

**The Oakland Tribune (Oakland, CA)**

**September 23, 2003 Tuesday**

**HEADLINE:** Officials aware of boy's beatings;  
Friends say they had earlier reported abuse of

**BYLINE:** By Laura Counts and Michele R. Marcucci, STAFF WRITERS

**DATELINE:** OAKLAND

**BODY:**

Officials responsible for safeguarding the welfare of children in Alameda County offered few answers Monday about the beating death of a 3-year-old boy in Oakland.

But outraged friends and family members said they had made complaints just days before that the child was in imminent danger from his father.

Chazarus "Charles" Hill Sr., 23, is expected to be charged today with the murder of his son, Chazarus Hill Jr.

Police said Hill admitted to severely beating the boy, who was bruised from head to toe when he was brought to San Leandro Hospital at about 2 a.m. Sunday. He was pronounced dead soon afterward.

The Alameda County District Attorney was still reviewing whether Hill's wife of five months, Kimberly Ford, 32, will face charges as well. The couple and toddler lived with Hill Sr.'s grandmother on Modesto Avenue in Maxwell Park, but police say they may have been visiting Ford's relative's home in San Leandro when the fatal beating occurred.

A Maxwell Park neighbor who was close to the boy -- known as Cha Cha -- offered an anguished account of his final week Monday. She had spent quite a bit of time with him but Hill had recently cut off contact. Last Monday, his great-grandmother, Sadie Catchings, told the neighbor that Hill had cut some tree branches from the back yard and used them to beat the boy.

Hill had been constantly quizzing Cha Cha on his numbers and ABC's and beating him whenever he gave a wrong answer, police said. He had also been forcing the boy to say Ford was his mother, and when he refused, he got hit, according to the neighbor.

The neighbor, who did not want her name used for fear of retaliation, said she believed Hill and his wife were using the boy to get welfare payments, passing him off as an older child. Ford was arrested on a warrant charging her with illegally obtaining public assistance.

"He was [quizzing the boy] not because he wanted him to be smart, but because he was going to

benefit moneywise," the neighbor said. "The baby was their meal ticket for getting their drugs."

The neighbor said she called Child Protective Services Monday, and told them the child was in "imminent danger," but they never came out, she said. An official told her that social workers could not come after 5 p.m., and since the father took the child away all day, they could do nothing, the neighbor said.

"Another neighbor had called six times, his wife called three, and even their roofer called," she said.

Natural mom was called

The neighbor also called Hill's mother in St. Louis, Mo. and was able to contact Cha Cha's mother, Tyrinza Brown, and maternal grandmother, Patricia Blair, in Southern California.

Blair, 41, of Chino, said neither Brown nor Hill had official custody of Cha Cha, because they had never gone to court to get it. But Brown had a notarized document saying she had given her mother custody, and when she called Oakland police Thursday, she was told that was enough to get the boy back.

Brown and Blair also called Child Protective Services Thursday and told them they planned to regain custody of the boy but wanted the situation checked immediately. They never heard back - until they got the call from Oakland police at 4 a.m. Saturday that Cha Cha was dead.

"We called CPS Thursday and they guaranteed they were going to be there," Blair said. "We actually were on our way out Friday night, and we couldn't get the rental car. We were going to get up there Saturday morning, but then we got that call."

Brown, who also has twins, had cared for Cha Cha from birth, but had let Hill take him to Oakland to spend time with his ailing great-grandmother. At first, Brown had regular contact with the boy but then Hill cut it off. Brown came to Oakland last May to try to take him back but Hill called police, and since she didn't have paperwork showing legal custody, she could not take him, Blair said.

"I want the grandmother to be prosecuted. I want the wife to be prosecuted. Because they knew what he was doing to that baby. And they didn't help him," Blair said. "I want some justice done with the system, because I don't want them to fail another child."

House stands out

There was no answer Monday at Catchings' Modesto Avenue home, which stands out in the well-kept neighborhood because of its peeling paint. A small shrine with a printout of a photo of Cha Cha, a stuffed Snoopy, candles and an empty bottle of cognac adorned the steps.

Chet Hewitt, director of the county Social Services Agency which oversees Child Protective Services -- said his department was aware of Chazarus Hill's case before his death, but would not

answer detailed questions about it.

"This is not a case that was unknown to us," said Hewitt, noting the department had prior contact with the family.

He offered sympathy for the boy's death and said the department is investigating whether the child's case may have slipped through the cracks.

Results of the investigation may be available in the next few days, Hewitt said.

"This will be an honest, complete investigation," he said. "Our goal is to get to the bottom of this."

Shannan Wilber of Legal Services for Children in San Francisco, which provides legal and social services to children, said while it's unacceptable for a child to die, it can be difficult for social workers to figure out whether a child is in immediate danger.

And she said such agencies as Child Protective Services are so underfunded it's tough for employees to properly do their jobs.

"When people get really outraged about these things, they should be outraged more than just about what one worker did in one case," Wilber said. "They should be outraged we have traditionally underfunded child welfare, to the point where it can't possibly do the job it's supposed to do."

Child Protective Services spokeswoman Sylvia Myles said staff in the emergency response unit, which investigates abuse calls, typically have 10 to 15 cases at a time.

"It depends on the severity of the case. Often times, it's not a case that can be investigated and closed. It requires some follow-ups," Myles said.

### Determining the risk

Abuse calls are taken by trained workers, who must then determine the level of risk a child faces, Myles said. Depending on the perceived risk level, they can send an investigator immediately, in 10 days, or 30 days.

Investigators then look for signs of neglect, from trash on the floor to obvious signs of physical abuse, then determine what to do next.

Hewitt said the department doesn't remove children simply because their parent has a criminal record. Hill has a felony drug conviction in Alameda County for marijuana possession and had faced two other misdemeanor charges here.

But even neighbors who had little contact with the Hills said the signs of neglect were so clear, they weren't surprised to hear the news. Several neighbors said they don't walk by the house

anymore because Hill and his friends were so intimidating. Catchings always defended her grandson, whom she raised and who dropped out of high school and never went back, according to neighbors.

Things got so bad that in May, 12 neighbors banded together and filed a lawsuit under state nuisance laws in small claims court, winning a \$60,000 judgment against the property.,

Attorney Grace Newfield of Neighborhood Solutions, Inc., who represented the neighbors, said they tried to get Catchings to understand what a problem her grandson had become.

"She always defended him. He could do no wrong, and she was basically an enabler for his criminal activity," Newfield said.

In their lawsuit, the neighbors cited drug activity, gambling, public drinking, profanity, loud music from the house and cars out front. At one point Hill broke into the home of a neighbor who had complained to threaten him, she said, and some neighbors got guns to protect themselves.

Next-door neighbors Cathi Bartice and Christina Baldwin, whose bedroom overlooks Catchings' driveway, took a slightly different view. While Hill's behavior was problematic, they said they never saw signs of physical abuse.

"We like to take care of things by talking to them directly," said Bartice, noting that the judgment could force a sale of the house. "It's an 80-year-old woman who lives there, and we don't want to drive her out of her home."

### **The Oakland Tribune (Oakland, CA)**

**October 9, 2003 Thursday**

**HEADLINE:** Agency deflects critics in tot death;  
Social services official claims much has been 'misreported' in slaying

**BYLINE:** By Michele R. Marcucci, STAFF WRITER

**BODY:**

The director of the county agency charged with protecting children's welfare took aim at the media and others in a press statement Wednesday over allegations that the agency failed to respond to calls that 3-year-old Chazarus Hill Jr. was being abused.

The boy died Sept. 20, allegedly beaten to death by his father, Chazarus Hill Sr. of Oakland.

The Alameda County Social Services Agency also has hired outside investigators to look into Chazarus's case and the department's handling of it. Agency spokeswoman Sylvia Myles said the investigation is necessary in part "because so much has been misreported."

"It is unfortunate that when a tragedy of this magnitude occurs, the facts surrounding the case often get misrepresented and grossly distorted," Agency Director Chet P. Hewitt said in the release. "These misrepresentations and distortions ultimately lead to further polarization between the communities that we serve and the very complex and difficult job of child protection that this agency and its department oversees."

Still, Hewitt acknowledged in the release that the system is not perfect. Child welfare workers are called upon to make difficult decisions every day, he said.

Much of the internal investigation is complete, the release said, but it offered no details on the findings, which were expected to be made public today. More specific answers to questions about the case could be released over the next few months, Myles said, although many details could remain secret due to confidentiality requirements.

Investigators will look at the agency's policies and procedures, Myles said. "Anytime you have a child death, it always makes you question your internal processes," she said.

Specifically, Hewitt said statements that the Department of Children and Family Services, the part of the agency that handles abuse calls, doesn't respond to calls after 5 p.m. are untrue. He also said the agency can't confirm reports that dozens of calls reporting abuse and neglect went unanswered or that they were even placed with the department, rather than another agency.

A neighbor who said she called the county's emergency child abuse hotline in the week before Chazarus died said they were told by an intake worker that investigators do not work after 5 p.m., an allegation the release did not specifically deny. But Hewitt said the agency does have workers available to respond to calls after regular working hours and that intake workers are aware of that.

Some of Hill's neighbors claimed that social workers did not respond in person to the calls. But Myles said that social workers had made several visits to the Hill home, but were unable to substantiate abuse claims.

The external investigation is being conducted by DDR Associates International. Further information about the company was not immediately available.

### **The Oakland Tribune (Oakland, CA)**

**November 2, 2003 Sunday**

**HEADLINE:** Agency guarding youths improves;  
In spite of criticism in beating death of

**BYLINE:** By Michele R. Marcucci, STAFF WRITER

**BODY:**

The county department that has come under fire for its alleged failure to protect 3-year-old

beating death victim Chazarus Hill has made a miraculous turnaround in recent years, leading child advocates to speculate that its alleged mishandling of the case is more likely the result of isolated actions than a systemic problem.

The Department of Children and Family Services had routinely failed state audits, was the subject of grand jury reports that questioned the department's ability to protect children and saw the deaths of several children with which it was involved throughout the 1990s, according to documents and interviews.

But in the last few years the department has made great strides, largely due to the leadership of Chet Hewitt, who did a short stint as head of Children and Family Services before becoming head of the county's Social Services Agency, which oversees the department, in 2001, advocates said.

"I think there's been a tremendous change in that agency, probably in a shorter time than I've ever seen," said Barry Feinberg, chief program officer of Lincoln Child Center, a Hayward foster family agency. "I've never seen an agency turn around as much."

But the department, like others across the country, has only been able to go as far as its budget will take it, child advocates said. A state workload study showed that California's child welfare departments have only half the workers they need to meet their legal obligation to protect children.

And some people who have reported child abuse said that while their experiences with the department have been positive, they do sometimes face delays in getting help from child protective services.

Child welfare workers are accused of failing to respond to several abuse calls in the weeks and months before Chazarus died, allegedly beaten to death by his father, Chazarus Hill Sr. of Oakland. Social Services Agency spokeswoman Sylvia Myles said the department investigated Chazarus' case and was unable to substantiate the abuse claims.

The Social Services Agency is looking into child welfare workers' actions in Chazarus' case and has hired an outside agency, DR Associates International of Davis, to conduct an investigation. Dave Rubin of DR Associates would not provide further information about the firm, referring calls to County Counsel Richard Winnie.

Myles said she does not know when the agency might have findings available, or what, if anything, might be released. Child abuse records are confidential under California law.

#### Long-troubled agency

While many experts view the child welfare system nationwide as broken -- not a single state that has undergone new federal reviews has passed -- Alameda County's troubles may have exceeded others.

The department failed state audits, which gauged tasks including the agency's case planning, investigations and contact with children, for 15 years, according to a lawsuit filed over the problems.

It was also the subject of county grand jury reports that cited the department for a laundry list of problems, including its inability to investigate any but the most egregious child abuse reports and its lack of emergency shelters for abused children.

In 1999, the Child Welfare League of America issued a report following complaints about Alameda County's child welfare system. The group found that the department had too many cases and not enough workers, clear policies or coordination between county agencies.

Workers closed cases even when children were at risk, unless the abuse or neglect they experienced was serious enough to warrant court intervention, the report said. And services after business hours were negligible: Department staff told researchers that staff rarely initiated emergency responses after hours "due largely to fiscal constraints."

Acting intake director Glenn Wallace said the department has improved its after-hours response by putting staff in place, rather than on call. But a neighbor who said she called child welfare workers days before Chazarus Hill Jr. died said she was told workers didn't come out to investigate complaints after 5 p.m.

Between 1996 and 2000, 63 of the 351 children who died in the county had some involvement with child protective services, 26 of them with a prior abuse or neglect referral. A dozen children who died of abuse or neglect during that time had some involvement with child protective services, according to a study by the county's Child Death Review Team. Newer data was not available.

In February 2001, the state Department of Social Services handed county officials a notice of noncompliance, saying the state could take over if the problems with the county's child welfare system weren't fixed. And the agency was sued for its alleged failure to help abused kids.

Social Services Agency Director Chet Hewitt had just started as head of the Department of Children and Family Services. He implemented a plan to correct the problems in six weeks, he said, fixing problems far sooner than the three years he said state officials expected him to take.

State audit passed

In late 2001, the department passed a state audit. The department passed a second audit in 2002, coming into full compliance with all nine audit items -- better than some other counties, Hewitt claims.

Hewitt, a longtime community advocate and foster parent who was named head of the Social Services Agency that November -- a year after joining the agency -- was credited with turning things around, hiring needed child welfare workers, improving the morale at Children and Family Services and improving case management there.

Hewitt also put a quality assurance mechanism into place, has put the department's policies and procedures online for all of its workers to access and is credited with increasing the coordination between Children and Family Services and other agencies that work with abused children.

During his tenure, the agency built an assessment center for abused children, so social workers would have a place to take children while they looked for a foster home or other placement, instead of having to drive kids around in their cars.

And he focused on emergency response by putting child welfare workers to work after hours -- the agency had previously only had staff on call at night -- and by starting programs to offer help to some of the thousands of families that don't qualify for a full-blown child welfare intervention but could if nothing is done.

One of those programs, called Another Road to Safety, could be a model for state officials who are in the midst of a massive redesign of the state's child welfare system, said Jill Duerr Berrick, a professor at the University at California, Berkeley's School of Social Welfare.

"Chet's putting into place changes that take the agency beyond basic, minimum requirements," said Bill Bettencourt, California site director for the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Family to Family program and San Francisco's former child welfare director. "Have they gotten there yet? You can't do it overnight. But they've made significant progress."

Still issues to overcome

While quick to outline the department's successes, Hewitt conceded that it still has problems. He said the department faces barriers to doing its job.

"I see a changing set of needs, a greater complexity in family dynamics. I see communities that have been, historically, major contributors to this system under increasing stress. I know these [factors] contribute to the rates of child abuse. And I see steep reductions in support for us to do the job," Hewitt said.

Hewitt said he doesn't want to blame budget problems for any role the department may have played in Chazarus' death. But he said that while the department experienced only marginal budget cuts in the last budget round, it is still underfunded.

Child welfare advocates interviewed for this story agreed.

"The state budget is routinely balanced on the backs of children. Services for children are routinely not being made available," said Dr. James Crawford, medical director of the Center for Child Protection at Children's Hospital in Oakland. "Funding and a well-running child protective services are critical to ensure the safety of kids. But there's no money, staff or services. It's an enormous problem."

**The Oakland Tribune (Oakland, CA)**

**February 24, 2004 Tuesday**



**HEADLINE:** Agency clears itself in boy's beating death; Social Services seals results of internal probe; outside report may be released later, official says

**BYLINE:** By Michele R. Marcucci, STAFF WRITER

**BODY:**

Just days after the apparent beating death of 3-year-old Chazarus Hill Jr., Social Services Agency Director Chet Hewitt promised an "honest, complete investigation."

Five months later, county officials have released little information about the boy's alleged beating death at the hands of his father, Chazarus Hill Sr., who has pleaded innocent to the charge. And it is unclear how much information will ultimately be made public.

Social Services spokeswoman Sylvia Myles said her agency never intended to release a report on the findings of its internal investigation, but she said the investigation indicated no wrongdoing on the agency's part. She said the results, which included a review of Chazarus' death, would not be released due to confidentiality constraints.

Myles said no policy or procedure changes have been made as a result of the agency's response to Chazarus' case.

"We have no indication that this call or this case was handled any differently from any of the other calls and cases we get when we respond to abuse and neglect," she said. "Everything that we have found, in terms of our processes -- we did everything that we were supposed to do."

The draft of an external report by DR Associates International, an investigative firm, has been completed but can't be released until Social Services officials check it for confidential information, and until it is seen by the Board of Supervisors, County Counsel Richard Winnie said.

The report is to be viewed by the board on next Tuesday and a version of it may be released after that, Winnie said.

"I have every reason to believe we will issue it after the meeting," he said.

Winnie said the external investigation, which deals with a wider range of issues than the internal investigation, was slow because of the confidential nature of much of the information needed to complete it and because of the criminal investigation and case over Chazarus's death. He said it is rare for a public agency to issue such a report.

"We've been trying to strike a balance between being complete, so we can perform a public responsibility, but at the same time abide by our requirement to keep records confidential. It is a balance," Winnie said.

Neighbors and family members said they had made several calls to Child Protective Services prior to the boy's death that they claim went unanswered. Social service officials admitted they

were aware of the Chazarus's case and had made trips to his father's Oakland home, where the boy had been staying, but were unable to substantiate abuse claims.

One neighbor said a child protective services screener who answered her call told her that workers didn't come out after 5 p.m., when she said the family was not home until late at night.

Myles, who said she couldn't divulge how many calls the agency got about Chazarus's suspected abuse or when they were made, said her agency has "no indication" a screener told the neighbor that nighttime services aren't available. "How someone interpreted their conversation with one of our screeners -- that we have no control over," she said.

The neighbor did not wish to comment.

Chazarus's mother, Tyrinza Brown, and maternal grandmother, Patricia Blair, filed an administrative claim charging the county and the city of Oakland with wrongful death. The claim was rejected, according to their attorney, Nicholas Heiman. Heiman said earlier he planned to sue. He could not be reached for comment Monday.

Board of Supervisors President Gail Steele said she has asked for the external report for months but hasn't been able to get a copy.

"It's outrageous. If you knew how many times I have asked for that report, you wouldn't believe it," Steele said.

Sixteen states have laws authorizing the release of abuse and neglect records if a child dies or almost dies, according to information from the National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information released in May 2002. California is not among them.

Social Service departments do sometimes misuse confidentiality laws to protect themselves, said Shannan Wilber, executive director of Legal Services for Children in San Francisco. But she said it can be difficult to parse what should be made public from what shouldn't.

"Departments should be held accountable for their decisions," said Wilber, who said she couldn't speak specifically to Chazarus's case. "You can make the wrong decision. But sometimes, it's because you just don't have enough information."

**The Oakland Tribune (Oakland, CA)**

**April 7, 2004 Wednesday**

HEADLINE: Superior vetoed quick care for boy approach reviewed Reports of abuse calls under probe; Chazarus Hill Jr. died

BYLINE: By Michele R. Marcucci, STAFF WRITER

BODY:

An Alameda County child welfare worker who recommended child protective workers immediately investigate the report-ed abuse of 3-year-old Chazarus Hill Jr. was overruled by a supervisor who determined a slower response was appropriate, according to an investigation report into the child's death released by county officials Tuesday.

But the report does not blame workers for the boy's apparent beating death five days after the call was received, saying they followed procedures correctly.

An abuse call screener who took a Sept. 15 call about potential abuse flagged his case for an immediate response, the report says. But the supervisor who reviewed the case reversed the decision, instead giving child welfare workers 10 days to investigate.

The boy died Sept. 20 of brain swelling. His father, Chazarus Hill Sr. of Oakland, is accused of beating him to death. Investigators said he was bruised head to toe. Hill's wife, Kymberly Dashon Ford Hill, is also charged with child abuse.

The director of Alameda County's child welfare department said such reversals are common because the decisions workers have to make are so difficult and complex.

"I can't think of anything that we could have done differently that could have prevented this," said Carol Collins. "It's just one of those tragic situations."

Collins said the boy's death has devastated her department.

"This has just been really difficult. And it's just such a horrible, sad ending to this story with this child," she said.

The department has since formalized a system in which the emergency response unit manager reviews all cases when the screener and supervisor recommend different response times, the report says.

Child welfare workers took four reports of suspected abuse of Chazarus between April 11, 2002 and Sept. 18, 2003, the report says. Workers investigated the first two calls and did not find evidence of abuse or neglect, the report says. A third call, placed by a neighbor on Sept. 15, was still an open referral when the boy died, it says.

A fourth call, placed anonymously on Sept. 18, was initially identified by the caller as a child custody issue, the report says, and referred to Family Court. Child abuse was an issue the caller had not identified firsthand, the report says.

The report also mentions two other, earlier calls to child welfare agencies in 2001 in Southern California which did not implicate Hill Sr.

According to the report, a child abuse screener talked at length with an anonymous caller on Sept. 15 and, based on the call, recommended an immediate response. The child welfare

supervisor reviewed the referral for recommendation and family history and then changed the response time, the report says.

The supervisor also used a structured decision-making tool to help direct the type and urgency of response to abuse reports as required, the report says.

Collins said that a supervisor would review call-takers' information plus additional factors, such as whether the caller personally observed the abuse.

"My sense is, that was not the situation in this case," Collins said.

An immediate response can be initiated within 24 hours, but the department typically has someone out "within a couple of hours," Collins said. She said workers also usually respond to less immediate calls in "much less than 10 days." Collins said she could not say why Chazarus's case was not investigated earlier.

The investigation report also contradicts earlier media reports that indicated the child welfare department has received numerous calls about suspected abuse but failed to act. Investigators only documented the four calls.

One neighbor, who was interviewed by investigators but did not wish to be identified, said they called child welfare workers once but that they did not directly witness Chazarus being abused.

"The police were there a lot, all these guys [were] kind of hanging out. The neighborhood knew there was drug activity going on there, that kind of thing. As a parent, I didn't think that was the best," the neighbor told a reporter Tuesday.

It also challenges one caller's statement that a call screener told her the department did not respond to calls after 5 p.m. "The reporting party may have misinterpreted the information that was provided to her," it says, adding that the department does have staff available to respond to incidents 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

An internal investigation cited in the report found that agency workers responded appropriately to the situation. Both the call screener and the supervisor are still on the job, Collins said.

The investigation was conducted by DR Associates International at the behest of the County Counsel's office, which undertook the investigation in anticipation of a lawsuit.

Chazarus's mother, Tyrinza Brown, and maternal grandmother, Patricia Blair, filed suit March 15, charging the county and Oakland city agencies failed to protect Chazarus. The pair's attorney, Nicholas Heiman, did not return calls seeking comment. Neither Blair nor Brown could be reached for comment.

The report's authors said that some relevant facts could not be included because they are contained in confidential files of the Social Services Agency, which oversees Children & Family

Services, or the court. Child abuse records are confidential in California, even if a child dies.

Presiding Juvenile Court Judge Carl Morris approved the release of the report last week, County Counsel Richard Winnie said.