

WHY DID KERRI HAVE TO DIE?

AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE SYSTEMATIC FAILURES OF DCFS

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THE CYCLE OF CHILD PROTECTION FAILURE

- On July 2, 2020 Kerri Rutherford died in a home the police found filthy and reported to the authorities by neighbors and a kindergarten more than a dozen times. DCFS had the case since 2015.
- A Tribune editorial headlined: “Why did Kerri have to die? Where was DCFS?” The editorial cites a string of dramatic children’s deaths from DCFS caseloads dating from 1993; 123 deaths in 2019
- The same criticism of child protection systems has been made around the world: these systems fail at protecting children entrusted to them.
- Why does this keep happening?

JOSEPH WALLACE
(AGE 3: 1993)



GIZZELL FORD
(AGE 8: 2013)



A.J. FREUND
(AGE 5: 2019)



KERRI RUTHERFORD
(AGE 6: 2020)



FROM THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE TO SOCIOLOGY

- The editorial adds Kerri to a list of dead children: Joseph Wallace (1993), Gizzell “Gizzy” Ford (2013), and A.J. Freund (2019), “betrayed by those responsible for nurturing and safeguarding them.”
- After three sets of investigations in 2019 found DCFS ineffective and inept, Governor Pritzker increased the budget by 11 percent for 2020
- The editorial asks: “Where did the money go?”
- The answer comes from the theory of social problems, adapted to the structure of the child protection system: It is designed to fail

CRISIS THEORY

- Jeffrey C. Alexander proposes a theory that social institutions are stable despite flaws and internal conflicts. His stage of transition (“societization”) posits the transformation of an internal problem to external demands for reform and their consequences (2018, 2019)
- Time 1: “Steady state.” Potentially damaging problems are dealt with internally and covered up. When revealed, they are portrayed as a problem of bad persons
- Time 2: “Societization.” Media and public demands for change transform internal problems to a moral threat to society
- Time 3: External Actions: Outside Authority Sanctions and Restructures
- Time 4: “Backlash” as internal stakeholders defend their privilege
- Time 5: “Back to normal” (Time 1: Steady state)

DCFS AND CRISIS THEORY

- Unlike Alexander's crisis theory, DCFS demonstrates a system in constant crisis, with one catastrophic failure after another
- Each child's death disconfirms the organization's and its allied profession's core competency of protecting vulnerable and defenseless victims
- The Time 1 and Time 2 stages of Alexander's crisis theory are cycled through without any demand for system restructuring or punishing the leaders
- Instead, frontline workers are systematically scapegoated for system errors while leaders and their profession escape sanctions and dodge reform

THE STEADY STATE: OPERATING IN SECRECY

- DCFS's steady state is for its stakeholders to be insulated from accountability through the basic structure of its work:
 - 1) All frontline work with clients is considered confidential and excluded from outside inspection. Then after an investigation or case is closed, it is expunged without a trace of system involvement
 - 2) The work (decisions, services, legal involvement) is done under the legal doctrine of "the best interests of the child." However, system insiders determine those best interests, which favor their own interests. This leads to self-dealing and corruption
 - 3) There is no outcome measure of the system's work, other than accounting for hours of work and money spent. The value of services is not known

THE SYSTEM'S ACHILLES HEEL

- All of the steady state's defenses disappear when a child is killed while under the protection of the system's workers
- The files, work notes, and other paperwork are all exposed when they are legally transferred to the criminal justice system in order to prosecute the murderer
- At the moment of public outrage at the death of a child, the system's inner workings, its mistakes, corruption, inaction, etc. are revealed to the media
- Thus, the only outside view of the work comes when it disconfirms the system's core competency at the height of public outrage
- The system is designed to be exposed as a chronic failure with episodic demands for change

WHY DOESN'T CHANGE COME?

- Child protection is a relatively new government system with new laws, a new court system, and ownership by an established profession
- It has been captured by the social work profession and its established child welfare system which gives services to adults
- The result is a system impervious to change as the stakeholders are able to control the resulting investigations after a death, blame the frontline workers, and protect higher-ups.
- The stakeholders lay claims that children can't be protected fully without more money, jobs, and control by the stakeholders and their profession

THE DISTORTED DCFS CYCLE

- DCFS' stakeholders have captured the cycle of child tragedy, public outrage, the commission that looks into the cause, and control over the official, government response
- The stakeholders lay claims that their system suffers from chronic underfunding, understaffing, insufficient training, and lack of power and control over their work
- When a child dies, the end result is that government leaders are highly motivated by the crisis to respond, and their response is directed by stakeholders to provide more money, power, and jobs to the stakeholders

THE PUBLIC VIEW OF THE CYCLE

- There's a cycle of public outcry, a brief period of taking more children into custody, then return to business as usual (Chenot 2011)
- Social work is exposed as an “abject failure [with] intense anger and hostility directed towards it, [yet] social work’s role in child protection appears to remain secure” (Warner 2015:1)
- “...an ongoing kaleidoscope of tragedy, media and public outrage, system bashing, firings, and announcements of new reform plans...” (Morton 2017).
- “We’ve seen this script many times. A child under DCFS’ protection dies, agency chiefs pledge reform, and nothing changes. The result? More defenseless, vulnerable children die” (Tribune 2020)

CONCLUSION: A NEW VIEW OF A LATENT SOCIAL PROBLEM THAT IS SUPPRESSED

- Time 1: A flawed service system produces a string of crises in the form of dead clients: innocent children
- Time 2: The outcome of a failed system is broadcast by the media and the public is outraged. The government organizes a commission to study the problem
- Time 3a: System stakeholders capture the commission investigating the crisis and seek to blame the frontline work, not the system and its leaders. The government is blamed for not resourcing the system enough
- Time 4a: The frontline workers are fired, insignificant changes to procedures and paperwork are recommended, and the stakeholders gain leverage over the government. Nothing else changes as the system returns to “business as usual” with more power and resources to defend itself

JEFFREY ALEXANDER AND HIS BOOK



What Makes a Social Crisis?

The Societalization of
Social Problems

Jeffrey C. Alexander

