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Funding Cuts Sentence Kids To Separation

No Place To Keep Victimized Parents, Children Together

By SARAH EAGAN

September 13, 2009

K (who can't be named because he is a minor) was at a state Department of Children and Families SAFE Homewhen I met him. A supposed temporary shelter for kids who are removed from abusive parents, its name was a misnomer. Unlike a real home, this facility was staffed by rotating shifts. Groups of kids stayed, often for months, before either a foster home could be located for them or they had "waited it out" to be returned to their own families.

I represent K, who is 4 years old and whose case, unfortunately, is just one of many involving domestic violence. More than 60 percent of the cases in the state's child welfare system involve domestic violence. During 2008, more than 6,000 cases were referred to the 13 DCF domestic violence consultants.

K was sitting on the floor when I caught his gaze. He was entwined within the limbs of a DCF investigator brought in to help translate because K spoke no English and none of the staff at the facility spoke his language. The investigator kept his arms tenderly around K's shoulders as he nudged him to speak to me. As K's lawyer, it was my job to meet with him, assess his well-being and report to the court regarding his wishes and needs.

Yet even with the gentle, encouraging whispers from the social worker in his ear, K would only bury his head in the worker's shoulder. He did not know me, could not communicate with me (or, sadly, anyone else at the facility) and of course had no reason to trust me.

Only a few days earlier, K had stood in a small hospital room at Connecticut Children's Medical Center and quietly told the investigating social worker that the unexplained dent in his 9-month-old brother's head happened when his father tried to punch his mother in the face and missed, striking the baby she was holding instead.

After further investigation of K's story, he and his baby brother were not only immediately separated by the agency from their mother — the victim of the domestic violence — but their family was shattered in another way. The baby went to live with a foster family two towns over, and K went to the SAFE home.

Month after month, K saw his family for only a few hours during supervised visits in a sterile room at the local DCF office. His mother, and sometimes his father, would bring homemade food and clothes for him and his baby brother.

It took six months before K and his brother were placed in an appropriate foster home together. But it

took much longer for them to go home with their mom. Although she regularly attended domestic violence counseling services, cooperated with DCF personnel and never missed court hearings or visits with her children, she was reluctant, as many abused women are, to disclose the depth of violence that had plagued her marriage. She also struggled with the question of whether she could or should learn to live and financially survive on her own.

As a result, K and his brother spent almost an entire year away from their mom before she was able to complete her counseling and obtain a two-bedroom apartment for her and the boys.

But the real tragedy of K and his brother's story is that their prolonged separation could have been substantially shortened, if not eliminated, if the right services had been available. Instead of being separated from their mother, they needed a home to move into together right away.

The factors that kept this family apart — the mother's fear of admitting the abuse, the family's poverty, the mother's difficulty in and ambivalence toward learning to subsist on her own — are common in family violence cases, but they are solvable without requiring the children to endure traumatic and prolonged separation from their non-offending parent.

The Supportive Housing Program run by DCF can avert the months of hardship for families like K's. It provides subsidized housing and intensive case management services to DCF-involved families for whom inadequate housing jeopardizes the safety, permanency and well-being of their children.

As of April, when a lack of funding for the program forced DCF to close its doors to new referrals, 728 families were on the waiting list. DCF estimates that if the waiting list was still open, about 1,200 families would be seeking this service.

If we are serious about looking at domestic violence through the eyes of the child, it is obvious that we need adequate supportive housing programs, which allow these children and others to live safely with their battered parent — without being further injured by forced family separation.

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