

Many child deaths come despite CPS visits

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Kati Earnest died after two previous investigations failed to verify callers' complaints that she was neglected and possibly abused.

Nearly half of all Texas children killed by abuse belonged to families previously investigated by Texas Child Protective Services — a statistic that has shown no improvement since 2004, despite efforts to save more children, records show.

Each year, about 200 children die of abuse or neglect in Texas — at least 1,227 since 2004, according to records obtained by the Houston Chronicle. That's 516 children who died who came from families with CPS histories.

They include Kati Earnest, 5, dead on July 4, from a beating.

Darrell “Tre” Singleton III, 1, left unattended for hours in a car on Sept. 3. Dead from exposure to 95 degree heat.

Emma Thompson, 4, sexually abused. Dead on June 27 from a beating.

In these child deaths, just three among the hundreds, prior visits to their families and homes by CPS investigators failed to detect potentially fatal warning signs.

“They are worrisome to me,” state Sen. Carlos Uresti, D-San Antonio, and member of the Senate Committee on Health and Human Services, said of the increase in child deaths among families with a CPS history. “They should be worrisome to anybody.”

On their face, the numbers of these troubled families with deadly outcomes seem to point to a worsening problem for CPS, one that the agency hopes to get a handle on with a better realignment of its work force in four regions of the state.

About 700 caseworkers and support staff in Houston, San Antonio, Dallas and the Rio Grande Valley will be reassigned to more critical jobs within CPS' investigative force and Family Based Safety Services, the department charged with monitoring families once they come to the agency's attention. It is this department that works with families where a

CPS investigation indicates potential problems but doesn't merit removing children from the home.

“Obviously, our goal is to bring those numbers down,” said Anne Heiligenstein, commissioner of the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, which includes CPS. “That has to be our goal.”

Study: Texas tops U.S.

The national advocacy group Every Child Matters released a study Wednesday showing Texas leads the nation in child abuse deaths from 2001 to 2007.

The deaths among repeat CPS complaints represent less than 1 percent of the 165,000 child abuse investigations completed by the agency each year. However, the growing incidence of child deaths coming from families with prior CPS histories, particularly in Houston, has prompted a review here and in Dallas of child abuse investigations.

Lawmakers are also looking for more answers about why certain families can't be located more quickly before a child dies.

Such deaths continue to occur despite a \$248 million infusion to CPS in 2005, which brought in 2,500 additional caseworkers and support staff, along with better equipment like digital cameras and more laptop computers, so workers could enter information about a child more quickly.

The additional money, equipment and staff did reduce the \$1 billion-a-year agency's crippling investigation caseload. The number of investigations per worker fell from 43 in 2004 to 22 cases today.

But the reforms, aimed at improving child abuse investigations, have done little to break chronic households from a cycle of abuse.

“The fact CPS had previous contact with the family doesn't automatically mean that CPS could have prevented that death,” said Patrick Crimmins, spokesman for CPS.

Ultimately the person who killed the child — and in 77 percent of Texas cases, that's a parent — is responsible for these deaths.

“I think we're all accountable and CPS as well,” Sen. Uresti said. “(But) we don't want to lose sight of the fact that someone killed these children, and they should be held accountable.”

The recent cases

In several cases among the 189 children who died by fiscal year's end on Aug. 31, there are stories of missed chances that continue to nag at the agency charged with protecting children while the public asks what it would take to stop missing the signs that something is amiss.

In the case of Kati Earnest, the Vernon girl died after two previous investigations failed to verify the callers' complaints that she was neglected and possibly abused. Fifteen

months after the second complaint, she was dead. Her mother said the girl drowned, but she was covered in bruises. Authorities say the mother finally admitted to beating her five times with a closed fist. She's now charged with capital murder.

Emma Thompson, 4, died after suffering a fractured skull and more than 80 bruises. The Spring girl was also sexually assaulted. Her mother tried to say her child had fallen. CPS was in the middle of an investigation into possible sexual assault of the girl after she tested positive for genital herpes. Because it can be transmitted in a nonsexual manner in rare cases, CPS let the girl stay with her mother. Three weeks later, Emma was dead.

And in Arlington, CPS workers considered the mother of 1-year-old Darrell Singleton “a pathological liar” and mentally ill from their prior visits, which included the removal of an older sibling because of abuse. But he remained in his mother's care. He died when he was left in a car all day while she worked in a nearby office.

Reaching more children?

According to Scott McCown, executive director for the Center for Public Policy Priorities, the number of chronic CPS families could indicate the agency's investigations may finally be zeroing in on the most troubled families in their system.

“More of the children are being reached by CPS,” he said.

While the loss of a single child is unacceptable, McCown said, he reasons that “the fact that more of the murders this year than last year had some kind of involvement with CPS could be evidence of a good thing. It means the system is more vigorous.”

Just last week, Kayvon Lewis, 3, turned up in a Houston emergency room. He could not walk or talk and weighed just 17 pounds, about half of what a child his age should. On two previous visits to Kayvon's home, neither of the two CPS investigators, who were both with the agency less than a year, detected anything wrong with the child. A third call came from the hospital staff when his mother brought him to the ER.

Admitted in critical condition, he is still alive.

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