

THE READERS' FORUM

## DCF has new chance to get it right

It's been a deadly time for children under the watch of the Florida Department of Children & Families and the community-based care or "lead" agencies charged with keeping kids safe.

Four children have died from abuse or neglect in the last three months. In the cases of 5-month-old Bryan Osceola, 2-year-old Ezra Raphael, 4-year-old Antwan Hope and 1-year-old Fernando Barahona, DCF or its contracted agencies knew about threats to health or safety in the children's homes. Yet, caseworkers and investigators approved visits or the children's continued placement in dangerous settings. Some caseworkers falsified reports or weren't even certified to work for the agencies.

Now — finally — there's hope that things might change. On Thursday, embattled DCF Secretary David Wilkins resigned. He was replaced by interim Secretary Esther Jacobo, who most recently served as DCF regional managing director for Miami-Dade and Monroe counties.

With Secretary Wilkins' departure, child advocates hope for a return of the transparency, common sense and sense of urgency infused into DCF during four years of significant, positive reforms under former DCF secretaries Bob Butterworth and George Sheldon.

For example, during three years of his "reforms" — all with the goal of cutting DCF's budget — Wilkins voluntarily eliminated key DCF quality-assurance personnel.

Without these watchdogs, DCF lost its eyes and ears regarding agency performance and couldn't ensure kids were safe. Without oversight, DCF was blind, rudderless and reactionary.

In my 25 years working with the state child protection system, I've never seen the spate of deaths we've seen this year.

Advocates now hope Jacobo, who worked under secretaries Butterworth and Sheldon, will restore the agency's transparency, common sense and sense of urgency it once had. We hope she can regain the tools, manpower and momentum lost after four years of agency improvement and help prevent future tragedies.

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