

Teen Sues L.A. After Decade in Foster Care

Teenage Girl Reunited With Her Long-Lost Father After Decade in Foster Care Sues L.A. County

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LOS ANGELES - A teenage girl reunited with her father last year after a decade in foster care is suing Los Angeles County for taking so long to bring them together.

County supervisors had said in September that the reunion of Melinda Smith, now 17, and father Thomas Marion Smith was the result of a "groundbreaking effort," and congratulated county agencies for locating the father.

But the lawsuit alleges that the Department of Children and Family Services failed to use "due diligence" to locate Thomas Smith. It claims the agency never notified Smith, who had continued making child support payments, that his daughter was in foster care and never gave him a chance to claim her.

"He's a registered voter with a valid driver's license and an open child support case," said Smith's attorney, L. Wallace Pate. "All they had to do, at any time during those 10 years, was pick up the phone and ask the L.A. County Child Support Services Department: 'Do you have a contact on this man?'"

Beginning in 1989, Thomas Smith made child support payments to Melinda's mother for his 1-year-old daughter, but when Melinda was 4 her mother moved and left no forwarding address.

Two years later, Melinda was turned over to foster care officials after the county received complaints of abuse.

Smith's whereabouts were listed as unknown in court documents on the case, although records show that Melinda's caseworker knew Smith was paying child support and his address was on file with the agency that collected the payments.

Father and daughter were reunited in July 2005 after Melinda got help from a social worker assigned to find permanent placement for teens in foster care.

The lawsuit seeks unspecified damages from the county, the social workers who handled the case and a private agency that provides attorneys for children in foster care.

County officials would not comment because of the pending litigation.