

'Isolated incidents'

**Another Canadian child dies while in the government's care.
How many before it's a trend?**

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"We have thousands of foster parents in Alberta who do a fantastic job," Janis Tarchuk assured the *Edmonton Journal* on Sunday.

No one seems willing to argue with Alberta's minister of children's services, even after the arrest of a 32-year-old Edmonton foster mother in the death of a three-year-old boy in her care. But this latest incident might seem just a little bit more isolated if it hadn't been less than a year ago that another Edmonton foster parent, Raymond Loyer, was sentenced to five years in prison for shaking 13-year-old Caleb Merchant to death.

The formulaic reactions to the most recent tragedy underline just how often Canada's child services are in the news.

Tarchuk has expressed sadness and announced there will be a "special case review" to supplement the routine investigation conducted whenever a child dies on the government's watch. Meanwhile, others are noting a severe shortage in foster parents. ("Some people are taking five or six kids because of the shortage of foster homes," Alberta Foster Parent Association president Norman Bronwell told the *Edmonton Journal*.) And naturally, the opposition is already pointing her finger at budget cuts.

"The model is based on social workers working with an average of eight to 10 families," Liberal MLA Weslyn Mather told the

Journal. "The reality is that these social workers are working with an average of 22 to 25 families.

"I don't believe that this government is stepping up to the plate and giving them the support they need to do their jobs."

The boy's father told the *Journal* that his son's injuries included "severe brain damage" and bruises and burns, and that he had been malnourished and forced to sleep in a garage. The foster mother's charges - laid before the boy died - include assault and failure to provide the necessities of life.

According to Sun Media, the suspect in this case (who cannot be identified) is a single, 32-year-old nursing teacher who was looking after two of her own children and two foster children. The three-year-old victim had been in her care for only two weeks, according to neighbours, and she had recently hired a nanny.

Time will tell whether any red flags were missed in assessing her fitness for the job or in monitoring her performance. Violence can happen unexpectedly in any household - foster or otherwise - and even the most rigorous and expensive inspection program might not detect a rapidly deteriorating situation. But then, as recent events in Ontario have shown, even keeping tabs on the suitability of foster parents isn't always enough.

In a gruesome case apparently nearing its

conclusion, a 15-year-old girl pleaded guilty last week to suffocating a three-year-old boy in December 2005. Both had been in the care of the same foster home in Welland - the girl for less than 24 hours, having just been released from a youth detention centre.

"We make every placement based on what we know about the child and what we know about the caregiver," Bill Charron, executive director of Family and Children's Services Niagara, told *The Globe and Mail*. "If anyone would have foreseen this, then we would have done everything to prevent it. ... I've never seen anything like this."

While reports indicate the girl had once been removed from an adoptive family because she assaulted her younger sister, Charron's shock was understandable - especially considering the repulsive details of the crime. But based on media and public reaction, this almost cartoonishly horrific case paled in comparison with that of Elva Bottineau and Norman Kidman, convicted of the second-degree murder of their five-year-old grandson less than eight months ago.

The horrific details of Jeffrey Baldwin's short life are fairly well-known: he was largely confined to a single filthy room, forced to drink from a toilet and to eat - if at all - like a dog from a bowl. He weighed just 21 pounds - less than on his first birthday - when he died of septic shock brought on by pneumonia and bacterial infections stemming from a lack of basic sanitation.

What makes that case - like several others - so disturbing was its seemingly preventable

nature. The Toronto Catholic Children's Aid Society awarded Jeffrey's custody to his grandparents in April 1998 without having conducted a background check that would have revealed their prior convictions for child abuse. And when the CCAS visited the home in 2000, acting on an anonymous tip, it apparently found nothing untoward.

Coroner's inquests have been ordered in both Ontario cases, but significant systemic changes will be neither cheap nor quick to implement. Less than a month after an official and exhaustive report on child protection in British Columbia was released, the Ministry of Children and Family Development was claiming rapid progress on implementing the recommendations. But in June, a television news crew found rotting food and generally deplorable conditions at a Victoria-area foster home. A case review released by the government in September noted that only one review of the home had been conducted over seven years, despite the requirement that they're performed annually.

At this point in the investigation, there is no way to know what - if anything - could have prevented the recent tragedy in Edmonton. But fair or not, as long as stories like these continue to emerge - especially where hindsight reveals so many errors - Canadians are likely to have the impression that the system is significantly flawed.

As Mather told the *Journal*, "When the government makes the decision to apprehend a child, they are saying they will care better for the child."