

## Philly's Department of Human Services under the microscope

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By Elizabeth Fiedler



The 2006 starvation death of Daniael Kelly has sparked major reform at DHS. (AP Photo/Philadelphia District Attorney, File)

Many eyes are on Philadelphia's Department of Human Services this week. Yesterday marked a final chapter in the Daniael Kelly case. The 14-year-old's 2006 starvation death sparked major reform at DHS. Now come reports that the woman who is accused of keeping mentally disabled adults captive in a Tacony basement, previously lost and regained custody of her children after contact with DHS.

Dr. Chuck Williams, from Drexel University, serves on the city's DHS Oversight Board. He says the once much troubled agency is much improved.

"Oversight, accountability, tracking data, looking at statistics and reporting on it regularly at senior staff meetings throughout the agency is a great thing," said Williams.

Williams says when it comes to the basement imprisonment case, it's not fair to fault current DHS leadership for possible mistakes decades ago.

"However what it does bring up is the relationship between the community and the Department of Human Services," said Williams. "One of the things that we've been working on in this past year is outreach and public engagement.

We need the community, the public, the people who see these things happen and say to themselves, 'It's not my business.' You have to call DHS and let them know. If they don't know they can't help."

Richard Gelles is Dean of the School of Social Policy and Practice at the University of Pennsylvania. He says for many years his role was limited to criticizing DHS from the outside, or serving as an expert witness in lawsuits against the agency. He says that changed after the Daniael Kelly case.

"A lot has been done in terms of case management, they've tried to eliminate agencies that could not meet the performance goals that they set for them. When I came to Philadelphia 13 years ago, nobody in the agency even asked the question, 'Is what we do effective?' And now they have a whole division," said Gelles.

Gelles says tragic stories will continue.

"You're going to hear about cases that happened well before the reforms and you're going to hear about and cases that are happening while you and I are on the phone," said Gelles. "There's a simple reason for that: the caseworkers and the supervisor and the attorneys have to make very difficult decisions about whether to allow a child to stay in the home or return to the home."

Gelles says only New York's child welfare system--which began reform efforts years sooner than Philadelphia--is the one major city doing better a better job.