



Six months after Kassidy Bortner's death, her case rings all too familiar

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ROCHESTER — Six months ago today, a local toddler's death brought home the reality that child abuse does happen here — fueling a public outcry in Kassidy Bortner's name.

Residents in both Maine and New Hampshire have written to their legislators and signed petitions expressing their outrage at the abuse 21-month-old Kassidy endured before her death.

Cases of child abuse fatalities with the brutal details that surround Kassidy's death are not common in the Seacoast, and in letter after letter area residents have said they will not stand by while children like Kassidy are left to suffer.

National statistics, however, indicate the circumstances of Kassidy's life in the six weeks prior to her death are anything but unusual.

Kassidy died on Nov. 9 after enduring what authorities have described as weeks of "senseless" beatings at the hands of her mother's live-in boyfriend, Chad E. Evans.

Evans, 29, is facing a murder trial in November for allegedly causing Kassidy's death by inflicting a blunt-force injury to her head.

Although Amanda Bortner has not been charged, court documents state she lied about her daughter's abuse and did not seek medical treatment for the child in an effort to protect Evans.

Bortner's behavior is typical of the nonabusing parent in situations such as Kassidy's, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System.

Nationally, statistics indicate the single most common form of child maltreatment is neglect on the part of a female parent.

More than 60 percent of the perpetrators of child maltreatment are females who — like 19-year-old Bortner — are typically younger

than their male counterparts, according to the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System.

Across the country in 1998, the most recent year for which statistics have been compiled, there were 903,000 confirmed victims of child abuse and neglect.

Nearly 902,000 of those children survived their abuse. Cassidy, however, was one of the exceptions.

"Child Maltreatment 1998," which is the most recently published collection of nationwide data on child abuse and neglect, states many child deaths were associated with more than one type of maltreatment, such as physical abuse being inflicted by one parent or caregiver with the other parent neglecting the child's needs.

In Cassidy's case, New Hampshire State Police affidavits allege Evans repeatedly abused the toddler by grabbing her face, arm or leg and throwing her into walls or onto the floor and by choking her until she gagged to stop her from crying.

The affidavits also state that Bortner and Evans discussed seeking medical attention for Cassidy's injuries, and agreed not to bring her to a doctor.

Court documents say little about whether Bortner neglected her child's other basic needs. But friends and family members who took care of Cassidy during the two months Bortner lived with Evans told Foster's Daily Democrat it was common for the mother to bring Cassidy to them in the same diaper and pajamas they dressed her in the night before.

Kassidy's physical condition at the time of her death supported those statements.

Although no charges have been filed against Evans or anyone else for sexually abusing Cassidy, preliminary court documents detailing the examination of Cassidy's body at York Hospital describe visible irritation and swelling in areas that may indicate she was sexually assaulted.

When the court documents were released in January, officials stated that no charges of sexual abuse are expected and the irritation could have been caused in other ways, including lack of attention to the toddler's hygienic needs.

Kassidy's case also parallels the 1998 data with respect to the age of child abuse victims. The data indicates that almost 78 percent of children who died as the result of maltreatment were under 5 years old. Cassidy was not yet 2 at the time of her death.

Perpetrators of abuse and neglect that ultimately led to the death of a child were considerably younger than the average age of abusers — with nearly two-thirds being under the age of 30. Evans is 29.

While more than 900,000 children were abused and neglected during the 1998 data collection period, an estimated 1,100 children

died as the result of that maltreatment.

According to "Child Maltreatment 1998," that number — and the number of all children who suffer abuse — could be significantly higher.

"Because of the lack of investigative coordination and information-sharing in many communities among law enforcement agencies, medical professionals and child welfare agencies, these estimates may be an undercount of deaths attributable to child maltreatment," the publication states.

Although all 50 states reported information to the data center, it is clear from the information submitted that there is no nationwide consistency in how abuse and neglect are reported or remedied.

In 1998, 9,749 reports of child abuse or neglect were "screened out" or not investigated by Maine while 4,121 were referred to Child Protective Services, according to the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System. By the state's own admission, however, those numbers do not mean that twice as many initial reports were false as were true.

"Of the 9,749 reports not assigned for investigation, 3,741 were considered appropriate for CPS but were not assigned for investigation because available staff resources do not allow all appropriate reports to be assigned," Maine Department of Human Services officials noted in the section of the publication devoted to explanations of the data submitted to the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System in 1998.

In 1998, Maine had 137 screening, intake, investigation and assessment workers while New Hampshire had 58.

The New Hampshire Division of Children, Youth and Families reported screening out 6,000 child abuse reports as not warranting further action in 1998 and looking into 6,391. The state clarified those numbers in the explanation section with a brief sentence reading: "The number of reports not referred for CPS assessment is estimated." In other words, the number of cases not referred for additional study is not known.

And without the current statistics readily available because of continuing investigations and other factors, it is difficult to track whether instances of abuse and abuse-related fatalities are on the rise.

The deaths of four children were reported in Maine in 1998.

"Two children suffocated while sleeping with adults; one child died from overheating after being left unattended in a car. One child was intentionally murdered by a stepfather," Maine officials noted in the explanation section of the publication.

Nationally, Maine and New Hampshire are among the states with the fewest child deaths reported. The state with the highest number of reported child fatalities in 1998 was Texas with 176 while

Vermont was on the other end of the spectrum with none.

Although Texas does not have the highest child population in the nation, its child fatality count was nearly three times as high as the next state, Indiana, which had 65 reports of child deaths in 1998.

In New Hampshire, one child fatality was reported in 1998. In January, however, New Hampshire's chief medical examiner, Dr. Thomas Andrew, told The Associated Press he was concerned that number had increased significantly between 1999 and 2000. Typically, Andrew said, in a given year he would see one or two homicides involving children under 4.

At the end of 2000, Cassidy was one of four young children determined to be New Hampshire homicide victims, and the deaths of three babies — including 14-week-old Jeffrey D. Trudeau Jr. of Dover — remained under investigation.

From Rochester — where Cassidy's mother lived with the man accused of murdering her daughter — to York, Maine, where Cassidy was pronounced dead on Nov. 9, public sentiment detailed in letters to legislators and petitioners is calling for a change in both states' child protection laws.

"Usually there is one individual inflicting the bodily injury while the other parent or adult member of the household enables this conduct through his or her omission and silence," said Maine Assistant Attorney General Lisa J. Marchese, testifying before a legislative panel earlier this year in support of one of Maine's proposed child protection laws.

"What we saw in 2000 is clearly extremely alarming," Andrew said in January. "Not only was the number of child deaths high, but these were very young children. Talk about the slaughter of the innocent."

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