

How to fight child abuse

How can so many die from child abuse in Hawaii, a society that values children so highly?

A similar question was asked in British Columbia in 1994 when Matthew Vaudreuil was suffocated by his mother. During his short life, Matthew was seen at least 48 times by health professionals.

Allegations of physical abuse were investigated. Matthew and his mother saw at least 16 child-protection workers, many mental health workers, psychologists and others. There were hospital ER visits, home support services and financial aid for the family.

Despite all these services, Matthew was physically and sexually abused and finally killed. How could that happen?

The question moved one man in British Columbia — Judge Thomas Gove — to investigate, then to attack, the structural barriers he discovered and to initiate a true reform designed to prevent future deaths.

Holding 11 weeks of hearings and calling 130 witnesses, Thomas Gove exposed the systemic problems in British Columbia's child-protection system:

■ Matthew was not an isolated case.

■ The system itself was handicapped. Politicians sent messages about supporting families while withholding funds.

■ Overwhelmed social work-

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ers, unqualified and inadequately trained workers charged with complex investigations, and agencies refusing to cooperate to support children's needs, clamped B.C.'s children in a deadly vice.

All of this was documented in the Gove Commission report, along with recommendations for reforming the system. Hawaii's Child Protective Services and children's mental health service systems have striking similarities to pre-Gove Commission B.C.

Gove's investigation and public disclosure resulted in a complete overhaul of the child-protection system of British Columbia.

On Sept. 23, 1996, the B.C. government implemented the Gove Commission plan ahead of schedule. B.C. dismantled the old, dysfunctional bureaucracy. It integrated child and family services and child protective services into a new Ministry for Children and Families responsible to provide child-centered services.

Consolidation was one of the key recommendations that came out of the investigation. It works for private industry, why not for government?

A single organization is more efficient economically, gives a single point of entry for all ser-

vices, and provides the opportunity to keep what has worked and shed what has not. A single organization with one mission, one vision and one goal — to provide for the health and safety of children — is free from the interdepartmental squabbles and lack of cooperation that hobbles disparate agencies.

Other recommendations for service delivery, quality assurance and participatory decision-making could be models for Hawaii. We should read Judge Gove's recommendations carefully (see <http://childservices.gov.bc.ca/recomm>).

We can expect administrators to say: "This won't work in Hawaii." At the same time, social workers, staggering under caseloads of 80 or more, will shout their support of a plan to bring sanity to children's services. In fact, it can work here, and we need to do something soon. We need a child-centered rather than an administration-centered delivery structure.

How many more keiki will die in Hawaii before someone has the courage to take a long, hard look at the system as a whole? Where is our own Judge Gove?

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