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## DCYF faulted in boy's death

Three-year-old Thomas "T.J." Wright could have been saved if the state had heeded warning signs, a report says.

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PROVIDENCE — The state's Department of Children, Youth and Families missed at least five opportunities to rescue 3-year-old Thomas Wright from an unsafe home where he was ultimately beaten to death one year ago yesterday, according to an investigation by the state's child advocate.

"Yes, this child could have been saved," Jametta O. Alston, the child advocate, said yesterday at a news conference.

The Office of the Child Advocate's report by eight experts in social work and law describes errors at nearly every step of DCYF's foster-care process, disclosing that the agency:

- Placed Thomas and his brothers with a couple who had a history of drug use and problems, detailed in the DCYF's own records.

- Overlooked a doctor's concern about the female guardian.

- Let the woman's boyfriend stay in the home even after DCYF found out that he had lied on

SEE **WRIGHT, A9**

# Wright

Continued from Page A1

his application about a previous arrest.

■ Ignored e-mails from a caseworker alerting supervisors about the boyfriend's 2003 arrest for drugs in Arkansas

"We stand here as people who acknowledge that children can be placed in dangerous situations. We want to stop that, we need to stop that today," said Alston, adding that her office should also do more to oversee foster care.

Patricia Martinez, who took over for former director Jay G. Lindgren Jr. in January, said she'll study the report and is not ruling out personnel changes.

The system "failed to protect T.J.," she said, not because one "individual was careless" but because of "larger systems issues," such as heavy caseloads and unclear roles. She said the DCYF has already corrected several issues in the report, and said new hires are reducing caseloads. "The department now has the final report," she said. "If action needs to be done, it will be done."

Thomas, depicted in the report as a "curious little boy," who loved to throw things and play with his brothers, was allegedly beaten while in state custody with his aunt, Katherine Bunnell, and her boyfriend, Gilbert Delestre. State prosecutors say the couple traded off hitting the boy, breaking his femur and causing massive head injuries, after a night out when they returned to a mess and blamed it on Thomas. He died the next day, Halloween of last year. Delestre told the police he was drunk when he hit Thomas.

Bunnell, 22, and Delestre, 23, were each charged with one count of murder and conspiracy to commit murder. They pleaded not guilty in February and are at the Adult Correctional Institutions while awaiting trial.

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**JAMETTA O. ALSTON**

state's child advocate

Thomas' death demanded scrutiny of the state's screening of prospective foster parents, prompting the child advocate to form a "Child Fatality Panel" whose members included Sen. Leo R. Blais, R-Coventry, and Rhode Island State Police Maj. John J. Leyden Jr.

The report calls for more accountability, smaller caseloads, stronger supervision and better training for staff. Also, the child advocate's office will launch a separate investigation into the DCYF's licensing unit.

Thomas and his brothers entered state custody early last year when their mother was imprisoned in Illinois for transporting 100 pounds of marijuana. The boys were placed with their aunt, Bunnell, then 20, who had two children of her own. She and Delestre were both unemployed, with much of their small income coming from the DCYF, which paid the couple \$100 per week for each boy. The DCYF allowed the boys to stay with the couple while the foster-home license was pending.

But Bunnell and Delestre should have never been allowed to take in the boys, the report said. They should have been disqualified because they both had prior DCYF juvenile records showing "substance/abuse and or violence." The DCYF is supposed to check those records before placing a child, but the report said it's clear that no one read Bunnell's and Delestre's case files.

"This is the first missed opportunity, which led to the death of T.J.," the report stated.

A complete check on Bunnell would have also showed that the year before she took in the boys,

she was twice in a car that was stopped for drug trafficking. Also, she'd been diagnosed with "Oppositional Defiant Disorder," but had discontinued counseling.

As a teenager, Delestre was charged with possession of marijuana, and never complied with mandatory drug counseling before the Family Court disposed of the case on his 18th birthday.

Delestre, the report said, lied on his licensing application, saying he had not been arrested.

According to the report, "the second missed opportunity to protect T.J." came when a caseworker learned that Delestre lied on his application about a previous arrest. Under DCYF policy, Delestre should have been required to move out. But the caseworker let Delestre stay. The report said Delestre protested, saying, "that he was innocent, and that he had not been arrested, only held, and that the record was supposed to be expunged."

The caseworker justified leaving the children in the home, the report said, saying, "I just feel that sometimes people can be in the wrong place at the wrong time and arrests can occur."

On March 18, 2004, another red flag was missed: A doctor refused to recommend Bunnell for foster care, writing: "Would recommend further evaluation."

But the doctor changed his position after a phone call from the DCYF.

The panel investigating the DCYF interviewed the doctor.

"When questioned why he changed his position," stated the report, "he stated that a DCYF employee pressured him."

The employee "told [the doc-

tor] that the children would be separated from each other and dispersed to different homes and it would be his fault."

"Unbelievably," the report said, the DCYF workers "ignored the doctor's concern and pressured the doctor to change his recommendation for the 'best interest of the children.'"

"The next opportunity to protect T.J. and his siblings" came on May 21, 2004 — just five months before the boy's death — when a licensing social worker wrote to her supervisor that she had "disqualifying information" about Delestre. Delestre's fingerprints showed he'd been arrested on drug possession in 2003 in Arkansas. She sought guidance. Should she continue to license the home? But the supervisor did not respond to her e-mail.

Over the next three months, the same social worker wrote to the supervisor three more times — by e-mail and by hand — and also wrote to the director of the licensing unit twice, for guidance. "There was no response," the report said. According to the report, the director explained herself by saying she got too many e-mails and thus couldn't open them all. The supervisor said he spoke to the social worker, but couldn't document that.

DCYF officials said they never learned the quantity of marijuana — 130 pounds — that Delestre was allegedly caught with in Arkansas until after Thomas' death. Delestre was never prosecuted on the drug charge.

"Clearly," the report said, the social worker's "unanswered e-mails constituted a fifth and final opportunity to protect T.J."