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Reflections on Another Child Fatality: We Must Do Better By Our Children!

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Greetings, and thank you for reading this issue of our ongoing analysis and commentary publication.

I need to be completely honest as I start this essay. I haven't always had much sympathy for or a solid understanding of the trials and tribulations of social workers working in public child welfare agencies. My introduction to public child welfare was really through the experiences of African American adoption agencies, many of which have endured their own share of struggles partnering with these large bureaucratic and frequently culturally unresponsive systems. I guess it's also safe to say that some of my initial perceptions and perspective was based on my own personal experience with public child welfare systems.

My birth mother was pressured to give my brother and me up for adoption, during pregnancy and up until birth. After being placed voluntarily by our birth mother, our birth father and his family were turned

away from the public child welfare agency after attempting to get my brother and me out of foster care. All of this I am sure contributed to my lack of compassion for and appreciation of the struggles of these systems, as well as the individuals working within them. As far as I was concerned they were the heartless and oppressive enemy – tearing African American families apart with no care or concern.

In my current job I am responsible for working directly with public child welfare agencies to achieve better outcomes for children and families, specifically providing support and technical assistance for their

system improvement efforts. Whereas I once critiqued the work of these agencies looking in from the outside, I am now responsible for supporting the system transformation efforts they are all engaged in. Now critiquing from a distance isn't an option. I have to be a part of the solution or be out. How interesting, given my own personal experience and previous perspective.

In my professional work over the last several years I have had an opportunity to work closely with social workers and child welfare administrators as they have attempted to transform their child welfare systems. In doing so I have gained a much better appreciation for what individuals working in these systems struggle against every day. These are large and complex bu-

reaucratic systems. As a parent of two wonderful children I can assure you that actually caring for children is pretty easy compared to transforming these huge systems. At no time do I personally appreciate

these dynamics more than when a child dies.

A few years ago I was involved in an on-going project working directly with child welfare administrators, social workers, community partners, as well as youth and birth parents that were themselves involved with the child welfare system. During that period one of the state systems we were working with experienced a child fatality. A young child had been removed from her family and placed in foster care. After a short period of time in care, the young girl was reunified with her birth parents. She was killed within weeks of being reunified.

Next time you find yourself making pronouncements about how things need to be done differently with these systems... finish your statement with the following words: *"...and I will take the first step to make it happen."*

Everyone involved with this child's case was in strong agreement about returning this child to her parents. When they heard the child had been killed by the step-father, everyone was devastated. To ensure their safety, the siblings were immediately removed from the home and placed in foster care. The media raked the agency over the coals about the tragedy, calling for accountability, independent investigations and massive agency reforms, all the while demanding that the workers and administrators be fired.

I followed the media reports closely while also talking with the staff and administrators about some of the dynamics surrounding the incident. The supervisor shared with me the daily struggles they were trying to get through as the media continued to pile it on. She described to me the general fear they live with on a daily basis, knowing that every decision they make could be one of a child's life or death. She talked about hearing the media reports during that evening the news broke, praying that the accused family and the child that had been killed wasn't one they had worked with. She described the gut-wrenching feeling that came over her when she got the call shortly after seeing the media reports, confirming her worst fears. She tried to describe the harrowing feeling, like the life had been sucked out of her, when she found out who the girl was. She and the administrator both tried to describe this scenario repeatedly but couldn't get through it without breaking down and crying.

Later, this same supervisor talked about how challenging it was to explain to the remaining children what happened to their little sister. She talked about how hard it was to explain to them why they were taken away from their parents and why they were not allowed to see them. She talked about how hard it was to get the siblings to go to school and continue with their daily routines. She talked about how hard it was to get the siblings ready for the funeral services, with reporters and cameras everywhere. She talked about how she couldn't go to sleep at night since finding out about the child's death. She talked about the relentless pressure placed on her to fire the social worker that was the primary case manager.

It was a very lonely and stressful period for her and all of the staff and administrators connected with this child and her family. Everyone outside seemingly wanted to place blame and no one wanted to believe that the agency really did do "everything right." As

tragic as the fatality was, the system seemingly could not have done anything more appropriate given the specific dynamics that played out with the family.

Having been involved on this side of the child welfare system, it's difficult to read and hear the news stories talking about most child fatalities. None of the reporters are present when the social workers have to tell a child's birth parents, or family of origin, that their child has died. The reporters aren't present when the social workers explain to a child's siblings that their brother or sister has died, and that they won't ever be able to see them or talk with them again. They aren't there when all the social worker can do is hold and embrace the child for hours at night until they either fall asleep or stop crying. The reporters aren't present when the social workers stay up at night responding to the children's nightmares, post-traumatic stress and depression. The reporters aren't present when the social workers help the children get dressed and ready to attend the funeral services. They weren't there during the weeks following the funeral services when the social workers had to continue explaining to the children what it all meant.

The reporters must not know that the social workers and administrators also have to live the rest of their lives wondering if the child might still be alive if only they did just one thing differently... if only they made one different decision. No one talks about the social workers and their grieving process. No one reports on the social workers who refuse to ever work again as a child welfare social worker because of the guilt as well as the fear that they might "kill another child."

The reporters don't talk about this side of the work. For that matter, many city and state elected officials also don't know about or appreciate these dynamics related to a child fatality when they make their pronouncements in front of the media about investigations, accountability and the firing of staff and administrators.

After learning of a pair of child fatalities several months ago in Maryland and the initial reporting about this horrific tragedy, I could not help but write this essay as a tribute to all social workers who give it their all every day and every night... all of those social workers that wake up every day praying that "their children" are alright... praying every day that none of their children's cases make the headlines.

I also cannot help but think about the reality that so

many more children come into foster care because social workers, supervisors, administrators and even judges don't want to risk being wrong about a family. There are also the many "non-traditional" or "non-ideal" families and relatives that would be wonderful adoptive and kinship families but don't make it through the licensing process because of the agency's fear that something might happen. So many more children end up staying in foster care so much longer because of the public's perception of child welfare, largely influenced by the media and the all-too-frequent knee-jerk reactions of elected officials.

So the next time you see a horrific tragedy involving children somehow connected to this nation's child welfare system please withhold judgment until all of the facts come out. Be willing to accept that you may never know all of the facts surrounding the case. Assume for a change that the child welfare system may have done everything it could have, given its attempt to balance its mission of supporting families, protecting children from harm and respecting the rights of families to care for their children without unreasonable and unjustifiable intrusion from "state systems."

I will be the first to say that child welfare systems do too often tear families apart unfairly and unnecessarily, fail to provide supports that meet their basic needs and fail to provide optimal living arrangements for children when they must be removed from their families of origin. I will also be the first to say that as individual citizens we know so little about how these systems work, and that our failure to understand these systems actually contributes to their ineffectiveness.

So the next time you find yourself heartbroken or even getting outraged about a child fatality, get inspired and get involved. Volunteering is always fine, but I am talking about really getting involved in their system transformation efforts. Organize community coalitions that partner with systems to achieve better

outcomes for families and children, as opposed to only critiquing from a distance. There is a time for criticism, but it has to be followed by active and persistent efforts to achieve meaningful improvements.

Discover your role as a regular citizen in creating safety nets so that struggling families have a place to turn. Reach out to your neighbors and develop relationships so that our children don't go unnoticed for months or years before we find out something has gone horribly wrong. Stop complaining about paying taxes to support ineffective and frequently under-resourced bureaucratic systems and actually help to take the stress and weight off of these systems.

We *can* transform this nation's child welfare system. Indeed, we *must!* In their current form, many of these local systems don't adequately meet even the basic support needs of our families and children. They do need to be held accountable. But we all have to stop offering our armchair critiques and get involved. There are many talented and committed people working within these systems and supporting children and families. Whether we individually like it or not, these systems have the power and legal mandate to intervene when they suspect that children have been or may be maltreated. If you don't like how they do it, my challenge to you is to do your part to transform these systems into what they truly can and should be.

These are our families and our children. We have got to step up! Next time you find yourself making pronouncements about how things need to be different with these systems... finish your statement with the following words: "...and I will take the first step to make it happen." We have everything we need to transform our community and make all of our families stronger. We can do this in our lifetime. Let's start right now. We have a lot of work to do! - OAM

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