



State of New Hampshire

Office of the Child Advocate

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Office of the Child Advocate calling for full review of Derry boy's death, suggests prevention services might have made a difference.

CONCORD – A 6-year-old Derry boy's death might have been prevented if Voluntary Services existed. Moira O'Neill, Director of the Office of the Child Advocate, today announced findings of a preliminary review of Division of Child, Youth and Family (DCYF) records on Preston E. The body of the boy was found with his father's on February 12, 2018 in what has been called a homicide-suicide. O'Neill will ask the state's Child Fatality Review Committee to conduct a complete review of the case.

While there was no open DCYF case at the time of Preston's death, O'Neill said 8 referrals were made to the child protection agency between February 2015 and June 2017. There were also multiple police encounters at the boy's address.

Although DCYF records described Preston's father as nurturing and protective with strong parenting skills, the records also documented a man constantly asking for help managing difficult family situations. Already grieving the death of an older son, Preston's father expressed being overwhelmed with managing family conflicts and Preston's developing behavioral issues. In April 2017 the father left the DCYF child protective service worker a message indicating an emergency. He said he was "not doing well" and had lost child care services. But the assessment was already completed and allegations of abuse or neglect unfounded. His requests for help were assessed as parenting strengths to keep his children safe.

"This is a classic case of a family that could have benefited from Voluntary Services if they existed," O'Neill stated. Voluntary services are supports for families at risk of, but not found to be abusive or neglectful. They were eliminated in New Hampshire in recent years, a key deficiency noted by an independent review of DCYF in 2016. Three bills aimed at reinstating funding for these kinds of preventive efforts are currently before the legislature.

"We will never know what Preston's dad was thinking when he took his son's life and his own," O'Neill said, "But if the DCYF assessment worker had been able to open a Voluntary case for this family with 'moderate risk' of abuse and neglect, the outcome could have been different. With tight budgets it may be hard to appropriate funds for family support services, but New Hampshire cannot afford this kind of family despair." O'Neill urged lawmakers to consider carefully the legislation that would restore funding to Voluntary and prevention services.

Pursuant to NH RSA 170-G:18, the Office of the Child Advocate is an independent state agency mandated to oversee the Department of Children, Youth and Families, and to promote policies and practices that ensure the safety and wellbeing of New Hampshire children. O'Neill was appointed as the first director of the new office in January, 2018.

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