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Agencies failed to share information about abused Barahona twins

By Mike Clary, Sun Sentinel

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From the moment they were taken away from their biological parents in 2004, Nubia and Victor Barahona were supposed to be shepherded through the state's foster care system by many welfare agencies with one shared goal: the safety and well-being of children.

But there was one thing dozens of social workers, lawyers, family court judges, physicians, psychologists, volunteer guardians and state administrators failed to share: information. And it was abundantly available from school teachers who suspected as far back as 2005 that the twins were abused to the point of torture.

"We call it a silo mentality," said Bernard Perlmutter, who directs the University of Miami's Children & Youth Law Clinic. "The public agencies involved in children's protection exist in silos, and at certain times there is very little interchange of information."

In the case of twins Nubia and Victor, that information hoarding contributed to what is shaping up as one of the most appalling cases of child abuse in Florida history.

During a meeting this week of an independent panel that is reviewing what happened, one foster care official suggested a "face sheet" to serve as a one-page case summary accessible to all.

"We have all this existing in silos in state records," said Frances Allegra, director of Our Kids, the nonprofit agency that handles foster care in Miami-Dade County for the Department of Children & Families. "We'll take all that gobbledygook and put it into one page."

During testimony over four days, the investigative panel has heard of many instances in which chances were missed, and red flags ignored, as the children moved through the maze of the Florida foster care system en route to their adoption by Jorge and Carmen Barahona in May 2009.

In 2007, Nubia and Victor told a court-appointed psychologist they were so unhappy, they thought about killing themselves.

But Paul Neumann, the twins' court-appointed volunteer guardian, confirmed last week that he was never told that. Nor was that startling information given to case workers who supervised the twins in foster care with the Barahonas.

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"The single most important lesson here is that people have to talk," said David Lawrence Jr., chairman of the three-member panel. "If all that information had been gathered together, there is a chance that Nubia is alive."

On Feb. 14, Victor was found, convulsing and covered with a caustic chemical, in the cab of Jorge Barahona's truck parked alongside Interstate 95 in [Palm Beach County](#). Later that day, Nubia's body was found in a bag in the back of the truck.

Barahona, 53, a Miami exterminator, is in the [Palm Beach County](#) Jail, charged with first-degree murder, aggravated child abuse and child neglect. Carmen Barahona, 60, faces the same charges.

According to an arrest warrant unsealed this week, the twins were "repeatedly hit, punched, beaten with multiple objects about their bodies, willfully tortured, maliciously punished" by both adoptive parents, who often left them "bound ... for days on end, inside the only bathroom in the family home."

Ultimately, according to police, Jorge Barahona took Nubia "from the bathtub while her feet and hands were still bound," and in the couple's bedroom, beat her "while she screamed and cried until she was dead."

Victor, who had to listen, told investigators that Carmen Barahona "assisted and encouraged" her husband, police said.

After treatment for his chemical burns, Victor is recovering in a therapeutic foster home. The two other surviving Barahona children have also been placed in foster care.

Documents released by DCF and testimony before the review panel reveal that many alarms went unheeded because in Florida's hybrid, privatized child welfare system, one agency, case worker or investigator does not always know what others know.

For example, although as many as four reports of suspected abuse were called into DCF's hotline over the past four years, in each case a different investigator was sent to the Barahonas' southwest Miami-Dade home.

Turnover among caseworkers is high; pay is low. Reports on home visits often are documented with perfunctory checklists. And, according to testimony before the review panel, the Barahonas were expert at fending off inquiries.

"We were getting signs early on, but we didn't tie it all together," Jacqui Colyer, DCF's top Miami administrator, told the panel.

The twins' teachers knew there were problems. They often missed school. Nubia showed up with bruises on her face, was sometimes dirty and foul-smelling, and hoarded food.

Most alarming, she seemed terrified of Carmen. When Nubia was in kindergarten at Royal Palm Elementary, she became hysterical after wetting her pants and hearing a teacher say she would call her mother to bring in a change of clothes.

"Mama is going to hit me on the bottom of my feet with a *chancleta* [sandal]," Nubia reportedly said.

But Valerie Manno-Schurr, the Miami-Dade family court judge then hearing the adoption case, did not

learn of that incident until a kindergarten teacher testified about it during a hearing at least a year later.

Nor was Vanessa Archer, the Miami psychologist who interviewed the children, told about the teachers' concerns, or guardian Neumann's.

"Remarkably, Dr. Archer's written report makes no mention at all of the reports from the principal or teacher, nor does it contain any information whatsoever from Nubia's teachers or her school," Roberto Martinez, former U.S. Attorney for South Florida and a review panel member, wrote in a memo.

Martinez wrote "there appears to have been no centralized system" in which "critical information" could be passed on to Archer and others involved in the case.

Allegra, of Our Kids, said a new tracking system will help make better decisions on the safety and risks of the 3,500 Miami-Dade children in foster care. It improves chances "we are all talking the same language," she said.

But Christina Spudeas, executive director of Florida's Children First, a Fort Lauderdale-based advocacy group, said no tracking system is going to help in "a fragmented system of care" if agencies do not start sharing information.

Spudeas said what's lacking "is the oversight necessary to see that all parts of the system were being monitored and doing their jobs."

The investigative panel is to meet again Thursday and then issue a preliminary report.

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