

an order of protection barring Ms. Francis and Mr. Henry from having contact with Christopher.

An investigator with the public defender's office told Christopher what had happened the next day. "It was like my whole body shut down," Christopher said of his reaction. "I don't even know how I was breathing."

After hearing the news, he decided not to call home, for fear his calls would be traced, he said. He did not speak to his mother and stepfather until a judge dropped the order of protection about a week later.

A key witness, the neighbor Ms. McClain, had stepped forward in that time to give a statement that prosecutors said helped turn the case around. She said that there was no blood visible on the boy's clothing and that

Kara Finck
David Jaros
Bronx, Nov. 17, 2004

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Couple Charged With Neglect in Son's Death in New Jersey

By IVER PETERSON and LESLIE KAUFMAN NY TIMES November 24, 2004

The police charged an Asbury Park couple with manslaughter and child neglect yesterday in the starvation death of their 14-month-old son, who had been seen by a pediatrician, a visiting nurse and caseworker in the months leading up to his death in August. The case again raised questions about New Jersey's system for protecting its poorest children.

The child, Jmeir White, was found dead by the police in his parents' apartment in a rundown Asbury Park housing project after the mother, Tahija Handberry, 22, called 911 on Aug. 22. The boy, the middle of three children, weighed 10.4 pounds at the time of his death, about two-thirds his last recorded weight.

income, they said. Her other children -- a 3-year-old girl and a 5-month-old girl born three months before Jmeir's death -- are in foster care.

Unlike many neglected and abused children, Jmeir White and his siblings were not well-known to DYFS. The agency got its first and only call about the family June 23 from a nurse who was concerned that Handberry's newborn daughter had missed two home appointments to receive medication for anemia.

A DYFS investigator was dispatched to the house that day. He located the mother and put her in touch with the nurse. The worker took note of three things: The house was clean; the oldest child was non-verbal; and Jmeir was noticeably small for his age.

When the DYFS worker asked Handberry about Jmeir's size, she replied, "He's always been small. It's his medical condition," said Kathi Way, deputy commissioner for the Office of Children's Services, which oversees DYFS.

The worker decided to close the case without communicating again with the parents or having Jmeir assessed by a doctor. His supervisor, a DYFS veteran, approved closing the case July 16.

Five weeks later, Jmeir was dead.

Way said the caseworker's focus was too narrow. "He was concerned only that the (younger sibling) was reconnected and back on schedule to get the shots for anemia," she said.

Both the caseworker and his boss were trained this year in "structured decision-making," a process that DYFS uses to evaluate the safety of a child's home. Homes are graded in 20 categories, such as income, emotional health and physical well-being, and families receive a score. That number is used to determine if the children are at low, medium or high risk of harm.

Cecilia Zalkind, executive director of the Association for Children of New Jersey, said structured decision-making should not replace common sense. She also made reference to the South Jersey case involving the four starved sons of Vanessa and Raymond Jackson.

The caseworker's notes about Jmeir's small size "should have been on the supervisors' minds in light of the Jackson case," she said. "It should have sent up a red flag."

Yesterday, a relative of Handberry rushed to her defense. "The allegations are bogus. The investigation is tainted," said an uncle, Derwin Dupree. He was at Handberry's home at a public housing project yesterday to collect her mail.

Dupree said his niece fed Jmeir baby cereal, peas and carrots. The only time the toddler didn't want to eat was when he was teething, he said.

One or two days before he died, Jmeir was walking around and dancing, he said.

"If you're suffering from starvation, how can you do

Boy starves after DYFS visit; parents are charged

By Kera Ritter Inquirer Staff Writer Posted on Wed, Nov. 24, 2004

The parents of a Monmouth County toddler who starved in the summer, two months after a child-welfare worker visited the home, have been charged with the boy's death, the state Office of the Child Advocate said yesterday.

Jmeir White weighed 10 pounds when emergency workers found him dead Aug. 22, said Kevin Ryan, New Jersey's child advocate. Jmeir had weighed 15 pounds in March, Ryan said.

The Child Advocate's Office said the mother, Tahija Handberry of Asbury Park, called 911 because 14-month-old Jmeir was unresponsive. Emergency workers found that rigor mortis had set in.

The death was ruled a homicide by chronic malnutrition, the office said.

Handberry and the boy's father, Wesley White, are charged with aggravated manslaughter and endangering the welfare of a child, Ryan said in a statement.

The charges, however, could not be confirmed yesterday through law enforcement. The Monmouth County Prosecutor's Office said it had no comment on the case last night, and it was unclear whether the parents had been taken into custody.

But James Davy, commissioner of the state Department of Human Services, commented on the case, saying his agency's work "just wasn't good enough."

"Clearly this family needed help and attention," Davy said in a statement. "In hindsight, you can't help but think that if we stayed involved with the family and linked them to other helping services in the community, this tragedy could have been avoided."

The state Division of Youth and Family Services received a complaint in June after a visiting nurse who was supposed to be seeing a newborn in the home could not reach the parents for several days, said Andy Williams, DYFS spokesman.

A worker investigated and found that the mother had been trying to return the nurse's phone calls, but that a block on the medical facility's phone system had prevented her from getting through, Williams said. The worker did not believe the mother was deliberately missing the newborn's appointments, and the case was soon closed, he said. But the caseworker also noted that Jmeir and his sister, who was about 3, were small.

"It seemed like the worker went out there, addressed that problem and that problem alone, and closed the case," Williams said. "The worker did make some observation about the other kids, but it doesn't seem like there was any follow on them. That's not the model of case practice that we're building here."

DYFS has had a number of high-profile failures in recent years, including the beating and starvation death of Faheem Williams, a 7-year-old Newark boy, and the case of four brothers who authorities said were starved by their adoptive parents in Collingswood. DYFS workers had visited both homes and took no action against the families.

The agency is in the midst of an overhaul under the supervision of a federal judge.

The Office of the Child Advocate has opened its own investigation into Jmeir's death and plans to release its findings next month.

Ryan's office was critical yesterday of DYFS, health providers and Jmeir's community.

"Jmeir's death is disturbing both because of the slow, painful way he died and the failure of the child-welfare system to save him," Ryan said in the statement. "We are reiterating our concern that the child-protection system continues to suffer from a lack of coordination with respect to medical information for children at risk of abuse and neglect."

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New Jersey Welfare System Rebuked for Child's Death

By LESLIE KAUFMAN and JASON GEORGE NY TIMES November 25, 2004

The acting governor of New Jersey, Richard J. Codey, sternly rebuked the state's troubled child welfare agency yesterday for failing to protect a 14-month-old boy who was found dead of starvation on Aug. 22.

A child welfare caseworker had been in the Asbury Park home of Jmeir White just two months before his death but closed the family's case on July 16 despite noting that the child looked "small." The child's mother, Tahija Handberry, 22, told the caseworker at the time that she is a dwarf and her son looked small because he is also a dwarf.

On Tuesday, Ms. Handberry was arraigned on charges of first-degree manslaughter and second-degree child endangerment by the Monmouth County prosecutor and is being held in the Monmouth County Jail in lieu of \$200,000 bail. The boy's father, Wesley White, 26, is being sought on the same charges.

"Jmeir White's death is a horrible and sickening tragedy," Mr. Codey said in a statement released yesterday. "It is inexcusable and unacceptable that while this little boy was suffering, the Division of Youth and Family Services closed the book on him."

But agency officials and the caseworker's union representative said yesterday that the agency was not alone in missing signs that the child was in great peril.

Asbury Park Police officials said yesterday that they had been called out to the apartment twice in 2004, once in February for a noise complaint and once in June because someone in the house phoned 911 and then hung up. Both times officers talked to Ms. Handberry, police records show, and said they saw nothing in the home to alarm them. The officer who visited in February noted that he had seen the children and that they "appeared good and healthy."

In addition, the boy was seen in December and March by a pediatrician who noted in his records that Jmeir's weight had remained unchanged at 15 pounds but did not notify the state's child protection agency, according to John Kaye, the Monmouth County prosecutor.

A visiting nurse from Meridian Home Care had been in the home on 12 to 18 occasions in the months before Jmeir's death to give shots to Ms. Handberry's newborn daughter, who was suffering from severe anemia. Meridian has declined to talk about the case, citing patient confidentiality, and it is unclear if the nurse ever saw Jmeir.

The only record of the nurse contacting the Division of Youth and Family Services is from June when she was unable to enter the house to give the baby her thrice-weekly injection. A child welfare caseworker responded and found Ms. Handberry at home and determined that the mother had been trying to return the nurse's calls but that the home-care center phone had blocked her phone number.

The caseworker, who has not been identified, also saw Jmeir, who was asleep in his crib. He noted that the child was small but accepted the mother's explanation that all her children are small because she is a dwarf.

Mr. Kaye, the prosecutor, said at a news conference yesterday that it was obvious that the child was emaciated when he died in August. "This could not have escaped your attention because you were distracted by something else," he said.

"I just don't think that's a fatal condition," he said.

Kaye said Jmeir was "clearly emaciated" when he died and he compared the boy's appearance to the gaunt, bony-chested children who once appeared in advertisements to fight hunger in Biafra.

He said there was no evidence on the boy's clothing or bedding that he was regurgitating food, nor any evidence of any physical abuse.

He blamed Jmeir's death on "super negligence" by his parents but said there was no indication they acted "intentionally."

Some proponents for reforming DYFS said the tragedy wouldn't affect Codey's support for a \$320 million, 2 1/2-year plan for the agency.

"I hope he is not giving up on the reforms. It takes plan for the agency.

The worker closed the case without speaking with the

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An Asbury Park Press editorial

The news accounts of the 14-month-old Asbury Park boy found starved to death in his home were heartbreaking reminders of how monumental a task it will be to turn around the troubled state Division of Youth and Family Services -- regardless of the sweeping, court-ordered reforms and the millions of