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Social workers' caseloads spark combative exchange

Ex-supervisor can't explain why personnel files destroyed

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OPINION

Hey there, time traveller!

This article was published 15/11/2012 (4430 days ago), so information in it may no longer be current.

There's plenty of blame to assign in the sad, sorry case of murdered child Phoenix Sinclair.

We can start with her birth parents. Steve Sinclair is a graduate of the child welfare system, aging out of care when he was 18. His sealed Child and Family Services file offered this warning: "Steven remains to be a highly disturbed individual who should

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not be left in charge of dependent children.”

Two years later, Samantha Kematch gave birth to their daughter. Kematch is also a CFS alum, apprehended due to family issues with alcoholism, abuse and neglect. While in care, she repeatedly went AWOL and was aggressive and in trouble with the law. When Phoenix was born in 2000, Kematch already had a two-year-old son in the permanent care of CFS.



CTV Image EX-CFS supervisor Andy Orobko was chippy during his testimony Wednesday.

Neither Sinclair nor Kematch was prepared emotionally or financially for a baby, child welfare files show. There were no bottles or diapers at home, no car seat waiting.

As the now-revived inquiry into her death is proving, there were scores of balls dropped during the child's short, miserable life. A veritable wealth of lawyers, journalists and a few bystanders gathered again at the convention centre to hear the tragic



details. This is not a criminal trial or a civil trial, commissioner Ted Hughes reminded us Wednesday. It's an effort to determine how a five-year-old girl could be beaten, starved and tortured to death while under the care of CFS for much of her life.

CFS lawyers tossed up every blockade possible. If they are done with their objections, Hughes might reach his new May 31, 2013 deadline to wrap up the inquiry.

And so Northwest CFS intake supervisor Andy Orobko took the stand Wednesday morning, resuming his testimony where he left off Sept. 7. A man who believes 12 words are better than two, Orobko sparred with several lawyers, notably Gordon McKinnon, who represents the Manitoba Department of Family Services and Consumer Affairs. He challenged Orobko's assertion his intake workers had caseloads double or triple industry recommendations.

When they were done counting, adding in new cases and deleting vacation time, it seems Orobko's unit of six social workers, one supervisor and a clerk had about 1,100 cases in 2003. That's only 3.5 cases per worker per week deduced McKinnon. That's



bad math, retorted Orobko, who swaggers even when he's sitting still.

And back and forth it went with the often-chippy witness defending his staff as "exemplary," complaining about their workloads and claiming no child was ever left at an unacceptable risk while workloads grew. They were sorely taxed, he said, and yet not a single child was harmed.

Orobko is the same CFS supervisor who inexplicably tucked all his notes on personnel issues in his pocket when he was let go after 17 years. That was against policy. He destroyed the files in 2010, testifying he no longer thought they were relevant.

This despite a murder trial, with the Hughes inquiry already set.

Authority lawyer Kris Saxberg ran through some basic business: How did you decide which files would wait when staff were overwhelmed? Orobko earlier testified he'd hold files in his office until he could free up staff. Saxberg got down to brass tacks: Phoenix was seized under a three-month guardianship, the shortest period CFS could apply for. Did Orobko believe her possibly mentally ill mother and inexperienced father would be ready to care for her in that time?



"I think that was very ambitious," he replied. Kematch expressed no interest in dressing her newborn in the hospital. She hid her first pregnancy and had no prenatal care for this one. Ambitious? More like impossible.

Orobko said he hoped the three-month span would spur the parents to get themselves ready to parent. He doesn't want anyone falling into despair.

Kerri-Lynn Greeley was the next CFS worker to handle the newborn's file and the person who would transfer her from CFS care to be "reunited" with her parents.

The files of Phoenix, Sinclair and Kematch seem replete with evidence this was a terrible idea. A note said "both indicated that they were not prepared to care for this baby either financially or emotionally." It was believed Kematch might be suffering from depression. There was concern she was flat and "stoic" around Phoenix.

Greeley testified she never saw Sinclair's child-in-care file and didn't ask for it. That's the document that called him "highly disturbed." The couple completed an eight-week



parenting course, a CFS recommendation.

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The Warm-Up

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Much time has passed and Greeley honestly can't remember much of what she read or appeared in her notes. But she was snippy when asked if the mere two years that had elapsed from Sinclair being declared unfit to be alone with dependent, to him being a father, should have been cause for concern.

Two years can be a very short time and 10 years not very long, she said, or words to that effect.

Phoenix went back to her parents in September 2000.

lindor.reynolds@freepress.mb.ca

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