

N.Y. / REGION

New Jersey Couple Held in Abuse; One Son, 19, Weighed 45 Pounds

By LYDIA POLGREEN and ROBERT F. WORTH OCT. 27, 2003

The parents of four boys adopted from New Jersey's troubled foster care system were arrested Friday, two weeks after the police found that the children, ages 9 to 19, had been starved to the point that none of them weighed more than 50 pounds, according to the Camden County prosecutor.

The boys were so badly malnourished that their shriveled bodies gave no hint of their ages, investigators said. At 19, the oldest was 4 feet tall and weighed 45 pounds. The police initially thought he was just 10 years old. The boys' condition was discovered when a neighbor called the police because the 19-year-old, Bruce, was looking for food in the neighbor's trash at 2:30 a.m. on Oct. 10, according to the county prosecutor, Vincent P. Sarubbi. The boys were removed from the home later that day.

The boys had been locked out of the kitchen of the house in this blue-collar Philadelphia suburb and were fed a diet of pancake batter, peanut butter and breakfast cereal. They ate wallboard and insulation to sate their hunger, investigators said.

A caseworker from the Division of Youth and Family Services, the state agency that oversees the foster care system, had visited the house at 318 White Horse Pike 38 times in the past 2 years, investigators said. The parents, Raymond Jackson, 50, and his wife, Vanessa, 48, rented the house, which passed a safety assessment by the caseworker and her supervisor in June.

"This is the most horrible case we have ever encountered in our child abuse unit," said Mr. Sarubbi, who charged the parents with aggravated assault and endangering the welfare of their children. "It has been impossible for me to rationalize how parents could treat children this way." Mr. Sarubbi announced the arrests at a news conference on Saturday.

The case is the latest in a series of discoveries revealing the collapse of New Jersey's child welfare system, which left the youngsters it was charged with protecting vulnerable to abuse and neglect in troubled homes with little oversight.

To settle a lawsuit over the failures of its foster care system, the state agreed in June to hand oversight of the agency to a five-member panel of child welfare experts. Last month, Gov. James E. McGreevey appointed an independent child advocate to protect the rights of children.

The advocate, Kevin M. Ryan, said Sunday that this latest case revealed the magnitude of the agency's problems. "The question that has to be penetrated is, how did 38 visits over 2 years not rescue these children from slow torture and starvation?" Mr. Ryan said in an interview. "I am completely baffled at this point at how a failure of this magnitude could happen."

He contrasted this case with the one that ultimately led to the call for major reform of the social service agency, the death of a 7-year-old boy in Newark named Faheem Williams, who was found hidden in the basement of a duplex where his cousin was supposed to be taking care of him. An investigation later revealed that Faheem's case had been closed prematurely despite serious allegations of abuse.

Of the Jackson case, Mr. Ryan said, "Here we had a caseworker who was going into this house and seeing these children," adding "It was not a failure of interaction."

The caseworker, whom officials would not identify, resigned from the agency as the conditions at the Jackson home came to light, said Gwendolyn L. Harris, the commissioner of the state Department of Human Services, which oversees the Division of Youth and Family Services. Agency officials described her as experienced, and Ms. Harris said the agency would review other cases she handled.

At least 8 and as many as 10 employees of the Division of Youth and Family Services, including managers and supervisors, face suspension and some could be fired depending on the outcome of the department's investigation into the Jackson case, she said.

Also living in the Jackson house were two girls, ages 5 and 12, whom the couple had also adopted from the foster care system; a foster daughter, 10, whom they were planning to adopt; and two of the couple's adult biological children -- a son and a daughter, Mr. Sarubbi said. None of the children other than the four boys appeared to be malnourished, Mr. Sarubbi said. The family had received a total of as much as \$28,000 a year from the state to take care of the adopted children and their foster daughter, investigators said. That stipend was reduced when the oldest boy turned 18.

The caseworker, with her supervisor, had completed an inspection of the home in early June, an investigator said. The inspection was one of more than 14,000 completed in the last six months in response to repeated problems in the foster care system. The assessments were intended to root out problems similar to the Faheem Williams case and others that troubled the agency in recent years, and were preceded by training courses for all the employees sent to perform them, officials at the Division of Youth and Family Services said.

Mr. Ryan said he had begun an investigation of the operations of the division's office that dealt with the family, the Southern Adoption Resource Center. The center handles foster children who are likely to be candidates for adoption. Each child who came into the Jackson home through the foster care system was overseen by the Southern Adoption Resource Center, investigators said, adding that the caseworker was assigned to the family to look after the 10-year-old girl whom the Jacksons were planning to adopt.

Once a child is adopted, officials said, the child is no longer assigned a caseworker.

Mr. Sarubbi said the adopted boys lived in a state of constant want. They had lice, and their teeth were rotting because they had not seen a dentist or doctor for at

least five years, investigators said. They were home-schooled by the adults and were not permitted to leave home often, investigators said.

In marked contrast to the four boys, the three girls were well fed, went to medical appointments and took vacations with their parents to Williamsburg, Va., where the family had a time-share apartment. The girls were permitted to order Chinese takeout while their brothers starved, Mr. Sarubbi said.

Yet the boys seemed unaware of their plight, he said.

"The parents had essentially brainwashed the children into believing they had eating disorders," the prosecutor said, adding, "The saddest part is I don't think the children even knew how bad off they were."

The family had financial trouble, Mr. Sarubbi said. They were \$8,000 behind on their rent and had defaulted on loans on their vacation time shares in Virginia and the Poconos, he said. Neighbors said Mr. Jackson worked as a mortgage broker and wore tailored suits, but investigators said he was now unemployed. The electricity had been turned off recently for four months, Mr. Sarubbi said, and the gas was off for a month.

Neighbors said that they noticed that the boys were small and thin, but that Mr. and Mrs. Jackson had told them they had medical conditions that kept them from growing properly.

Pete DiMattia, who lives next door to the family, said he never thought to call the police or a child welfare agency because he often saw a state car parked outside the house and assumed that the family was being supervised.

"I thought the kids had medical problems," Mr. DiMattia said. He said the boys were polite and respectful, referring to him as "Mr. Pete."

The evangelical church attended by the Jacksons, who are born-again Christians, is in Medford, about 20 miles away. Congregation members said they could not imagine that the Jacksons had starved their sons.

"There is no way on God's green earth that this happened," said Frank Jacobs, 50, a member of the Medford congregation, the Come Alive New Testament Church, who said he has known the family for 15 years. He said the children were lively and active members of the church, attending Sunday school, acting in pageants and singing.

Medical examinations of the boys ruled out any natural cause for their small stature, Mr. Sarubbi said. One boy, a 14-year-old identified only by his initials, K. J., weighed 38 pounds when the Jacksons adopted him in 1996. When he was removed from their home on Oct. 10, he was 4 feet tall and weighed just 40 pounds, Mr. Sarubbi said. After 13 days in a hospital, K. J. had gained seven pounds, he said.

"To look at the children, it was just gut-wrenching," Mr. Sarubbi said. "They had distended stomachs. You could see their ribs. Their shoulder blades protruded from the skin. The boys' faces were gaunt."

He said it seemed impossible that anyone, particularly someone charged with looking out for the welfare of children, would fail to notice the boys' condition. He said he would examine how the Division of Youth and Family Services handled the Jackson case, but he would not say if anyone from the agency would face criminal charges.

The three younger boys have been released from hospitals and are in foster homes, Mr. Sarubbi said. Bruce, the oldest, remains hospitalized; doctors are monitoring a possible heart problem. The girls living in the house have also been placed in foster homes.

Marcia Robinson Lowry, executive director of Children's Rights, a Manhattan-based child advocacy group that sued New Jersey over its foster care system, said the Jackson case was a stunning reminder of just how difficult it will be to right the troubled system. It was particularly distressing, she said, that the very process that was intended to find problem homes -- the inspection of all homes with foster children -- failed to help the Jackson children.

"I think we have got to immediately start talking about redoing a large number of these assessments because I don't know how many of them have been done and

how many of them done appropriately," Ms. Lowry said. "It is clear that this system can't be fixed quickly."

Jason George reported for this article from Collingswood, N.J.

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