

Tampa Bay Times

July 19, 2013

DCF chief Wilkins steps down as scandal grows | July 19 Finally, hope of change

It has been a deadly time for children under the watch of the Florida Department of Children and 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; some weren't even certified to work for the agencies.

Now — finally — there's hope that things may 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 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 DCF Secretaries Bob Butterworth and George Sheldon.

Howard M. Talenfeld, president, Florida's Children First, Fort Lauderdale