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At DCF, an untold epidemic of abuse, neglect and death

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Aliyah Branum is pictured with her mom, Chelsea Huggett. Aliyah died April 26 at 2. Her mom, now charged with first-degree murder in Citrus County, allegedly slammed Aliyah's head into a wall for 'whining.' Aliyah had come to DCF's attention both in August 2012 and January 2013.

On the day before she died, Jewel Re'nee Howard sat on the porch, in her grandmother's lap, having her hair twisted into ponytails made pretty with pink and purple beads. She played outside the home with neighborhood children, ate noodles, talked and giggled, as she had so many days before, about her dream of becoming a princess.

Less than 15 hours later, Jewel was dead — her liver torn and mangled, ribs crushed, her tiny body bruised and bleeding internally.

"Every night when I try to go to sleep, I ask myself, how could this have happened to my baby?" says her paternal grandmother, Tiffany Howard, who often cared for her.

A month ago, the head of the state agency designed to protect Florida's children resigned amid a widening scandal over the deaths of four small children within six weeks, all with a history of involvement with child-abuse investigators.

The reality of mounting child deaths in Florida is far grimmer.

A Miami Herald investigation — which included a review of hundreds of pages of agency emails, incident reports and other documents obtained through Florida's public records law — shows the number of children who died is nearly four times what had been acknowledged.

Jewel is among 20 children with child protection histories who have died since April 11, a span that saw the resignation of Department of Children & Families Secretary David Wilkins.

“We are deeply saddened any time a child dies in Florida, but especially when DCF has had prior involvement with their families,” said Esther Jacobo, DCF’s interim secretary.

“That’s why I’ve ordered a review of all child fatalities caused by abuse or neglect and invited a nationally renowned child welfare foundation to scrutinize the findings.”

Even before the new tally, legislators were working to try to stanch the trend: The chairwoman of the state Senate’s Children, Families & Elder Affairs Committee, Hollywood Democrat Eleanor Sobel, will host a “town hall” meeting Tuesday with members of the delegations of Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties.

Jacobco will be there to discuss “steps that the department is taking to prevent any more tragedies.”

In an Aug. 1 letter to Gov. Rick Scott, four members of the U.S. House of Representatives from Florida urged the governor to convene an “independent panel” to recommend reforms that go beyond fleeting “promises and overhauls.”

Weeks before Jewel died, the 3-year-old had told her birth father that her mother’s boyfriend had beaten her face, leaving a large laceration on her lip requiring stitches, according to a DCF report. And although both Jewel’s mother, Asia Rosier, and her boyfriend, Jumar Edwards, already had a substantial history of arrests and charges, DCF didn’t act for weeks — sufficient time for Jewel to die brutally, police allege, at the hands of the couple one Friday in April, the morning after she had gotten her hair done and played princess.

Deadliest month

As with Jewel, the deadly toll, from newborns to teenagers, was caused mostly by one or the other of the youngsters’ own parents — all of whom had come to DCF’s attention at least once before the tragedies occurred. They unfolded across the state, the cases bound only by the role the state did or did not play in the period leading up the child’s death.

June was the deadliest month, claiming seven children, including victims who drowned, were strangled or beaten. The most recent death was just four days ago.

Among the child deaths that have received little scrutiny:

- K.S., a 1-year-old girl in the Panhandle’s Franklin County: The girl’s mother was already the subject of a child-abuse hotline report that her four children — ranging from eight years to one year — were at risk because she was smoking crack in front of them.

“Mom sells items and her food stamps in order to purchase street drugs in addition to abusing her prescription drugs,” the hotline caller said.

On May 7, an incident report says, the children’s mother and a group of her friends watched in horror as a friend ran over the infant with a truck, eliciting a piercing scream from the baby.

The mother “was on the ground next to a gray truck crying and saying MY BABY MY BABY over and over,” a police officer wrote in a report. “I noticed the child had [an] injury to the forehead.”

In an email, DCF’s Panhandle chief, Vicki Abrams, called the baby’s death “a tragic accident,” adding: “no indication of abuse or neglect.”

- Christian Byrd: Two-year-old Christian drowned in a swimming pool behind the home of a Lehigh Acres daycare on June 24. The daycare’s owner, 42-year-old Melissa Smith, told DCF she left three children — all younger than three — in the above-ground swimming pool while she went to the bathroom. “When she returned outside, she observed Christian floating in the water,” a DCF incident report says.

- A 2½-year-old Citrus County boy: The toddler’s family already was under the supervision of a privately run child welfare agency when he wandered out of his home and drowned June 23 in a nearby canal. His parents, records say, were sleeping at 10 a.m. when the toddler left the home.

The family came under DCF’s supervision in January, when the agency’s hotline received a report that an infant sibling was suffering from failure to “thrive.” Emails from DCF’s Central Florida director, William D’Aiuto, said the Kids Central child welfare group had given the family locks and child alarms for their doors, but the safety devices were not in use when the toddler died. The family said they never got the locks and alarms.

After the little boy drowned, DCF’s response was to develop a plan in which the parents pledged to better supervise the surviving infant and install the locks that could have saved the baby’s older brother. An email also noted, with apparent satisfaction: “We don’t anticipate any media involvement.”

- A 16-year-old girl from Brevard County: The teen had been placed in foster care, then was reunified with her father under the supervision of the privately run Deveraux child welfare agency. She died of possible pneumonia and a heart attack around May 11.

Department emails say the girl’s family members knew that she had gone to live with a 24-year-old boyfriend and “did not have serious concerns” about the relationship, even when the couple left the state. And, as early as May 2, the teen’s caseworker knew she had gone missing, emails say.

The adult boyfriend, emails say, took the teen to Indiana, where the girl became critically ill. She was hospitalized on May 10, released from the hospital, and died a day or two later.

Emails among high-ranking DCF administrators suggest leaders were dismayed to learn the caseworker knew that the girl had been missing for more than a week and never sought the help of police or missing-child organizations — as state law requires — to get her back.

“Case manager never filed a missing child report, nor reported [the] guy to law enforcement,” DCF Assistant Secretary Pete Digre wrote in a May 16 email. Stephanie

Weis, a DCF administrator in Orlando, suggested in an email the couple may have been using the narcotic methadone during their odyssey.

Because the teen did not die directly at the hands of her parents, DCF did not investigate her death, said Whitney Ray, an agency spokesman. But the caseworker has since been fired.

Ominous hints

For her short life, Jewel spent much of her time at her grandmother's Sarasota home while her mother worked. It was in that apartment that Jewel would watch Yogi the Bear cartoons and eat pickles right out of the jar. This was also where she was learning to ride her brand-new Snow White bike, all pink hearts and pom poms and training wheels, a gift for her third birthday.

"Jewel was a real loving child," said Tiffany Howard. "She was quiet. And she was sweet."

Her caregivers did not share the youngster's sunny disposition: Rosier's criminal history includes nine arrests. Edwards had faced charges of battery, marijuana possession, resisting arrest and cocaine sales.

Howard says that in her final months, Jewel would often cry when it was time for her mother to pick her up.

"I didn't think much of it, but now I feel like they were hints," she said.

On March 5, DCF opened an investigation after Jewel was discovered with a deep laceration on her lower lip. Rosier, her mother, reported that Jewel had bitten her own lip, but her father, Joshua Howard, said Jewel had told him she was hit by Edwards, Rosier's boyfriend. The toddler later told investigators she caused the injury but was unable to demonstrate how.

Florida's Child Protection Team determined the injury was suspicious but "indeterminate for physical abuse."

Three weeks later, Rosier took Jewel and Jumiyah — her infant daughter fathered by Edwards — to the hospital, both sick with asthma.

On the evening of April 10, after Jewel had spent an afternoon of play with her grandmother, she went home with her mother, a five-minute drive away. Rosier would later tell investigators that Jewel was sick that night, vomiting and complaining of abdominal pains. She said Jewel had asthma, so she administered nebulizer treatments and put her to sleep. She also told a family friend they had a doctor's appointment, which police said was not true.

Jewel was gravely ill. She was lethargic and still vomiting. By the next morning, the family friend was so worried, he argued with the couple, urging them to take her to the hospital. The family friend finally called 911 himself, telling the dispatcher the girl was "flopping" around and had become non-responsive.

An hour later, Jewel was pronounced dead at a local hospital. Her mother demanded an autopsy, telling police that although the girl had asthma, she believed her daughter had died from something more serious.

She was correct: An autopsy revealed the details of Jewel's death — blunt force trauma to her abdomen, which caused a lacerated and crushed liver, other internal injuries and “a vast amount of internal bleeding.” The medical examiner called her death the result of “homicidal violence” and investigators determined that her fatal injuries were inflicted while she was in the couple's care.

Rosier and Edwards, both 21 at the time, were arrested, and are being held without bail on charges of felony child neglect.

Howard, left with three surviving grandchildren, is still trying to make peace with Jewel's death, her grief renewed each day as she passes the child's beloved bike parked in a back bedroom.

“When I lost her, I lost a huge chunk of who I am,” she says. “Now I believe that in her own way, Jewel was crying out for help.”

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