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June 21, 2021

TO: Supervisor Hilda L. Solis, Chair
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FROM: Judge Michael Nash (Ret.) 
Executive Director, Office of Child Protection

OFFICE OF CHILD PROTECTION REPORT ON CARRILLO/DENTON CHILD DEATHS

On April 10, 2021, three children—three-year-old Joanna Denton, two-year-old Terry Denton, and five-month-old Sierra Denton—were found dead in their apartment in Reseda. The cause of these deaths has not been officially released, though various reports have indicated their cause as stabbing or drowning. The apparent perpetrator was the children's mother, Liliana Carrillo.

The Los Angeles Department of Children and Family Services (LA DCFS) had been involved with the family during the previous month and up to the day of their deaths. The Office of Child Protection was asked by LA DCFS Director Bobby Cagle and the Board of Supervisors to review the matter.

History

2018

The Denton/Carrillo family first came to the attention of LA DCFS on March 12, 2018, after Liliana Carrillo (Mother) tested positive for tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) one day following the birth of Joanna. The referral was closed on April 12, 2018, with the allegation of General Neglect by Mother deemed inconclusive. Between March 12 and April 12, LA DCFS and a public health nurse met with Mother, her roommate, Erik Denton (Father), and the maternal grandmother. The newborn child was seen in the hospital and at home following discharge from the hospital. No concerns were noted prior to the closing of the referral.

2021—Tulare County

In early 2021, the Denton/Carrillo family resided in Tulare County. On February 25, 2021, Tulare DCFS received a referral from Sequoia Medical Center stating that Joanna Denton was an alleged victim of sexual abuse. Mother brought her to the hospital

reporting a vaginal injury. No trauma was noted, and sexual abuse was not suspected. However, the child was diagnosed with vaginitis.

On February 26, 2021, Tulare DCFS received a referral from the National Human Trafficking Hotline stating that Mother called with concerns that Joanna was being sexually abused.

On February 26, 2021, Tulare DCFS attempted a visit with Mother, who was not at home. Tulare DCFS later spoke with Mother by phone; Mother stated she had left Tulare County and moved in with her mother (the maternal grandmother) in Reseda for safety reasons. She feared that Father or someone else was sexually abusing Joanna. During the conversation, Mother indicated that she had previously suffered from postpartum depression.

On February 26, 2021, Tulare DCFS spoke with Father and his cousin, Dr. Terri Miller. Father reported that on February 19, 2021, while at the park with Mother and the children, Joanna fell and hit her groin. The next day Mother observed a bruise on the child's groin and accused Father of sexual abuse. Father denied sexually abusing the child. Father expressed concern about Mother's mental health, saying she was diagnosed with anxiety, postpartum depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). He further stated that he believed Mother would never hurt the children. He was worried that Mother's "paranoid state" would prevent him from seeing the children. Father's cousin, Dr. Terri Miller, stated that Mother struggled with her mental health. She said Mother believed conspiracy theories about the coronavirus. She also said Mother was very protective of the children and does not leave their sight.

On February 26, 2021, Tulare DCFS called the LA DCFS Child Protection Hotline, which indicated that the Tulare County case needed to be closed for LA DCFS to take a report. On February 27, 2021, Tulare DCFS evaluated the referral as inconclusive. On March 1, 2021, Tulare DCFS closed the referral and referred the matter to LA DCFS.

2021—Los Angeles County

On March 2, 2021, unbeknownst to LA DCFS, Father filed for custody of the children in Tulare County Superior Court, which was granted on March 4. A further hearing was set for March 26, 2021. Father's petition noted Mother's mental instability, attached social-media posts from her complaining about the children, stated his fear of not being able to see his children, and said he was concerned for their safety until Mother is mentally stable and amenable to psychiatric treatment.

On March 4, 2021, LA DCFS attempted an unannounced visit with Mother and the children but was unsuccessful. LA DCFS was able to contact Mother by phone and she agreed to a home visit on March 9, 2021.

On March 9, 2021, LA DCFS met with Mother and the children at the maternal grandmother's apartment in Reseda. The children were examined and looked fine. The apartment was clean and appropriate. Mother expressed her concerns about Father sexually abusing Joanna and his possible drug use and drinking. She said she did not believe the pediatrician who examined Joanna and found no sexual abuse. She also

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admitted to the social-media posts and explained that she was reaching out to friends for support since she was alone with the children most of the time. Mother denied any domestic violence or substance abuse. She also admitted being in therapy over the years for PTSD resulting from abuse by her mother, and for postpartum depression and anxiety. She said she had a support system that included her mother and sister. The LA DCFS social worker noted that Mother appeared attentive to and caring of the children.

On March 12, 2021—once again, unbeknownst to LA DCFS—Mother filed for a temporary restraining order (TRO) against Father in Los Angeles family-law court, which was granted. LA DCFS received a copy of Mother's TRO on March 26 and had also received a copy of Father's Tulare County court order on March 21. On March 26, the Tulare County court granted Mother and Father joint legal and physical custody and ordered alternate weeks with the children from Sunday to Sunday. The matter was continued to April 14, 2021. On April 6, the Los Angeles County court granted a change of venue to Tulare County and also continued the matter to the April 14 court date there.

On March 17, 2021, LA DCFS completed a Structured Decision Making™ (SDM) safety assessment, which indicated no safety threats.

On March 19, 2021, LA DCFS spoke with Father via video chat. Father described the incident at the park where Joanna fell, and described Mother's mental state. He also admitted to a previous DUI, a diagnosis of depression, and occasional beer-drinking and marijuana use. He further stated that he did not believe Mother would hurt the children and that she loved them.

On March 24, 2021, LA DCFS spoke with a Regional Centers specialist who was seeing Terry for a minor speech delay. The specialist denied having any concerns with child abuse or parents abusing drugs or having any mental health issues.

On March 26, 2021, LA DCFS received a call from Mother about the Tulare court order. Mother said she was afraid for the children and was not happy with the court's decision. Mother said she wanted a professional to speak with Joanna. LA DCFS told Mother they were waiting to hear back regarding the referral being made to a Los Angeles County Medical Hub.

On March 26, 2021, LA DCFS spoke with the maternal grandmother, who stated that Joanna pointed to her vaginal area and said "Daddy"—a fact that Mother had also reported. The maternal grandmother denied that Mother had any mental health issues.

On March 31, 2021, LA DCFS officially submitted a referral to the Medical Hub for a forensic evaluation of Joanna. The Hub responded that no evaluation was needed.

On April 4, 2021, at 11:00 p.m., Mother contacted the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD), which made contact at 12:30 a.m. on April 5. Mother indicated that Father did something to Joanna's private area. She said Joanna's vaginal area was red and irritated and that she saw white discharge on Terry's anus. Mother said she was "pissed" that Father received 50% custody. She refused to let LAPD see the children

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and said she would call back after she took the children to their pediatrician. LAPD reported this to LA DCFS.

On April 7, 2021, LA DCFS spoke to Mother's therapist in Tulare County, who said she had diagnosed Mother with Major Depressive Disorder. She said she had met Mother in 2019 and seen her monthly, but not in person during the pandemic. Their last conversation was February 24, 2021. Mother missed her appointment on March 30 and was rescheduled for May 7, 2021. In February, Mother had displayed some levels of paranoia and appeared out of character. The therapist indicated a possibility of schizophrenia (which could also be the result of Mother's marijuana use) or possible bipolar disorder. She also said Mother could be having a psychotic break. She did not think Mother suffered from postpartum depression. She said she would recommend that Mother see a new therapist in person to receive a better assessment.

On April 7, 2021, LA DCFS visited with Mother and the children again. Mother described alleged injuries to the children. She showed the social worker a video she had recorded that could not show any injuries because of the angle of the camera. Mother said she took the children to a pediatrician, who said there were no signs of trauma or discharge. Mother described her call to LAPD. She told LA DCFS that she was still seeing her therapist in Tulare County, but she also agreed to participate in an Upfront Family Assessment (UFA).

On April 8, 2021, the UFA referral was submitted. It indicated that the problem was "Mother's mental health. Mother continues to make allegations against Father, his friends, and former residents of her apartment complex of sexually abusing her children and drugging and passing the children around. Mother has contacted the Human Trafficking Hotline (from Tulare County), LE [law enforcement], and different pediatricians to state that Father abused Joanna. Mother is seeing a therapist in another county and that therapist stated she has noticed Mother has been displaying signs of paranoia." The referral further stated that family strengths included, "Family court has temporarily given both parents 50/50 custody and they each have a week with the children. Three medical professionals have stated there are no signs of abuse or neglect. Mother is in therapy, but due to being in LA County, she is not seeing her therapist in person."

On April 9, 2021, an SDM risk assessment was completed that indicated a risk level of "high" and recommended the promotion of the case.

On April 9, 2021, a UFA provider was assigned. The UFA provider attempted unsuccessfully to call Mother on April 10, 2021. That day, the maternal grandmother discovered the children's bodies in her apartment along with a note from Mother saying she was sorry for what she did. Mother was arrested while on the run in Kern County.

Discussion

LA DCFS's official involvement with this family began on March 1, 2021. From March 1 through April 10, there were substantial efforts to work with the family. During this period of time, LA DCFS received information from Tulare DCFS and spoke with Mother on three occasions—March 9, March 26, and April 7. The first and third conversations were in person with the children present. Conversations occurred with Father on March 18 and 19, the maternal grandmother on March 26, child Terry's Regional Centers specialist on March 24, and Mother's therapist on April 7. In addition, LA DCFS attempted to schedule a forensic examination at the Olive View Medical Hub for Joanna, and ultimately got Mother to agree to a UFA which never occurred because of the children's deaths. LA DCFS also received information from LAPD and the Human Trafficking Hotline (from Tulare County DCFS) regarding contacts with Mother. It further received information from Tulare County DCFS on its interview with Father's cousin, Dr. Terri Miller. Finally, the Children's Social Worker (CSW) on the case continually consulted with her supervisor throughout DCFS' involvement and also consulted with County Counsel about the court proceedings in both Tulare and Los Angeles counties.

While concerns were expressed about Mother's mental health, during visits with Mother and the children, the home appeared appropriate and Mother was coherent and appeared bonded to and protective of the children. Further, everyone who was interviewed indicated that Mother cared for the children, and no one expressed any concern that she would harm the children. The only exception to this is a report in the *Los Angeles Times* on April 18, 2021.

On April 18, the *Los Angeles Times* reported a conversation between Father's cousin, Dr Terri Miller, and LAPD. No date was given. The article quoted her as saying, "I told them she might kill the kids." There is nothing in any report from LA DCFS or Tulare DCFS to corroborate that statement. LAPD was contacted and asked whether the comments were made, and, if so, when they were made and whether LAPD reported the comments to DCFS. Citing an internal investigation and confidentiality, LAPD declined to comment.

This matter was further complicated by the fact that both Mother and Father had filed court actions seeking custody in both Los Angeles and Tulare counties. Both filings made accusations against the other parent, a situation very common in custody disputes that often makes assessing the situation more difficult.

This is a matter in which DCFS was faced with a number of conflicts. These included first an allegation of sexual abuse based on alleged bruising to a three-year-old's vaginal area and a diagnosis of vaginitis, along with alleged statements by the child pointing to "Daddy." Second, evidence of mental health issues with Mother is counterbalanced by evidence of her functionality and obvious care for her children, as noted by several of those interviewed. She also apparently had family support. Finally and significantly, there was a custody dispute in the courts.

To the credit of LA DCFS, it maintained continual contact with the family while proceeding with caution as it conducted its investigation. Moreover, Mother was

cooperating with the investigation, as evidenced by her agreement to participate in the UFA designed to better understand her mental health status.

From a social-work perspective, LA DCFS utilized the SDM safety and risk assessment tools. The safety assessment showed no imminent safety threats. While the risk assessment scored high, it did not point to removing the children, but did suggest moving forward with Mother—which LA DCFS was continuing to do, as noted, with Mother’s cooperation. It is hard to find fault with DCFS in this matter.

Recommendations

With almost any case, a careful review will reveal some matters that could improve practice. This case is no different. Below are a few issues to consider.

1. The Department of Mental Health (DMH), DCFS, and OCP have partnered on a pilot project in DCFS’s Lancaster regional office where a DMH clinician is outstationed solely for the purpose of consulting with emergency-response social workers on their open investigations of child abuse and/or neglect. The consultations give social workers access to mental health expertise that can help guide their investigations and help them understand available mental health information and to assess and connect parents to mental health supports within their community, when needed. This additional support has been very promising so far. In cases like this—where mental health issues are present and it is difficult to assess how much of a safety risk they might pose—having access to this type of expertise can go a long way in helping to inform the assessment. Had this type of resource been available, it could have helped provide a greater understanding of the presenting issues and the need for a UFA or other type of assessment earlier in the investigation.

OCP recommends that DMH and DCFS explore the feasibility of expanding this pilot to additional DCFS regional offices.

2. On March 31, 2021, LA DCFS made a referral to the Olive View Medical Hub for a forensic evaluation for three-year-old Joanna Denton. The Medical Hub Referral Form stated very clearly that there was an allegation of sexual abuse. It described in detail the incident at the park, the Father’s denial, the previous hospital visit, and concerns about Mother’s mental health. The Referral Intake Form, however, stated that the referral was for “general neglect only.” It further stated that Mother “kept calling different agencies reporting concerns for sexual abuse.” It referenced the previous hospital visit and concerns for Mother’s mental health. The Hub also had a discharge summary from Valley Presbyterian Hospital noting vaginitis, and further referenced the child’s statements indicating “Daddy” when asked what happened.

The Olive View Hub rejected the request for a forensic exam, saying it was not indicated “due to non-specific allegations of child abuse and current investigation of general neglect by mother based on concerns of mental health noted by CPS in Tulare County.”

Medical Hub policy 321.002, dated October 1, 2019, states:

Referrals for forensic evaluations meeting the following criteria will be accepted and scheduled by the Medical Hubs, regardless of other circumstances:

(1) All children who are alleged victims of child abuse or neglect and are under age of five

. . .

(4) Any child for whom a non-Hub medical provider communicated concerns to the DCFS hotline that the child is a victim of recent physical or sexual abuse

It must be noted that the rejection of the referral was contrary to Hub policy in criterion (1) above. Further, however the referral was worded, it clearly described an allegation of sexual abuse. It quoted the child's statements; in addition, the record from Valley Presbyterian Hospital gave a diagnosis of "injury of genitalia" and also noted vaginitis.

While it cannot be unequivocally stated that a forensic examination would have made a difference in the outcome of this matter, an evaluation should have occurred for two reasons. One is that the Hub policy required it. Second, given the allegation of sexual abuse—combined with the information of some injury to the vaginal area, the diagnosis of vaginitis, and the child's statements—an examination was prudent. In addition, the personnel at the Medical Hubs are uniquely qualified to do these evaluations. The qualifications of those who previously examined the child are unknown. If a finding of sexual abuse or possible sexual abuse had been made, that could have made a difference to the outcome in this case.

DHS officials have indicated that the Hub policy, specifically criterion (1), is outdated and does not align with current practice and standards, and is currently in the process of being updated.

OCP recommends that DHS officials update the referral criteria as soon as possible and that all Hub personnel and social workers receive training on the updated policy. Further, a process needs to be in place to ensure that all Hubs comply with this policy. Finally, social workers need training on when and how to request forensic exams, including how to word those requests.

3. Following the deaths of the children, the *Los Angeles Times* on April 21 published a letter from Kelly O'Connor Kay, the executive director of Maternal Health Now. It is printed below.

The tragic deaths of Liliana Carrillo's three children were entirely preventable. Each of her numerous interactions with Los Angeles County departments and agencies provided an opportunity to offer the mother help. Catastrophically, each opportunity was missed.

As a group of mental health professionals advocating for improved recognition and response to perinatal mental health disorders, we emphatically recommend that the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors mandate in-depth training on perinatal mental health disorders for all county agencies and employees.

Postpartum psychosis is an extremely rare and life-threatening medical emergency, occurring in only 0.1%–0.2% of births. Four percent of women who experience it kill their children as a result of their delusions. Perinatal mental health disorders—which include postpartum psychosis as well as more common and separate diagnoses such as depression—are the most common complications of childbirth. According to the 2016 Los Angeles Mommy and Baby Survey, 1 out of 4 new mothers in L.A. reported symptoms of depression.

Training should not be limited to mental health professionals only, as most affected individuals do not seek immediate care. They often, however, have numerous interactions with other county agencies, and there should be no restrictions on which county employees learn to detect and appropriately respond to perinatal mental health concerns.

The Board of Supervisors should make perinatal mental health treatment a priority by providing coordinated oversight and adequate funding for county agencies to develop and implement appropriate, high-quality, easily accessible, and culturally appropriate care. There should be no 'wrong door' for new mothers and young families to obtain help.

It is possible that with training about the existence and nature of postpartum psychosis, along with an awareness of existing treatment resources, this matter may have been viewed more urgently, resulting in earlier attempts to link Mother to appropriate resources.

OCP recommends that DCFS and DMH collaborate in the development of training and resources for perinatal mental health treatment.

4. As noted earlier, on April 18, 2021, the *Los Angeles Times* reported a quote from Father's cousin, Dr. Terri Miller, to LAPD, stating, "I told them that she might kill the kids." As also noted, when queried about whether that statement was made to LAPD, and, if so, whether LAPD reported it to DCFS or took some other appropriate action, LAPD declined to comment, citing the confidentiality of an internal investigation.

If such a comment was made to LAPD, LAPD should have reported it to DCFS so that DCFS could potentially have taken some significant steps sooner. There is nothing in DCFS records indicating that the statement was reported to the agency. If it had been and DCFS did nothing with it, that would be important information. Either way, the public and others need to know whether this statement was made and whether anything was done with it.

It is hard to understand how LAPD's refusal to comment serves any legitimate purpose; answering the query certainly would not jeopardize an internal investigation. Further, this is not an isolated situation. LAPD and other law-enforcement agencies have repeatedly refused to disclose potentially important information to DCFS while citing the need to maintain the confidentiality of law-enforcement investigations. While that issue sometimes exists, there needs to be a better understanding of when that is the case.

OCP recommends that DCFS and law-enforcement agencies, along with County Counsel and the District Attorney, commence a conversation on what information could be shared from their respective investigations and when.

If you have any questions, please contact me at (213) 893-1152 or via e-mail at mnash@ocp.lacounty.gov, or your staff may contact Carrie Miller at (213) 893-0862 or via e-mail at cmiller@ocp.lacounty.gov.

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