

We can't allow another 'Jeffrey'

By Lee Prokaska
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Jeffrey Baldwin

Police have called the death of five-year-old Jeffrey Baldwin one of the worst cases of child abuse seen in Canada.

Emergency workers called to his Toronto home on Nov. 30, 2002, were shocked -- Jeffrey's wasted, 21-pound body (one pound less than he weighed on his first birthday) was covered in sores, abrasions and bruises. He reeked of urine. He had died of starvation.

Last week, a judge found Jeffrey's maternal grandparents guilty of second-degree murder in the child's death. In a 500-page verdict that took more than five hours to read, Judge David Watt called Jeffrey's death "barbaric" and called his life a "miserable existence" in a cold, urine-soaked, feces-coated "dungeon" he shared with his sister.

Incredibly, a court order had placed Jeffrey and three siblings with their grandparents after being taken away from their abusive birth parents. The Catholic Children's Aid Society (CCAS) of

Toronto approved of the placement, having failed to check its files on the grandparents, who were convicted child abusers. An inquest has been called.

Everyone failed Jeffrey -- his birth parents, his grandparents and the social agency that was supposed to protect him. Horror stories such as this ignite outrage, making us rail against authorities who should have done something to prevent such cruelty to a defenceless child.

There have been too many cases of children who fell through the cracks of the system and we fear there are systemic fault lines that mean we will hear of such abuse again.

The CCAS of Toronto has improved some of its practices after an external review following Jeffrey's death and has indicated that it will cooperate in the inquest called into Jeffrey's death.

Child protection service organizations too often cloak themselves in privacy issues, seemingly more concerned about covering their own butts than improving the system that is supposed to protect children.

Nothing can bring Jeffrey back, but given the horrifying circumstances around his death, the inquest must take a hard look at the decision-making processes in child custody. It must ensure there are checks and balances that help, not hinder, accountability. Otherwise, stories such as Jeffrey's will not stop.

The shame of that is our collective responsibility.