

Why did Fla. children slip through cracks?

By Richard J. Gelles, *Special to CNN*

February 18, 2011 1:07 p.m. EST

CNN.com

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(CNN) -- The tragic case of Jorge Barahona of Florida is yet another reminder of the shortcomings of the nation's child protective service systems.

Barahona was charged with attempted murder after the body of his 10-year-old adoptive daughter was found Monday in a pickup by the side of the road near West Palm Beach; her gruesomely abused twin brother, injured and alive, was also found in the truck. Barahona was nearby.

Here again is a child fatality that could have been prevented had the agency charged with protecting children, the Florida Department of Children and Families, appropriately responded to reports of the harm apparently coming to these children.

When a tragedy occurs, people point fingers at the dysfunctions of a child protective service system. The solutions offered tend to fall into the category of "round up the usual suspects." First, blame is laid on the child protective service worker who failed to see the risks and dangers in the home.

But while sometimes, worker incompetence is indeed to blame, it is more often the very structure and function of a system that is supposed to protect children that is the source of the problem.

When that system is blamed, the response is: Ask for more money and for more workers, conduct a systemwide review, establish a blue-ribbon commission, fire the director, hire a new director, change the name of the agency or all of the above. Most any of these might help. But the proposed actions tend not to focus on what is actually wrong with a system that allows so many errors and mistakes.

To reform the system and to better protect children, you must first know the answers to two important questions:

- 1) What is the main task of child protective services?
- 2) What is the goal of the system?

The key task of child protective service is that the workers, supervisors and administrators are in the business of making decisions -- investigate or not, substantiate or not, offer services or not, remove the child or not, return the child or not, where to place, for how long, with what goal, etc.

Federal and state law, administrative codes and policy manuals all describe, often in excruciating detail, what decisions a worker could make. What the laws, codes and manuals do not provide is the "how."

The toolbox that child protective service employs in decision-making is alarmingly devoid of reliable and substantial tools. The main tools used to make decisions are either clinical judgment or risk-assessment

instruments with little scientific accuracy.

Workers rarely have access to the full range of timely and critical information about children and families. Combining clinical judgment with incomplete information means the decision's accuracy is often no better than chance -- much like spinning "the wheel of fortune."

Abuse clues in Fla. twins case put spotlight on child services

Child protective service administrators have little ability to assess the accountability of the workers. Ironically, Florida has begun to address this problem by providing workers with better technology, such as smartphones to access information. But the technology that is being adopted does not confirm that the worker has actually visited a home, nor does it provide the worker with full, real-time information about the child and family.

For whatever reason -- lack of information or poor judgment -- the agency still apparently failed to assess and address properly the risks to the Barahona children.

As for the second key question -- the goal of a child protective service system -- child protection can focus on preserving families, protecting children or assuring permanent caregiving to children. Many observers and administrators of child protective systems believe they can achieve all three goals. But they cannot.

Preserving families can put children at risk. Assuring safety often means taking children out of homes that are believed to be dangerous. Permanence of caregiving is fragile in both homes where children have been mistreated and in foster-care homes.

Having studied and consulted for Florida's Department of Children and Families for almost four decades, I know the system reasonably well. I know that in the past few years Florida's department has fallen under the spell of those who believe that the proper role of child protective service is to intervene in families as little as possible.

Those who prefer minimal intervention were virulent in their criticisms when the Department of Children and Families responded to the last public tragedies -- the beating death of 6-year-old Kayla McKean and the disappearance of 4-year-old Rilya Wilson -- by increasing investigations and increasing the number of children placed into foster care.

Neither Florida nor any other child protective system can have it both ways -- preserving families and assuring the safety of children.

There are structural flaws in child protective services that caused two children to fall through Grand Canyon-like cracks: inadequate bases for making critical decisions about child safety and a system that seems willing to risk child deaths and injury to keep families, even the Barahona family, together.

The opinions expressed in this commentary are solely those of Richard J. Gelles.



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