

Child Fatality Review #08-69
Region 3
Snohomish County

This 10-year-old dependent Caucasian male died in a house fire.

Case Overview

On November 22, 2008, the private agency foster home where this foster child lived caught fire. This child and an 11-year-old died of asphyxiation. This foster home housed five behaviorally disturbed children. Everyone in the home was asleep at the time and smoke detectors were working. The foster parents, their adult daughter, and the other three foster children escaped with minor burns and smoke inhalation; none required hospitalization. The fire was originally thought to have started about 1:00 a.m. from electrical wiring. Another 11-year-old foster child in the home later said he started the fire. Law enforcement is investigating his statements. The Arlington Fire Department is investigating the cause of this fire, but did not issue the final report by the writing of this review. The foster father reported to a Children's Administration social worker that he had no reason to be suspicious of the boy who started the fire. He had no known history of starting fires and didn't appear interested in fire in any way. These foster parents never saw this boy play with matches or lighters prior to the event and never would have suspected him of playing with fire.

Referral History

On March 22, 2005, it was reported to Child Protective Services (CPS) intake that an eight-year-old foster child was choked by the foster father and hit by the teenaged daughter of the foster parents. This referral was accepted for investigation by the Division of Licensed Resources, Child Protective Services Section (DLR/CPS). During the investigation it was determined that this eight-year-old hit the foster parents' daughter. At this point, the foster father held the child's chin in an attempt to get him to look at him in the eye while he scolded him for hitting his daughter. There was no evidence or disclosure to verify that the foster father choked this child. The foster father agreed that he would not hold the child by his chin. This investigation was closed with an unfounded finding.

On October 23, 2006, the foster mother called CPS intake and reported her 17-year-old daughter was watching the children (two eleven-year-old boys) and she caught one of the boys looking down the pants of the other. She stopped this behavior and notified her parents. This referral was screened as a licensing complaint and closed with a not valid finding for improper supervision.

On December 20, 2007, a report was made to CPS intake alleging an adult relative visiting in the home spanked the eight-year-old and threatened to spank an 11-year-old child in the home. The relative was babysitting at the time and the foster parents were

away from home. This referral was screened as a licensing complaint. This relative was visiting during the holidays and was left with the children for a short time. The children later disclosed they were not spanked. This referral was screened as a licensing complaint and closed with a not valid finding for improper discipline.

On August 21, 2008, the parents of a foster child in this home reported to CPS intake that their son had a one-inch long bruise on his arm visible when he visited with his parents. The child told his parents the bruising was caused by other boys in the foster home. This referral was screened as a licensing complaint and closed with a not valid finding for improper discipline.

On November 10, 2008, a report was made to CPS intake alleging a 12-year-old boy was covered with bruises after being in this foster home for three days. The boy told family members that he was pinched and hit by the foster father while he was wrestling with him. This boy was reported to have severe behavior problems. The other boys in the home disclosed the foster father broke up a fight between this 12-year-old and another child and used just enough force necessary to break up this fight. This referral was accepted for investigation by the DLR/CPS and closed with an unfounded finding for physical abuse.

On November 13, 2008, during the investigation of the referral dated November 10, 2008, a child reported the foster mother picked up a child by the collar of his shirt and held him against the wall and told him to "shut up." None of the children interviewed in that investigation reported any abuse in this foster home. This referral was screened as a licensing complaint and closed with a not valid finding for improper discipline.

On November 22, 2008, a report was made to CPS intake that a fire erupted at this foster home in the middle of the night killing an 11-year-old legally free foster child and this 10-year-old dependent foster youth. Three other children in the home survived with minor injuries. The Arlington Fire Department and Snohomish County Sheriff are investigating the cause of the fire. This referral was screened out as a licensing complaint. The licensing file indicates that the foster family was current in all trainings. They had regularly practiced fire evacuation plans. They had one drill within two months of the fire.

Issues and Recommendations

Issue: POST FATALITY: Five children involved with Children's Administration were affected in various ways by this fire. There were many social workers in several Division of Children and Family Services (DCFS) offices involved with these children, in addition to the private agency and DLR. It later became apparent that in the days and weeks following the fire the communication and coordination among these many partners was inadequate, possibly affecting the timely provision of services.

Issue: The team agreed that in the event of another such event that affected so many in this agency and others, consideration should be given to the appointment of one person to act as coordinator for the activities of the others.