

L.A. Child Welfare Agency Hurriedly Changes Key Policy After 4-Year-Old's Death

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Noah Cuatro died on July 6 under suspicious circumstances. Photo: KTLA

Less than two weeks after the suspicious death of 4-year-old Palmdale boy Noah Cuatro, Los Angeles County's child welfare agency changed a key policy at the heart of the mounting controversy.

Despite Noah's parents' explanation that he had drowned over the Fourth of July weekend, the Sheriff's Department announced that the young boy suffered injuries inconsistent with such a fate.

According to *The Los Angeles Times*, Noah's family had been subject to at least 13 allegations of child abuse, fielded by the county's Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) and local law enforcement. In May, a juvenile court commissioner ordered the boy physically removed from his parent's home – but somehow that order was never carried out.

Michael Nash, who leads the county's Office of Child Protection – a watchdog agency created in the aftermath of the 2013 death of another Palmdale boy, Gabriel Fernandez – is now leading an investigation ordered by the county Board of Supervisors into what systemic issues could have contributed to Noah's death. A chief concern for Nash was the department's policy regarding what to do if a "removal order" like the one issued against Noah's parents is not carried out.

Nash found that policy too ambiguous, and told DCFS brass that it needed to be reviewed and changed just last week. By Friday, July 19 — 13 days after Noah's death — the policy had been amended, making clear "that after a Judicial Officer issues a Removal Order, it must be executed without undue delay and not held. Exceptional cases that arise must be brought to the attention of the Director of DCFS in order to be staffed by the Senior Executive Team."

"I've never seen DCFS act that fast," Nash, who led the county's juvenile dependency court for nearly two decades said, pausing to chuckle. "Maybe that's something new here."

DCFS Director Bobby Cagle explained the fast change in an email statement to *The Chronicle*, stating:

"Many of the cases that come to the attention of the Department of Children and Family Services have a complicated history. It is rarely, if ever, clear when we should remove a child from his or her home. It is imperative for social workers and staff to have access to information and resources to support their work. The Department recently updated its policy with regards to removal warrants to ensure that social workers and their supervisors engage with senior leadership to help guide their case practice and strengthen child safety in instances where there is a removal warrant and circumstances lead to consideration of not serving the warrant."

But, Nash pointed out, the policy change doesn't answer the central question surrounding the department's actions in the lead-up to Noah's death.

"The question is, 'Was the failure to execute the warrant reasonable under the circumstances?'" Nash said.

While inaction was permissible under the old policy, it remains unclear who decided not to take an action that could have saved the 4-year-old boy.

This story was updated at 5:56 p.m. to include comment from DCFS Director Bobby Cagle.