

# Lawmakers mull informing public on child abuse cases

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**CONCORD** — Senate Bill 86, designed to provide the public limited information on fatal or near fatal child abuse incidents and how they are being handled by the Department of Children Youth and Families, was heard yesterday by the House Children and Family Law Committee.

The measure was dubbed the Cassidy Bortner bill after a toddler who died Nov. 9, 2000, following beatings by former Rochester man Chad Evans, then 30' a boyfriend of the child's mother, Amanda Bortner. Evans was convicted of second-degree murder, second-degree assault, endangering the welfare of a child and simple assault.

Bortner was convicted earlier this year of child endangerment, and both are currently serving prison terms.

Bortner's mother, Jacqueline Conley of Bryant Pond, Maine, asked the committee to support the bill because it might save other mothers and grandmothers the heartbreak she experienced upon learning of the death of her grandchild.

"Had there been a law like this in place, maybe there would have been quicker action and Cassidy might have been saved; she was a special little girl," Conley said.

Yesterday's hearing focused on the need for a system where the public could get better informa-

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tion about child neglect and abuse cases if the information disclosed would not be against the best interests of the child.

The bill also requires the Department of Health and Human Services to submit a plan to obtain accreditation by the Council on Accreditation for Child and Family Services by July 1, 2007.

The department would be required to periodically update the Legislature on its progress toward gaining Council accreditation.

This part of the bill is considered key by supporters and sponsors of the bill. Testifying yesterday was Sen. Iris Estabrook, D-Durham, a co-sponsor.

"This bill gives us the tools we need to meet our responsibility to ensure that DCYF fulfills its role in protecting New Hampshire children," Estabrook said.

DCYF has for some time been the object of criticism for lack of timely response to abuse and ne-

glect cases, among other shortcomings. Lack of staff has often been cited by DCYF and others. Committee members voiced support yesterday for the idea of adding at least 42 people to help the agency cope with mounting case-loads.

With better organization, the state could rescue more children from life-threatening and other serious domestic situations, proponents of the bill said.

Jack Lightfoot, Jr., representing the non-profit agency Child and Family Services, supported the bill. He said the proposed legislation is not a quick fix because it takes time to reform an agency the size of DCYF.

Lightfoot and other proponents believe a requirement to seek Council accreditation will lead to better accountability in a number of areas such as staffing and policy practices.

Currently, the agency receives no outside professional oversight, proponents say.