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Howard M. Talenfeld: Has DCF learned lesson from cases?

By Howard M. Talenfeld



The Missing Children List from the Florida Department of Children and Families is a lengthy and upsetting indictment about how little we know of the whereabouts of many of Florida's foster and at-risk children.

These 193 minors are listed as "missing" by the Florida DCF, just like Rilya Wilson.

Last seen more than a decade ago, the then-4-year-old child is presumed dead. Justice in some sense was served last week when a [Miami-Dade County](#) jury convicted Rilya's foster mother, Geralyn Graham, of abusing and kidnapping the child. They deadlocked on a murder charge. Though a mistrial was declared on that count, Graham, 67, still faces decades behind bars.

The eight-week trial revealed the harsh life of abuse that Rilya endured until she went missing. She hadn't been seen by DCF case workers for 18 months before they realized she was gone. History seems to be repeating itself for the 193 other missing kids supposedly under DCF's purview. The case against Graham was yet another harsh rebuke of the way DCF handles the cases of such children in its care.

DCF has redirected millions of dollars to update its technology, including giving mobile devices to case workers and investigators. DCF has increased staffing and awareness of the Florida Abuse Hotline (800-962-2873). The state has stiffened penalties for those who fail to report child abuse. Yet considering the 193 names on the DCF website, we know much remains in disrepair.

How many other Rilya Wilsons are out there? How many will perish because of failed oversight, like Nubia Barahona, the adopted child whose teachers and medical professionals had reported suspected abuse, only to have the reports go ignored by authorities? Nubia died a horrible death, allegedly by her adoptive parents' hands.

The real question we're left with is whether the DCF and its community-based partners are truly learning the lessons being given to us, and whether we're creating a safer environment for all of Florida's at-risk children.

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