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HEADLINE: A system breakdown;
An 8-year-old boy has found little comfort in county care since his parents abandoned him.

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BODY:

In retrospect, J.B.'s last foster home was probably his best.

There, Riverside County social workers say, the 8-year-old boy was merely beaten with a wooden spoon until his backside was black and blue.

Otherwise, the foster mom looked after the troubled boy. She gave him better care than his biological parents, who abandoned the boy and his five siblings in San Diego.

Better than his grandmother, who failed to take the child for regular visits to the doctor or dentist.

Better than the foster mom who beat the children with belts or hangers and sent them to school in tattered clothes.

And better care than the Riverside County group home where social workers believe the boy was sexually assaulted by a teen-ager - one week after being taken from his last foster mom.

If ever Child Protective Services failed a child, it has failed J.B.

Dumped into the system when he was just 19 months old, J.B. has been caught in a seemingly relentless cycle of abuse that has produced what one counselor called a "painful rage. "

J.B. has spent most of his life in the Riverside County child

protection system, an agency that has been working to repair its image and eliminate what an outside investigation in 1996 called an "illusion of safety. "

At key junctures, records show, social workers failed to detect abuse of J.B., took seven weeks to investigate an emergency report that J.B. had been threatened by his foster mom with a knife, and neglected to inform state regulators when the child was removed from that foster mother.

The sexual assault at the group home has led to a lawsuit against the Department of Public Social Services and calls for reform of Riverside County foster care programs.

Jim Meehan, a 30-year veteran in Riverside County child protection and former supervisor on the case, conceded that the agency had failed the boy.

"I guess that's what you'd call a system failure," Meehan said.

"Why becomes complicated. "

Abandoned as a toddler

How the system failed J.B. is laid out in a dog-eared, three-volume, 6-inch set of files stored at Riverside County Juvenile Court. The reports from social workers, doctors and psychiatrists document the gradual decline of a young boy living a contented life with his grandmother into a heavily medicated and depressed adolescent with rapid mood swings and a sometimes violent temper.

J.B. was 19-months-old when he - along with four brothers and a sister - was abandoned by his parents in San Diego. Why his parents left that day in 1990 was never noted in the case file. In recent years, J.B. has told counselors that he and his siblings were beaten by their parents and sexually molested.

Unable to place all six children together, social workers put half - including J.B. - with their grandmother. The others were placed in foster care and lost touch with their siblings.

J.B., his sister, and a brother placed with their grandmother all had problems associated with abandonment: Head-banging. Bed-wetting.

"Profanity and acting out. "

Just before the children moved to Riverside County with their grandmother in 1993, a social worker issued a warning for those that would follow: "These minors remain at very high risk and should be monitored closely. "

Three weeks before Christmas 1993, the grandmother gave up. She asked social workers to take the kids out of her home because of an illness in the family.

It wasn't until the children were removed that social workers determined that none had been taken for regular visits to the doctor or dentist. They didn't even know if the children under state care had been properly immunized.

Six homes in three years

By all accounts, J.B. and his siblings were never easy to handle.

Of the three, J.B. was the most sensitive. The 34-pound 4-year-old wet his bed and would break down in tears at almost any remark.

Still, reports suggested, that all three were "well-adjusted" when they moved into their new foster home.

If anything was wrong in the home, social workers knew nothing, even though they regularly checked on the children. The kids even expressed a desire in early 1995 to be adopted by their new parents.

Three weeks later, all three kids were removed after social workers learned that the children were beaten with belts, shoes and hangers in the foster home. Soon thereafter, the state revoked the woman's foster home license.

After that, the children went rapidly downhill.

Once again, the siblings were split up. J.B., separated from the only constants in his life, exploded. A new foster mom described J.B. as "out of control." He was threatening to kill himself and her.

Two days after being placed in his sixth foster home in three years, J.B. was institutionalized for more than a week. The 5-year-old was diagnosed with Intermittent Explosive Disorder, placed on heavy medication and returned to his foster mom.

Investigation delayed

For more than a year, the woman wrestled with J.B. and his demons. During that time, J.B. attacked a teacher, was suspended from school and tried to jump in front of a car.

Despite the trials, the woman asked to become J.B.'s legal guardian. In July 1996, when J.B. was 7, Child Protective Services and the Juvenile Court agreed to make the home permanent.

Nine months later, the emergency hotline rang. The caller wanted to report that J.B. had been beaten by his new mom until he was black and blue.

The foster mother, according to reports, admitted to hitting J.B. with a 12-inch-long wooden spoon and defended spanking as a biblical method of discipline.

When the mother refused to take part in voluntary counseling, the social worker removed J.B. and placed him in a group home for troubled youth.

The emergency call that led to J.B.'s removal was not the first about the mother. It was the third in five months.

The first caller told the hotline that J.B. had revealed that his foster mom had threatened him with a knife. The report was marked ASAP and was supposed to be investigated within 10 days.

Instead, it took seven weeks.

When a social worker finally did look into the report, she learned that the boy had been talking about his previous foster mother and the case was closed.

Social workers also found no evidence to back up claims in the second call that J.B. had been locked out of the home, or that he was forced to stay in his room for days on end.

Nevertheless, Child Protective Services was so concerned about the two reports that they decided to stop placing more foster kids with the mother until they could resolve their worries.

To this day, the woman remains barred from taking foster children. However, because the county failed to notify the state licensing board about J.B.'s removal, no action was taken to revoke her license until the omission was noted by a reporter - eight months later.

New home, fresh violence

After being taken from his latest mother, J.B. tried to adjust to life in Cicero's Group Home in Moreno Valley.

One week after being placed in the county-approved facility, J.B. told supervisors that he had been sexually assaulted by a teen-ager in the home.

Betty Watkins, executive director of Cicero's Group Home, said the older boy led J.B. away when counselors weren't looking and forced him into a sexual act.

The teen-ager was taken to juvenile hall. A staff member on duty at the time was fired almost immediately. Watkins blamed the problem on social workers who failed to tell the facility about the older boy's history as a sexual predator.

"He was there maybe three weeks and I had no idea that he was a perpetrator," Watkins said. "Had I known the full details of the kid, this never would have happened. "

Who was to blame mattered little to J.B. The boy struggled once again to deal with abuse. School officials told social workers that J.B. would sit in class gently rocking his head, singing "Jesus Loves Me. "

Gayla Hannah, the social worker handling J.B.'s case at the time, declined to discuss her actions. Records show that Hannah interviewed J.B. one day before he reported the sexual assault. She did not visit the troubled boy again until the court ordered his removal two months later, according to J.B.'s case file.

Jan Michaels, the attorney who represents J.B. in Juvenile Court, said Hannah failed to make sure her client was safe in the group home by waiting two months to move him to a better facility.

"This little boy has been victimized again and again and again," Michaels said. "That's a tragedy in my view. "

Mixing ages questioned

The alleged sexual abuse has also led to a lawsuit against Riverside County, Child Protective Services and a number of social workers involved in the case, including Hannah.

James M. Baynes, the attorney representing J.B. in the civil suit, said Riverside County should not be placing young children in group homes with older kids.

"The real question here is: Should young kids be placed in age-specific placements?" Baynes said. "An 8-year-old should not be placed with 12-year-olds. "

Jerry Rose, the administrator who oversees county Child Protective Services, said the county handles such placements on a case-by-case basis and is not willing to change its policies to separate younger and older boys.

At his new facility, J.B. has shown periods of improvement and decline. J.B. says he isn't sure whether or not he wants to be reunited with his legal guardian, who comes for regular visits. The woman has been attending parenting classes in hopes of regaining custody of J.B., but the process is slow.

In the meantime, J.B. spends his time playing video games, skateboarding, attending school at the group home. His face brightens when someone mentions his brother and sister, the only people in his life yet to let him down. Relatives he sees infrequently.

"I miss them," he says. "When can I see them? "

NOTES:

See sidebar "Mother battles addiction to keep child"

GRAPHIC: PHOTO [Caption] Carlos Puma; The Press-Enterprise; J.B. with his skateboard at a group home in Riverside County.

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