

New Jersey child death information will remain public

Posted by [kheyboer](#) July 31, 2009 05:53AM



AP Photo/Courtesy of Williams Family Faheem Williams' body was found in a storage bin one day after his twin, Raheem, 7, and another brother, Tyrone, 4, were found starving in a locked basement room in Newark. Their case helped spur changes in the state's child protection system.

Improving New Jersey's child welfare system and maintaining transparency are paramount to the mission of the New Jersey Department of Children and Families.

It is this strong and focused commitment that has helped the department achieve tremendous progress over the past three years, ensuring the safety and well-being of New Jersey's most vulnerable children and families.

Therefore, it is important to clarify misinformation about [changes in what information DCF](#), the state's child protection and welfare agency, releases regarding a child fatality or near fatality due to abuse or neglect. DCF has not proposed to make, nor will it make, any changes [limiting its public information](#).

To be clear, DCF has made absolutely no change that will limit the public's access to information surrounding the tragic loss of a child as a result of abuse or neglect. In fact, Gov. Jon Corzine has asked that DCF now provide, in a more proactive and easily accessible way, the same information that has always been available.

Under federal and state statutes, the state is required to release specific information regarding a child fatality or near-fatality resulting from child abuse or neglect. This information includes:

- details about the child victim, including full name, gender, age, and home county
- the nature of the incident and cause of death
- information on who the alleged perpetrator is and relationship to the child victim
- the entire family history (if applicable) of a child victim, including the date and disposition of each prior referral received about the family, investigation findings, case closure dates, and any services provided to the family (i.e. domestic violence services, substance abuse counseling, parenting classes, etc.)
- the last date of contact DYFS had with the child victim's family prior to the fatality (if applicable).

DCF receives regular requests for this detailed information, particularly from the media, and has always made it available upon request. To provide even greater access, DCF will now proactively post these reports annually and will, in the coming month, post reports on all abuse/neglect fatalities that occurred in 2006, 2007 and 2008.

In addition, the Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) -- an independent office housed in the Department of the Public Advocate -- has decided to collaborate more extensively with the New Jersey Child Fatality and Near Fatality Review Board and conduct a unified and independent review of all child fatalities and near fatalities, instead of issuing its own report on select child fatalities. The review board is a multidisciplinary panel which includes medical examiners, state police, prosecutors, law guardians, pediatricians, psychologists, social workers, and OCA. It was formed over a decade ago to review cases and provide meaningful recommendations on system-wide improvements that may be needed to prevent future fatalities or near-fatalities, and improve services to children and families.

Over the past six months, OCA and the review board have been engaged in an intensive process to strengthen the work of the board, improve its operation, expeditiously review serious cases of abuse and neglect and marshal the significant expertise and resources of the board.

As a part of this process, OCA and the review board together plan to create in the coming year a more comprehensive assessment of each case, take proactive steps to address immediate concerns identified in the course of its case reviews, and issue a unified report on child deaths that will provide recommendations for needed changes in any system that serves children.

While DCF agrees with OCA and the board's decision and welcomes a more robust review by this multidisciplinary team, the decision does not and will not restrict or change any information currently released by DCF surrounding the cases of child fatalities or near fatalities resulting from abuse or neglect.

Since 2006, DCF has reduced caseloads for child welfare staff; begun and made significant progress on improving the way the Division of Youth and Family Services keeps children and families safe and strong; moved children to permanency on a more timely basis; recruited record numbers of safe and loving foster homes; improved health care outcomes for children in the state's custody; built a robust statewide network of prevention and family support services, and increased capacity in the child behavioral health system, bringing hundreds of New Jersey's children back home to receive the treatment they need.

Our commitment to build a stronger child welfare system to safeguard and improve the lives of our state's most vulnerable children has never wavered. Under Governor Corzine's leadership, we now have a very different child welfare system - one that is more transparent and one that is partnering with families in a more collaborative and approachable manner to achieve real and enduring results for New Jersey's children.

Kimberly S. Ricketts is commissioner of the New Jersey Department of Children and Families.