

CHILD PROTECTION GAP PROVES DEADLY - NO NATIONWIDE DATABASE TRACKS ABUSIVE PARENTS

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When two Child Protective Services investigators knocked on the door of the run-down Florida Street home on Detroit's west side, they had no idea the mother inside had a history of child neglect in Illinois.

Tammy Burse, 34, refused for 20 minutes on May 24 to answer their knocks, according to court records. The investigators left and tagged the report to be checked again by another team from the Michigan Family Independence Agency that weekend.

But moments later, **Burse** confronted her oldest daughter, 14-year-old Irika Peterson, choked her and then stabbed her repeatedly with scissors, according to Detroit police. **Burse** then told her 12-year-old daughter to get a knife, police said, and she continued cutting Irika. Police said **Burse** then stuffed the corpse into a closet -- all while her three other daughters cowered in fear.

Irika's killing underscores a gap in the national child protection system, which is really not one system but 50 different systems. There is no nationwide database to track child abusers who move from one state to another.

"In our country, we are transient. And it's not uncommon, if people have serious problems in one state, that they move to another state," said Marianne Takas, a policy specialist for the National Association of Child Advocates based in Washington, D.C.

"Just as in the areas of criminal justice and child support, more and more we are recognizing as a nation that it is necessary for the protection of the citizenry to have interstate agreements" to list child abusers in a single database.

Michigan Children's Ombudsman Robert Geake says a national database of child abusers would be a useful tool, but establishing such a system would be difficult and expensive.

"There are probably other things we can do to protect children if we had that kind of money, probably providing services at the local level to prevent child abuse and neglect," Geake said Tuesday.

Nearly all 50 states have a confidential list of people who have mistreated children, officials said. The lists are used to check on people who are applying for jobs involving care for children such as teaching and working at day-care centers.

In Michigan, it is called the central registry and is maintained by the Family Independence Agency (FIA).

Richard Wexler, executive director of the National Coalition for Child Protection Reform based in Alexandria, Va., said there is a good reason no such national database of child abusers exists.

"Given the lousy way the states have done the job of compiling their state databases, what you would have is a national depository of rumor and innuendo that would destroy children's lives from coast to coast," Wexler said.

"Many of these people in state databases are actually children accused of abusing other children."

Standards for being listed on registries of abusers vary from state to state, Wexler and others said. In Michigan, the standard is by a "preponderance of evidence" or at least half of the evidence pointing to abuse or neglect. There are 176,445 names on Michigan's central registry.

Many states have no procedures for people to challenge their names being on a list.

Burse , who has been charged with first-degree murder, is undergoing a psychological examination to determine whether she is competent to face further court proceedings.

She could not be reached for comment but her attorney, William Winters, said Tuesday she faces a competency hearing on Aug. 8 in 36th District Court in Detroit.

"She's allegedly given a statement to homicide that admits her involvement, but raises some other questions such as self-defense."

The FIA is petitioning juvenile court to terminate **Burse** 's parental rights to her three daughters. They remain in foster care.

Winters said he was unaware of **Burse** 's history in Illinois.

John Goad, deputy director of child protection at the Illinois Department of Child and Family Services, said investigators in Kankakee, a city 56 miles south of Chicago, had been in contact with **Burse** since the mid-1990s on allegations stemming from **Burse** 's alleged substance abuse and homelessness. **Burse** also was a victim of domestic violence, Goad said.

Burse 's four daughters were placed in foster care there in July 1997, Goad said. When **Burse** completed treatment and parenting classes, the juvenile court returned the children to her care while the department monitored their care, Goad said.

He said that after the children returned home, the family was seen by a clinical psychologist, some family members individually and in family therapy. "And the therapist felt that the family had reached the point where the mother would be able to provide a stable and adequate environment for the children."

Goad said that based on the therapist's reports and the mother's stated desire to move to Detroit, the juvenile court and department closed their cases in October 1999.

Burse has a maternal aunt and uncle in Detroit. Her four daughters, ages 9-14, were attending Detroit Public Schools.

Irika was a freshman at Chadsey High School, where she apparently told a teacher that conditions at home were deplorable, according to court records. The house was littered with garbage and debris and roach-infested, the records said. There were no beds for the children and minimal food, according to an FIA petition filed in Wayne County Juvenile Court this week.

"Homicide (detectives) reported that Irika slept in the closet because it was the cleanest and safest room in the home," the FIA petition said.

Burse 's husband, Ernest **Burse** , came home about 10 p.m. that evening to a house that was dark and splattered with blood.

Ernest **Burse** told police that when he finally found his wife in their van with the other kids, she told him that she had killed Irika because she was angry that Child Protective Services investigators had come to the house.

Tammy Burse allegedly asked her husband not to call the police and to help her dump the body in a field. He refused and called police.

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TO BE HEARD

The Michigan House Family and Children Services Committee is nearly finished writing a package of legislation that sponsors hope will close gaps in the state's child protection system. The legislation would create an Office of Child Advocate, which would have greater powers to monitor the state's care of abused or neglected children and intervene if necessary.

* To be heard, call the committee's chairman, state Rep. Doug Hart, R-Rockford, at 517-373-0218.

* Contact Family Independence Agency Director Doug Howard at 517-373-2000 anytime.

* Contact Children's Ombudsman Robert Geake at 517-373-3077 anytime.

* To report suspected child abuse or neglect, call 800-942-4357 anytime.

Memo: CHILDREN FIRST. SIDEBAR ATTACHED

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Page: 1A

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