

DYFS rescues 4 kids called 'skin with bones'

Single mother living in Sussex County cottage is accused of starving children

BY JIM LOCKWOOD AND BILL SWAYZE Star-Ledger Staff August 03, 2006

A woman who moved to New Jersey to escape an abusive relationship has been accused of starving four of her five children, who were found "very malnourished" in their Sussex County home last week, authorities said yesterday.

The children -- ages 8, 9, 11, 13 and 18 -- were found July 25 in a cottage in Hopatcong owned by a member of a Manhattan-based church after the state Division of Youth and Family Services was contacted about the youngsters, authorities said. Their mother, Estelle Walker, was arrested the same day.

The children, one law enforcement official said, were "nothing but skin with bones..."

While all five children were malnourished, no charges have been filed in connection with the oldest, a girl who recently turned 18, Sussex County First Assistant Prosecutor William Fitzgibbons said.

The five are now living out of the area with other family members, under a court order, and their conditions are improving, he said.

Walker, 47, who was charged with child endangerment, is being held in the Sussex County jail in Newton on \$200,000 bail with no option for release by posting 10 percent of that amount, authorities said.

Walker moved into the cottage last winter, said Gayle Paulsen, who leads a ministry for single mothers at the Times Square Church in Manhattan.

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All five of the children were immediately taken to Newton Memorial Hospital for treatment of apparent malnutrition, Fitzgibbons said. He described their conditions as "very malnourished -- nothing but skin with the bones..."

"It was extremely evident that they weren't eating," Hopatcong police Lt. Michael Siciliano said.

"This was over a long term," he said, adding that the 8-year-old girl "weighed only 35 pounds."

Siciliano said authorities believe the children, who were being home-schooled, had not eaten in at least four days.

"They were home so they weren't on the radar screen; the schools weren't aware of them," Siciliano said.

Walker moved from Brooklyn to Hopatcong to give herself time to get back on her feet, Paulsen said. She said Walker has been a member of the 8,000-member Times Square Church for 10 years.

Paulsen said that when church officials asked Walker to leave the home, "she told me God told her to stay."

"I told her that wasn't sound thinking ... I told her if she would continue to live where she had been asked to leave, she'd be in violation of the law," Paulsen said. "I would never believe she wouldn't feed her children."

Peluso said she has no regrets about allowing Walker to stay at her home.

"We opened our home to strangers. Sometimes when you try to help somebody, I guess it backfires," she said. "I don't think this would ... stop me from doing it again."

The prosecutor's office announced the arrest yesterday in a late-afternoon press release. Asked why it took more than a week to disclose, Fitzgibbons said, "We were just dotting our i's and crossing our t's with the investigation."

DYFS spokesman Andy Williams said it is "pretty rare" for the agency to investigate allegations specifically about malnutrition.

However, he said, nearly 60 percent of the complaints DYFS receives involve various forms of child neglect, including malnutrition. Typically, DYFS will remove a child who appears to be suffering from malnutrition, take them to see a doctor and, if necessary, place them with a relative or family friend, Williams said.

This is the second case of child endangerment reported by Sussex County authorities in as many days. On Tuesday, police in Stanhope arrested a 27-year-old mother who allegedly left her 13-year-old daughter home alone for well over a month in an apartment with no electricity and little food.

The mother, Lisa Sylvester, was charged with neglect and second-degree child endangerment.

Staff writer Susan Livio contributed to this report. © 2006 The Star Ledger

DYFS says N.Y. church silent about starved kids

BY JIM LOCKWOOD AND BILL SWAYZE Star-Ledger Staff August 04, 2006

Officials from a Manhattan church said yesterday they contacted the state Division of Youth and Family Services on May 15 about a Brooklyn woman whose five "severely malnourished" children were found last week in a cot tige in Sussex County.

But Kevin Ryan, commissioner of the state Department of Children and Families, denied receiving any call from the

Times Square Church about Estelle Walker and her children. In fact, he said, DYFS did not learn about the family until they were found in the Hopatcong cottage July 25.

The church was providing food and housing to the Walkers, parishioners of the church who were trying to escape an abusive situation. Gayle Paulsen, a church leader, said Walker was told she had to move out in May. When Walker refused, the church cut off its support, hoping she would leave, Paulsen said.

That's when the church contacted DYFS, hoping they'd get involved, she said.

Ryan, whose department oversees DYFS, said that never happened.

"Their failure to call us after cutting off food and aid to these children is appalling," Ryan said in a statement.

The children -- ages 8, 9, 11, 13 and 18 -- were discovered last week after the attorney for the owners of the cottage on Maxim Drive contacted DYFS and told officials the children appeared emaciated.

One of the children told DYFS caseworkers it had been at least 11 days since she had eaten, according to a police affidavit. A physician who examined the children said they were in the lower 3 percent weight range for their ages, according to the affidavit.

Only an empty jelly jar, coffee grounds and a box of Chex Mix were found in the cottage, the court affidavit said.

Earlier, one law enforcement official said the children were "nothing but skin with bones." Another said the 8-year-old girl weighed 35 pounds.

Walker, 47, was charged July 25 with child endangerment involving four of the children. She remains in the Sussex County Jail on \$200,000. No charges have been filed in connection with the oldest child, an 18-year-old girl, because she is an adult, Sussex County First Assistant Prosecutor William Fitzgibbons said.

The children, who were being home-schooled, are living out of the area with other family members and their conditions are improving, Fitzgibbons said.

For more than two years, Times Square Church, an 8,000-member evangelical church, has helped its parishioners who are single mothers, giving them money so they can pay their rent and buy food, said Paulsen, director of the church's Single Mothers Ministry.

Walker, a member of the church for 10 years, is the first woman relocated.

"She had five children and said she had nowhere else to go," Paulsen said.

Last year, the church moved Walker and her children to the cabin overlooking Lake Hopatcong on the property owned by former soap opera star Lisa Peluso and her husband, Brad Guice, Paulsen said. The couple, who live on Maxim Drive in a house next to the cottage, are members of Times Square Church.

A steady flow of assistance from the church followed, including \$700 to \$1,000 a month in food. There was one caveat: Walker had to find a new place to live by mid-May. If she didn't, the church would start eviction proceedings, Paulsen said.

"We deeply regret the consequences of your actions on your children and this ministry," Paulsen said in a letter on file in Superior Court in Newton in a landlord-tenant eviction dispute. "Our heart was only to bless and to help you with the transition back to supporting your family on your own."

Paulsen said the church promised to resume its financial support if Walker moved out.

Peluso said she offered Walker help during the eviction, but the woman became a "reclusive squatter."

"She had many options that she chose not to pursue. She had family, she had a church, she had friends," Peluso said. "The woman needs help. She came here from an abusive situation. I just think somewhere she snapped. I don't know what could have possibly happened in her mind."

Paulsen said Walker began to behave strangely.

"She told me God told her to stay," Paulsen said. "I told her that wasn't sound thinking."

After the church cut off support in May, Peluso said she noticed in mid-June that the children looked "a little thin" and gave the family boxes of food, including pasta and sauces, rice and meat to freeze, bread, peanut butter, several gallons of milk, lunch meat and cheese.

In late July, Guice went to the cabin to check on a broken hot water heater and saw that the children were "emaciated," Peluso said. That's when the couple told their attorney in the eviction proceeding, William Lang, to contact DYFS.

Church officials, however, say they had contacted DYFS weeks earlier, in mid-May, in the hopes the agency would get involved.

"This is about a woman who did not want to move and things got out of hand. I think if DYFS would have gotten involved in May, at least send somebody out, maybe this whole thing may have been averted," Lang said. "The children may have been taken care of."

Kate Bernyk, a DYFS spokeswoman, said the agency has no record of receiving a call about the Walker family prior to July 25.

"We ran a search of all calls that came into the hot line, by county, and by all the names. We know that we absolutely did not receive any prior calls on these children," Bernyk said.

Patty Lou Boff, director of A Safe House, a shelter for battered women in Bloomfield, said she believed the church showed extraordinary compassion in putting Walker up in the cottage, but lacked the expertise or resources needed to deal with families fleeing domestic abuse.

"In a real shelter, she would have had a case manager and the children would have had a children's advocate," Boff said. "You can't just stick them in a house and think you're helping them."

The plight of the Walker children is reminiscent of a 2003 Camden County case in which authorities said four brothers were systematically starved by their adoptive parents, Raymond and Vanessa Jackson.

The Jackson brothers' story gained national attention in October 2003 when Bruce Jackson was found scavenging for food in a neighbor's trash can in Collingwood. He was 19, but from his size -- just 45 pounds -- police figured him for about a 7-year-old. His younger brothers were similarly gaunt.

That case ended in a \$12.5 million settlement for the brothers, who were removed from the Jackson household, Vanessa Jackson's guilty plea to one count of child endangerment and accelerated efforts to reform the problem-plagued DYFS. Raymond Jackson died of a stroke before the case was concluded.

Staff writers Susan K. Livio, Laura Johnston and Brendan Berls contributed to this report.

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looked incredibly skinny,” he said. “Immediately, I knew there was something wrong. It was obvious she had gone too far.”

Mr. Guice then went to the store and returned with more food. He also called his lawyer — the same one who was working to evict Ms. Walker — and asked him to call state officials from youth and family services.

The officials visited the house on July 25, Mr. Fitzgibbons said, and Ms. Walker was arrested the same day.

“Their faces were emaciated,” Mr. Guice said of the children. “The boys’ arms were just not there almost.”

Mr. Guice said he had confronted Ms. Walker, told her that she was abusing her own children, and asked her what she thought she was doing.

Her only answer, he said, was that God would take care of them.

Nate Schweber contributed reporting for this article.

State scuttles adoption reform that backfired

Plan intended to expedite process instead creates a record backlog

BY SUSAN K. LIVIO August 06, 2006

permanent homes for foster children.

Instead, under a strategy called "One Worker, One Family," the state decided front-line case workers would handle all aspects of the cases assigned to them -- everything from reuniting children with their families to supervising adoptions.

Within six months, the labor union representing DYFS workers and advocacy groups revealed few workers had been trained to handle their new adoption responsibilities. They said workers gave priority to children they suspected were being victimized rather than focusing on kids waiting to be adopted.

"We predicted this would happen," said Cecilia Zalkind, executive director of the Association for Children of New Jersey. "Adoption requires specialized expertise. It requires completing court papers that are much more involved. Recruiting a home for special-needs children can be very challenging and requires a lot of work and expertise."

Zalkind said the backlog represents "a very high number of kids who are waiting primarily for paperwork to finish their adoptions."

Ryan said he plans to re-create specialized adoption units in every DYFS office, and deploy "SWAT teams" to assist the hardest-hit cities -- like Newark, where 505 children are on waiting lists -- by year's end.

Susan Lambiase, associate director of Children's Rights, said the group was "adamant" about closing the former adoption offices because children could get lost in the system for months after their caseworkers transferred the cases to an adoption specialist.

She said adoption workers and supervisors testified they did not consider it their responsibility to perform what are considered basic child protection functions for caseworkers: visiting homes and checking to see whether children were going to the doctor.

Lambiase said the group has agreed to Ryan's plan to bring back the specialized adoption units -- but only because he assured them regular caseworkers will also work there, and that adoption specialists will be trained to keep a close eye on safety.

"We will monitor it to make sure they do it," she said.

Foster mother Lynn Nowak of South Brunswick said that even though she was not affected by the changes, she has seen the emotional toll the uncertainty of adoption can have on a foster child.

After Nowak and her husband adopted their first child four years ago, they accepted another foster child. The child lived with the family for a few months but was then placed with another family.

DYFS ultimately returned the child, a 4-year-old girl, to the Nowaks, who adopted her in May. But the changes rattled the Nowaks' older child, who worried she would be taken as well.

"On a day that DYFS would come to visit, she would ask, 'Where is she taking me?'" Nowak said.

Mary Jane Awrachow, executive director of Foster and Adoptive Family Services, an advocacy and training organization, said families who want to adopt are frustrated by the delays. "Foster parents aren't cognizant of where the hold-up is, they just know it's not happening," she said.

DYFS Director Eileen Crummy said specialized adoption units are already back up and running in three-quarters of all DYFS offices. DYFS also plans to assign 66 caseworkers and 55 paralegals to expedite the adoption process, according to a recent report outlining the goals for the coming year.

"In year one, our focus is going to be an aggressive strategy to move through the backlog of kids who have been waiting in the system," Crummy said.

In addition to child safety, federal money is at stake.

New Jersey's adoption system earned consecutive million dollar-plus bonuses from the federal government in 2001, 2002 and 2003 for its success rate.

The state hasn't gotten any bonuses since. And now it may be in line for a federal penalty.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services says in order for New Jersey to avoid a penalty, at least 25 percent of the adoptions finalized by the end of next year must have taken no more than two years to complete. Last year, only 17 percent of adoptions were finished in that time frame.

New Jersey last met the 25 percent goal in 2003, two years before the adoption offices were closed.

"In some ways, the system was considered a national model," Ryan said.

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Adoption changes backfire in N.J. Aug. 07, 2006 Associated Press

TRENTON - The number of foster children in New Jersey has climbed to a record high despite a new state program that is supposed to find them permanent homes faster than before, the Star-Ledger of Newark reported yesterday.

More than 1,700 children - 200 more than a year ago - are waiting for the Division of Youth and Family Services to find them adoptive families, the newspaper reported.

Statewide, adoptions were down 16 percent through the first five months of this year after falling 7 percent last year, when the program was implemented.

The new plan involved using DYFS caseworkers to handle all aspects of the cases under their supervision, including overseeing adoptions. But child-advocacy groups and the union representing the workers said few workers were trained to handle adoption responsibilities.

"We predicted this would happen," said Cecilia Zalkind, executive director of the Association for Children of New Jersey. "Adoption requires specialized expertise. It requires completing court papers that are much more involved. Recruiting a home for special-needs children can be very challenging, and requires a lot of work and expertise."

Kevin Ryan, commissioner of the state Department of Children and Families, said he was reinstating an old adoption system. That system included specialized offices that for 30 years focused on finding permanent homes for foster children. In 2001, 2002 and 2003, its success earned it a monetary reward from the federal government.

Ryan said he also would create special teams to focus on problem areas such as Newark, where 500 children are on waiting lists to be adopted.

"We are now challenged with creating an adoption system for these children who are waiting for their 'forever' families, and that challenge is made very difficult by the impact of the reform efforts over the last year," Ryan said.

The state started the new system after prodding from the advocacy group Children's Rights Inc., whose lawsuit against the state helped bring about changes in child welfare.

Associate director Susan Lambiase said Children's Rights had supported closing the adoption offices because children got lost in the system as their cases were transferred to adoption specialists.

The group decided to support Ryan's plan to bring back the other system after he assured it that regular caseworkers would work with adoption officials, and that adoption specialists would be trained to monitor child safety, Lambiase said.

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