

Child Fatality Review #08-63
Region 4
King County

This two-year-old Caucasian male drowned.

Case Overview

On November 7, 2008, this two-year-old child and his 13-year-old stepbrother were passengers in a car driven by their sixteen-year-old cousin. At around, 8:30 a.m., while driving in south King County, she failed to negotiate a curve in the road and lost control of her car. The car slid off the road and rolled down an embankment and into the Green River. The 16-year-old driver escaped from the car and made her way back to the road. She was unable to rescue her cousins. Police cited her for failure to use caution on a wet road, covered with leaf debris.

The river was swollen due to heavy rain and the swift current made recovery impossible until November 11, 2008. On that date, the vehicle was pulled from the river. The body of this two-year-old child was found still secured in a carseat in the back seat of the vehicle. The second passenger, the thirteen-year-old stepbrother, was not found and to date his body has never been recovered.

The King County Medical Examiner determined that the deceased child's Cause of Death was Asphyxia Due to Drowning (Traffic-Related) and the Manner of Death was Accident.

Referral History

On June 20, 2008, it was reported to Child Protective Services (CPS) intake that the mother of the deceased child was seen driving erratically on May 8, 2008 with her two sons, ages three and two years old (the deceased child) in the car. The mother was stopped by Renton Police and field sobriety tests were performed. She passed a breathalyzer, but failed the sobriety tests and was arrested. She was under the influence of two prescribed medications she took that morning for back pain. The mother told police her doctor advised her to pay close attention to her driving abilities while taking these medications. The officer contacted a family member who responded to the scene and took custody of the children. This referral was screened in for investigation by CPS and closed with a founded finding. The worker left the case open for monitoring. The mother was charged with reckless endangerment. She passed all court-ordered urinalysis.

Issues and Recommendations

Issue: Safety Assessments, Safety Planning and Service Plans. The assigned social worker consulted with his supervisor (now retired) soon after the case was assigned and they decided that a safety plan was not necessary. The social worker instead gave the

mother community resource information, and the mother arranged for counseling and parenting classes at the Children's Home Society of Washington.

The mother was already doing urinalysis (UA) through district court for her traffic violation. She also agreed to a UA that the assigned worker arranged.

Because the mother was cooperative with the social worker and all collateral reports and direct observations were positive, the worker did not ask the mother to sign a voluntary service plan. Instead, he kept the case open to monitor her progress.

Recommendation: Children's Administration can improve investigations and assessments through early recognition of safety issues and subsequent safety planning. Written and signed voluntary service plans help all parties in a case do what is expected.

Cases can best be managed when the work is completed in each phase in the life of a case. Investigations should be completed within 45 days and if the family wants to continue with services, the case should be transferred to the Family Voluntary Services Unit.

The King South office is scheduling training with an expert in safety assessments and safety planning. The worker in this case will attend that training.