig contends, "if prevention efforts were strengthened, what DYFS does would not be necessary."

Currently, Rosenzweig's statewide organization partners with the Hudson County Child Abuse Prevention Center in Jersey City to locally promote primary prevention methods.

Primary prevention targets the general population with information on child development, discipline, personal safety for children, and other aspects of parenting.

"Everyone is always quick to attack parents, but parents do the best they can with what they know," said Veronica Pitts, HCCAP's program director. "And that might be spanking, because that's what they learned from their parents, who learned it from their parents."

"What these programs do is give parents some other alternatives to use in disciplining their children."

Rosenzweig said there's a precedent for DYFS - which would be known as the Division of Child Protection and Permanency under a proposed reorganization bill - to fund prevention programs, since it already funds projects and programs that aren't directly aimed at children in abusive environments.

"DYFS does child care licensing, and it has an office of public information, and it has a huge contracting unit that puts millions of dollars into communities for family-oriented support services," Rosenzweig said.

Money spent on prevention programs that, for example, teach parenting skills to people in stressful situations or help teens put off having children can significantly reduce the likelihood of children ever needing services from DYFS, maintains Peter Herbst, executive director of the Jersey City center.

Talking prevention

In June, two weeks before the state Legislature recessed for the summer, Rosenzweig had planned to testify before the Assembly's Family, Women and Children's Services Committee about legislation that was supposed to completely restructure DYFS.

The bill, A3773, proposed replacing DYFS with the Division of Child Protection and Permanency, which would primarily investigate child abuse and find safe foster and adoptive homes for children. All other DYFS functions - like licensing and inspecting child care centers to - would be allocated within the state Department of Human Services.

But with little time left before the summer recess, some felt the bill had been rushed and that more time was needed to debate its language. Others feared the bill was little more than a name change for DYFS.

Assemblywoman Mary T. Previte, D-Cherry Hill, chairwoman of the Assembly committee considering A3773, said she was concerned the bill was too narrowly focused on child abuse victims, which is just one category of children under DYFS care.

"I think we need to move carefully in putting together legislation that genuinely reforms," Previte said, adding that she was also concerned about what would happen to the 30,000 children awaiting residential placement or services who are not child abuse victims.

The language of the bill made "not a singlemention"of primaryprevention, Rosenzweigsaid.

Although she conceded that "most of what we see happening in Trenton is a much needed response to the death of the Williams boy," ignoring prevention is like ignoring the future, she argues.

DYFS officials agree that prevention strategies are important, but the agency says it must first get out of what had become a crisis situation.

"We recognize now that we do not do enough with regard to prevention," DYFS spokesman Delmar said. "The way DYFS works now, our investigations are based on safety. Is the child safe at this moment?"

It's difficult at this time for DYFS officials to take into consideration the bigger picture, he said, because the agency has been "reeling."

Delmar made assurances that under the leadership of newly appointed DYFS Director Edward Cotton, a child welfare veteran who previously ran Nevada's child protection agency, DYFS will undergo significant reforms.

Although Rosenzweig said she's doubtful prevention strategies will be part of DYFS reform, she said she is trying to get legislators to at least acknowledge the importance of primary prevention strategies. She wants primary prevention included in the definitions section of any future restructuring legislation.

Assemblywoman Previte agreed that the state is not doing enough to promote abuse prevention.

"I think the issue of prevention is one of the biggest problems in the state," Previte said. "Too much federal money that goes to counties ends up going to reacting to the problem of child abuse."

Getting the state Legislature to acknowledge the language of primary prevention would ultimately benefit groups such as HCCAP.

"It's easier to get funding, grant money, if the language of prevention is in the books," Herbst said.

With the budget as tight as it is, Rosenzweig said she would be happy if prevention was at least mentioned.

"We need to have this in the public eye," she said.

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