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"Bury your mistakes": despite DHS vows of reform, children it checks on are still dying

In September, five months shy of her second birthday, Alayah Turman was pummeled to death after she interrupted a video game.

Marrieon Currie, 11 weeks old in January, took his final breaths as he was being doused in hot water, thrown down stairs, and beaten with a mop handle. Bryanna Redmond, a skinny 2-year-old known as "Princess," died last year from a punch that split her spine. Before they were killed -- each by a parent, police say -- all three children had come under the scrutiny of the city's child-protection agency, the Department of Human Services, which has the power to remove children from abusive homes. In each case, relatives or neighbors say they saw signs of danger. DHS either never saw those signs or discounted them.

Three years after a string of blunders by DHS were widely blamed for failing to prevent the torture-murder of toddler Porchia Bennett, an Inquirer investigation has found that young children are still regularly abused to death after coming to the attention of DHS. Although 3-year-old Porchia's death prompted the department to solicit expert advice on how to improve its investigative procedures, agency officials have failed to act on most of those recommendations. From 2003 through 2005, at least 20 children died of abuse or neglect after coming to the attention of DHS, including 10 just last year, according to department records. Those numbers were coaxed out of the agency after four weeks of repeated requests. In recent interviews, DHS Commissioner Cheryl Ransom-Garner acknowledged that the agency had made mistakes, but she declined to discuss them, citing confidentiality rules. "I think DHS is doing a great job," she said. "Our staff do a heroic job every day, working to save Philadelphia's children. One child death is too many. And from every death we do a review to determine what can we do differently." Those reviews, however, are secret. "In Philadelphia, you can bury your mistakes," said Richard Gelles, dean of the University of Pennsylvania's School of Social Work.

Ransom-Garner declined to discuss details, but said DHS reviews had found that no policies or procedures were violated in six of the eight cases The Inquirer examined. In two of the cases, DHS could not answer the question by the time this article went to print. There always will be deaths that child-protection authorities could not have foreseen or prevented. And the agency is in much better shape than two decades ago, when a class-action lawsuit forced it to improve. But experts who consulted for DHS in recent years told The Inquirer that the agency's system for evaluating risk is inadequate. They

said the agency still had not addressed key failings uncovered after Porchia Bennett's death. "Their investigators are not being given a policy for how to make decisions or an understanding of what risks can be tolerated," said Gelles, a former DHS consultant who became so disillusioned that he now serves as an expert witness for lawyers suing the agency. Mayor Street, walking into City Hall yesterdays to attend a chess lecture, declined to answer questions about the performance of his human-services department. "I don't have any comment," he said. "I don't have any comment on that at this time." In the three cases with the most extensive public records about the department's actions, an Inquirer review of court documents and interviews with relatives and neighbors found that people had concerns about the children's welfare before they died -- red flags that could have been apparent to inquiring caseworkers.

Five other cases, where there is less public information about DHS actions, raise questions about whether the agency could have done more to prevent the deaths. The Inquirer examined only cases in which the agency's involvement could be determined from other sources, because DHS would not disclose which of the dead children it had checked on.

The Inquirer found: In the Bryanna Redmond punching death, the toddler was killed after the agency closed a case involving her mentally disabled mother, who had talked of abandoning the baby at birth. A grandmother testified in court that she had asked DHS for help, to no avail. Marrieon Currie's mother, Lea, who had a history of mental and physical problems, told neighbors that she was hearing demons. DHS had been providing her services and left the infant in her custody. But neighbors, who tried to help with the baby, told The Inquirer that she was incapable of caring even for her dog. When Alayah Turman was beaten to death last month, DHS had been investigating an abuse allegation. The agency said it had not detected any injury; Alayah's grandmother said she had seen bruises on the child, and the medical examiner found a healed arm fracture during the autopsy.

A video game unplugged Police say Alayah's father, Tyrone Spellman, confessed to killing his daughter after she pulled the plug while he was playing Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon, a violent combat video game.

Ransom-Garner told The Inquirer on Sept. 13 -- before the newspaper launched its inquiry into child deaths -- that the agency had been investigating the family. A few weeks before Alayah was killed, the commissioner said, an anonymous caller reported that an adult was yelling at a 2-year-old, and

that there were holes in the floor of the home. The next day, she said, a caseworker interviewed Alayah's mother, Mia Turman, and inspected the child. There were no bruises, Ransom-Garner said, and the toddler appeared happy and playful. She said there had been no other complaints. The agency made another surprise visit a few days later. The caseworker asked Turman whether anyone else lived in the house, in order to perform a background check on each adult. The caseworker took Turman's word that no men lived there, Ransom-Garner said. Neighbors and relatives told The Inquirer, however, that Spellman had been born at the Brewerytown rowhouse where Alayah was killed. He was living there with his brother and another relative, Keith Walker. Turman had moved to Spellman's house only recently, said neighbors, many of whom say he is innocent. Walker told The Inquirer that he had tried to revive the little girl when he arrived home that night. Detectives later told him that there were obvious signs of past abuse, he said. Alayah's grandmother Marvine Turman told The Inquirer that she remembered seeing bruises. Asked about that, Ransom-Garner said she could not discuss the case, even though she had talked about it previously. Asked whether caseworkers were instructed to interview neighbors during their investigations, she said that they were not prohibited from doing so, but that there were no specific guidelines about it. A shattering death Alayah died three years after a killing that was supposed to change the culture at the Department of Human Services. In August 2003, 3-year-old Porchia Bennett died after enduring months of abuse at the hands of a couple her mother paid to care for her. DHS acknowledged it erred in the case. First it lost track of the family before Porchia was born, even though the agency had not resolved a previous abuse investigation.

Then, three days before she died, a DHS worker failed to investigate an abuse report at her house. In the aftermath, DHS did make some changes. It overhauled the way caseworkers search for families, authorizing the use of databases and private investigators. So why are children in its system still dying? One answer, experts say, is that while the agency fixed its tracking system, it failed to adopt proposals for significant changes in how it investigates abuse and weighs risk to children. As a result, the agency still depends on the judgment of individual caseworkers -- some of whom are incompetent, according to DHS critic Gelles. After the Bennett case, then-Commissioner Alba Martinez hired several consultants to examine and overhaul the agency's risk-assessment procedures. DHS officials said Friday that they might implement some of the recommendations. "This is a work in progress," Deputy Commissioner John McGee said. Ransom-Garner said the agency was working to improve its systems on its own timetable, consistent with state regulations. She also argued that the Bennett case did not point to profound problems in how DHS operated. "What happened to Porchia Bennett, we looked at that case and said, 'Lessons learned, what do we need to do here?'" she said. "The system was not broke." Losing sleep Ransom-Garner's predecessor, Martinez, struck a different tone when she hired a Penn team led by Gelles, a nationally recognized child-welfare expert, and Carol

Wilson Spigner, a child-welfare official in the Clinton administration. "This was Alba's project, because she wanted to prevent another Porchia Bennett," Gelles said. "She lost a lot of sleep over it." Gelles said the DHS policy manual "said you should do this you should do that, but it gave almost no guidance as to how." That policy manual on investigations is still in place. Gelles now believes the best way to change the agency is to fight it, he said. "I said to Cheryl, 'You can do this the easy way or the hard way: You can change, or I'm going to sue you.' They've chosen to do it the hard way," Gelles said. In May, the Penn team handed over two major recommendations: a new policy on investigating child fatalities, and a new policy on assessing the safety of a child in a home. The city has not adopted them. John Goad, former deputy director of the Division of Child Protection at the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, had a similar experience. He had helped engineer a turnaround in Chicago's system, where, he said, reports of repeat child abuse fell by half. Martinez hired him to evaluate her agency. Goad said DHS workers had a difficult time deciding how to handle cases and sometimes made the wrong decisions.

"Their decision-making structure is wanting," he said. "They tended to lose focus on some things that pertain to child safety." After visiting the city in 2003, Goad wrote 65 pages of guidelines and definitions. His report included 14 scientifically determined factors that contribute to a child being unsafe. Ransom-Garner said the agency had improved its call-routing system, but had not implemented Goad's other recommendations.

One year after Porchia died, McGee, then the agency's operations director, said: "It's much less likely that a case like Porchia's will happen again." Not again People knew Bryanna was in danger from the day she was born. Nurses at Frankford Hospital-Torresdale Campus became concerned when her mother, Viola Redmond, a 22-year-old with an IQ below 90, told them that she didn't want the child. "It was alarming. . . . She didn't pay any attention at all to the baby," testified the social worker, Columbia Elmehaoui. Her testimony, and this account, is drawn from court documents in the Viola Redmond murder case, interviews, and other public records. DHS declined to comment on the case. A DHS caseworker went to the hospital shortly after the birth in January 2003. Three days later, the worker visited the home in the tidy Crescentville section of Northeast Philadelphia where Viola Redmond was living with her parents. Along with baby Bryanna, Redmond was caring for a 16-month-old son, Jaleel. She worked a cleaning job at the nearby IRS office. The caseworker, Robin Goodwin, reported that Redmond seemed "mentally retarded" and "childlike."

Though at risk, Bryanna would be OK, Goodwin decided, "because of the fact that there are both maternal grandparents in the home." She did not respond to a request for comment. DHS referred the case to a private contractor, paid by taxpayers to train Redmond in parenting skills, according to

DHS records. "Most of the time they came, [Viola] was at work," testified Rosetta Redmond, the baby's grandmother, at her daughter's sentencing hearing. On Dec. 8, 2004, DHS closed the case, deeming the children safe at the grandparents' house. Two months later, Viola Redmond and her boyfriend, Damar Davis, decided to move into their own apartment. Rosetta Redmond testified that she had repeatedly warned DHS that the couple intended to move out. A caseworker promised to get back to her, she said, but never did.

Not long afterward, Viola Redmond's sister, a parole officer, made an anonymous call to DHS to report that "the child may have a broken bone in her face." The call arrived at the DHS hotline at 10:12 a.m. July 15. It was too late. Across town, Bryanna was buckled over in her bed, slipping into shock after a death blow to her stomach.

Davis testified that he had found the child in that condition when he returned home from work about 6 a.m., and met Viola on her way out the door. By 11:58 a.m. Bryanna was dead. Ian Hood, a Philadelphia deputy medical examiner, testified that the toddler had died of an injury more severe than all but one or two he had seen in his career.

In a statement to detectives, Viola Redmond said she had punished Bryanna for having a temper tantrum by punching her in the stomach.

On the day Bryanna died, a DHS caseworker named Lekisha Harvey tried to investigate the sister's abuse complaint. But somehow the address had gotten garbled. It took DHS three days to search a public-assistance database, which turned up Viola's former address on Reach Street in the Northeast. The judge in the case, Benjamin Lerner, commented from the bench that the case raised questions about the agency. "Who is in charge, who gives little children to people who are so obviously, absolutely completely incapable of taking care of them?" Lerner wondered. From the bench Lerner, who has been dealing with DHS for decades, as a public defender and then a jurist, argues that the agency is not aggressive enough in removing children from potentially abusive homes. "I don't think the system has changed at all" since Porchia Bennett's death, he said in a recent interview. "I believe that we have to be more forceful earlier in children's lives when we see that they are simply not being taken care of. I believe that we have to be more accepting of the fact that good motives are not sufficient in parenting, and that many people lack either the will or the ability to raise children in a safe and healthy environment."

DHS is credited with improving significantly since its worst days in the 1980s, when a series of scandals led to a 1990 class-action lawsuit by the American Civil Liberties Union and other advocacy groups.

In 2000, outsider Martinez took the helm and quickly won high marks for a variety of changes. The next year, DHS settled the class action, known as the Baby Neal case. The

settlement allowed advocates to audit how the agency handled a sampling of cases for two years. The arrangement expired in 2003. But experts say the Philadelphia agency remains seriously flawed, with a staff of uneven quality overburdened by caseloads that can exceed 30, nearly double the 17 that national standards recommend.

"In general, they've done a lot of great things at the department, and it's a totally different place than when we sued them," said Frank Cervone, who runs an agency that provides free legal advocacy for children. Cervone was part of the 1990 lawsuit and is among the city's foremost DHS experts. "That said," he added, "they remain a public agency that has a lot of problems." Hearing demons Almost everyone who knew Lea Currie had serious doubts about whether the 25-year-old could care for her newborn son, Marrieon. "She was hearing demons," said neighbor Felix Cruz, 33, who lived just two doors away from Currie on Charles Street in the East Frankford section of the city. "She was off-balance," he added, echoing nearly a dozen others interviewed on the block. "She shouldn't have been raising that kid on her own."

Currie had tried to kill herself at 17, and she suffered from cerebral palsy, a muscular disorder that left her barely able to walk up the stairs. Yet after Marrieon was born last fall, DHS decided to leave the baby in her home and send a contract worker to provide support services, neighbors said. Three months later, Marrieon was dead.

On Jan. 23, Currie held the infant under hot water, threw him down a flight of stairs, and beat him with a mop handle, according to court records. She quickly confessed and was charged with murder, records show. Currie told neighbor Amelia Lewis, 35, that demons had confined her and the baby to an upstairs bedroom, Lewis said. Neighbors said Currie was incapable of even caring for her dog, which they eventually took away. "She was always calling people to buy food for the dog when she remembered," said Paul Wons, 45, who worked with Currie's mother and now lives in the Currie house. Awaiting trial, Currie has been committed to Norristown State Hospital. Psychiatrists initially ruled her unfit for court, noting that she had "stopped eating and drinking" and had been "soiling herself and lying in her own menstrual fluid." Court records refer to her as "severely mentally disabled."

Timika Bowens, 29, who lives across the street, has known Currie most of her life. She can't understand how DHS left Marrieon in her care. "DHS killed that baby," she said. Bowens and four other residents recalled that in a meeting several weeks before the baby died, a DHS worker asked neighbors to care for the child. "Who would leave it on the neighborhood to care for a child?" asked Timika Bowens' mother, Irene. DHS officials said that it wasn't their policy to ask neighbors to care for a child, and that if that had happened, it would have been inappropriate. Neighbor Blanche Jacobs, 41, recalled a day when Currie made a startling confession to her. "I don't know how to love my baby," Jacobs said Currie

told her. " 'Ms. Blanche, please tell me how.' " In one of her few references to a specific case, Ransom-Garner insisted that neighbors had not relayed their concerns to DHS. "People have a lot to say after a child death," she said. But in interviews, neighbors said it should have been clear to anyone, after a few moments of conversation with Currie, that the young mother was in trouble. "Anyone who would see her,

who talks to her, interacts with her, would know right away she couldn't care for that child," Timika Bowens said. "They should have done their job."

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