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The pique behind the scenes on DHS: publicly silent, Mayor Street grew frustrated during days of meetings over child deaths. The result: two officials gone.

Last Sunday, Mayor Street sent an e-mail to his closest advisers.

He was disturbed, sources said, by The Inquirer's investigation into how his Department of Human Services had handled the cases of children who were later killed. Day after day, Street said nothing publicly, even as lawmakers were calling for hearings and state regulators were swooping in for a review. Instead, as is his style, he hunkered down in meetings, conducting a methodical examination of child-death cases. That was where Street grew frustrated, city officials said. He kept hearing that the rules were being followed -- as he stared at files detailing the brutal deaths of helpless children. He finally decided he'd had enough. There was a need, as he later put it, "for fresh eyes and a fresh approach."

On Friday, Street broke his silence in dramatic fashion by announcing the removal of two top officials at the department. Commissioner Cheryl Ransom-Garner was asked to resign, and her deputy in charge of abuse investigations, John McGee, was fired. Street named Arthur C. Evans, Jr., who directs the city's mental health office, as acting commissioner. "We think we can do better," Street said at City Hall Friday, in a tone more matter-of-fact than defensive. Street, who lived with foster children as a boy on his family's Montgomery County farm, may have seen his legacy at stake. Almost from the moment he was elected, he has called children his first priority. He very nearly hired his wife, a longtime children's activist, to lead his social-services department. As a step toward reform, the mayor promised that the state Department of Public Welfare and the city together would review all child-abuse fatalities from the last several years. Aides said the reviews would include child advocates from outside the government.

Based on public records and interviews, The Inquirer article focused on three cases in which relatives and neighbors told of danger signs that DHS caseworkers either had missed or discounted. In four other cases, the newspaper raised questions about what DHS did before a child died of abuse or neglect. All told, 20 children in families that had prior contact with the agency died from abuse or neglect from 2003 through 2005. On Friday, the city disclosed five such deaths in 2006. The article also reported that after the 2003 death of toddler Porchia Bennett, DHS hired consultants to devise plans for improving how it assesses risk. But few of those recommendations have been implemented.

Ransom-Garner and McGee sat for two long interviews for the article. But they said city lawyers had barred them from discussing DHS actions in the case.

Yesterday, she spoke with a Fox29 news reporter. "I have a problem with the reporting," she said of the Inquirer investigation. Some of the cases in the report were closed long ago, she said. Of her performance, Ransom-Garner said, "I've done everything he's [Street] asked me to do and worked from sunup to sundown. I've served 26,000 children." McGee could not be reached for comment yesterday.

Before the Inquirer article ran, Ransom-Garner defended her record at the agency. "I think DHS is doing a great job," she said. In the end, the mayor didn't agree. Street has fired or asked top officials to resign before. But many of those cases, including that of his former inspector general, involved violations of the city's residency rule. Ransom-Garner became the highest official dismissed over her performance. The commissioner made \$117,000 a year. McGee, who joined the city in 1973, made \$108,000. Throughout the week, as politicians weighed in from all directions, Street gave no public indication that he even had noticed The Inquirer report. On Monday, state lawmakers and the city controller called for public hearings on DHS, while mayoral candidates weighed in. Street said nothing.

On Wednesday, Gov. Rendell's administration said it would review the actions of DHS. Again Street was silent. That was in keeping with this mayor's close-to-the-vest style, and in contrast to the actions of other mayors facing child-welfare crises. Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, for example, led New York's response this year to the beating death of a 7-year-old, a case that provoked a storm of criticism because the child-welfare agency had mishandled it. "We, as a city, have failed this child," Bloomberg said a day after the killing. But behind the scenes, Street's closest advisers knew he was unhappy.

On Tuesday, he held one of several meetings with Managing Director Pedro Ramos, City Solicitor Romulo Diaz, Ransom-Garner, and other DHS officials. Those meetings -- about nine or 10 hours' worth, Street said -- continued all week, some as early as 7:30 a.m. and others occurring as late as 9:30 p.m., including on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday evenings. "He was trying to understand what the discrepancies were and what were the areas in which we needed more scrutiny," Diaz said.

Street also met Thursday with Pennsylvania's welfare secretary, Estelle B. Richman, a former Philadelphia managing director. He has not spoken with Rendell about the agency troubles, Street spokesman Joe Grace said. Political insiders said it was no surprise Street that did not feel compelled to share with the public what was happening behind closed doors at City Hall. "His style is his style, and I don't think he's ever going to change," State Rep. Dwight Evans (D., Phila.) said. Street has long demonstrated a resistance to knee-jerk responses, and a penchant for being a slow decision-maker -- a practice some call deliberate and others stubborn. He has left half a dozen agency heads in "acting" positions for months, unwilling to appoint them permanently.

"His outright dismissal of someone is something that has been done infrequently," former Managing Director Phil Goldsmith said. "He obviously learned information that made him uncomfortable going with the leadership in place, and he was going to take whatever action he felt was necessary." Frank Keel, a former Street spokesman, said, "I can only assume some of the revelations in The Inquirer article surprised him to the point that he and the managing director took a closer look, and came to the unavoidable conclusion he had to shake things up."

Speaking from the podium in the ornate Mayor's Reception Room on Friday, Street talked about his boyhood, and how the child-welfare agency and its troubles had an emotional pull on him. He said his mother had been a foster parent for several years when he was a boy. He said 15 or 20 foster children had lived in his house over those years, "and they became a part of our family." As an 18-year-old student with little money at Oakwood College in Alabama, far from his home, Street rented a room for \$1 a day in the state's only black orphanage, he said. Recalling the dozens of orphaned children he saw every day, he said, "People who get involved in the child-welfare system should be treating these children like their

family members, and not like they are a paycheck." A Street spokesman said yesterday that the mayor had not been referring to DHS workers. Street said he hoped the review would point the way toward real improvements in DHS's performance.

Richard Gelles, dean of the School of Social Policy and Practice at the University of Pennsylvania, said he was glad to hear that Street planned to include outsiders. "The devil is in the details," he said. Gelles also said Street should create an office for an independent child advocate who could demand DHS records, review cases, and tell the public what he or she found. Frank Cervone, whose Philadelphia agency finds legal help for abused children, said he chaired a commission in 2000 that made the same proposal. "We need to make the system transparent so that community trust can be restored," he said. "And that's a structural change that will take a change in style of leadership and some change in law." Cervone said the new leadership must work to rebuild sagging morale at the agency. A DHS union leader agreed. "The articles should force a review. We have had a lot of deaths, and that should not have happened," said Rita Urwitz, vice president of the DHS supervisors' union, Local 2186 of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees.

"I know there are systemic problems," Urwitz said, "but this throws the entire agency into total chaos." Not everyone is sympathetic with DHS workers. "My hope is that they would walk out and just keep walking," Joseph Rogers, president of chief executive of the Mental Health Association of Southeastern Pennsylvania, said of DHS workers who left the building Friday to protest the firings. "They do not seem to be meeting the needs of children. I think we need some radical changes over there."

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