

DCF resignation a hopeful change

By Howard M. Talenfeld

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

Five 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, people are seeking answers. We applaud state Sen. Eleanor Sobel, D-**Hollywood**, head of the **Florida Senate** Children, Families and Elder Affairs Committee, who is calling for hearings regarding DCF lapses.

We believe Sen. Sobel and her committee will discover what child advocates have feared all along -- that 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 have been eliminated by current Secretary David Wilkins.

For example, during three years of "reforms," all with the goal of cutting DCF 's budget," Secretary Wilkins voluntarily eliminated 70-plus key DCF quality assurance personnel. Without these watchdogs, DCF lost its eyes and ears regarding agency performance and couldn't ensure kids were safe.

He is removing the oversight of the experienced DCF supervisory reviewers who determine if investigators have made appropriate risk assessments. Instead, he is implementing a new, untested risk assessment tool.

Secretary Wilkins, you had the momentum of four years of agency improvement, the tools and the manpower. You stripped it away, and Bryan, Ezra, Antwan and Fernando died.

In my 25 years working with the state child protection system, I've never witnessed the spate of deaths we've seen this year. Without oversight, DCF is blind, rudderless and reactionary. It's especially disheartening that Secretary Wilkins doesn't recognize how far off the course his agency has strayed.

Howard M. Talenfeld is president and founder of Florida's Children First, the state's premier child advocacy organization.