

not



# The Washington Post

## Va. Case Highlights Discord Over Releasing Abuse Data

Advertisement \* Your Ad Here

By Jonathan Mummolo  
Washington Post Staff Writer  
Tuesday, May 19, 2009

When a letter from Prince William County's Department of Social Services arrived in the mail recently, Wes Byers was hoping for answers.

He wanted to know why -- despite a report he made in December that a 13-year-old girl in his neighborhood appeared to have been abused -- officials failed to rescue her before she was slain the next month.

But the letter, five sentences long, didn't shed any light on Alexis "Lexie" Agyepong-Glover's case. It said Byers's report had been investigated and that "appropriate actions" were taken, but it did not elaborate.

"I can't tell you how upsetting it is to me," Byers said. "These folks are like, 'Well, it's just another day at work.' . . . We've got a life that has passed."

The slow trickle of information to emerge about Lexie's death, and how local agencies handled her case while she was alive, highlights the secrecy that often surrounds child abuse cases, child welfare advocates said. Because of confidentiality rules that vary across the states, records related to cases involving juveniles are sometimes withheld even after a criminal investigation is complete.

If information is eventually released, it is often heavily redacted, preventing proper scrutiny of public agencies charged with protecting children, child advocates said.

Some say a federal law requires the release of records in abuse-related child deaths or near-deaths and that it should be made even stronger before it is reauthorized during this session of the U.S. Congress. State and local officials in Virginia, however, say disclosure is optional in such cases. They argue that privacy rules are necessary even after a child is dead to protect victims and reporters of abuse.

"Fifty-one different jurisdictions interpret [federal law] 51 different ways," said Elisa Weichel, administrative director and staff attorney with the Children's Advocacy Institute at the University of San Diego School of Law. "When it reaches the point that a child incurs this kind of serious injury or death . . . the public's right to know about what's going on in these cases trumps the privacy rights of those involved."

It is unclear how much information officials will release to the public in Lexie's case. A criminal investigation into the actions of her adoptive mother, Alfreedia Gregg-Glover -- charged in her abuse and death -- is ongoing, and her trial is set for July.

"We don't want to scare away people from adopting children," said Prince William Social Services Director John P. Ledden Jr. "We also don't want to give the public the perception that we're hiding and covering up something."

Since Lexie was found dead in a Woodbridge area creek Jan. 9, several investigations have been launched.

County social services officials have completed probes into past abuse allegations, but the county attorney's office declined to release to The Washington Post nearly 400 pages of records pertaining to Lexie's case, citing the pending criminal trial. Assistant County Attorney Bobbi Jo Alexis said that it was too early to say whether any of the records would be made public after Gregg-Glover's trial.

Prince William police have been retracing their steps, re-interviewing Lexie's former bus drivers and acquaintances who made reports of abuse to see if any red flags were missed. Police Chief Charlie T. Deane said that he will be "as thorough as I can" in releasing the findings, but that he might have to withhold certain information so others aren't discouraged from reporting abuse.

The Virginia Department of Social Services is conducting a Quality Management Review of the county's social services practices, which could be completed this month but will not mention Lexie specifically. Findings of a separate probe by VDSS into Lexie's death, which began recently, would be made public upon request but with likely redactions, a VDSS spokeswoman said.

How much the public gets to know about cases such as Lexie's depends heavily on how states interpret a federal law known as the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act, child law experts said. CAPTA says states must "allow for" the release of "findings or information" in child fatalities or near-fatalities caused by abuse or neglect.

Although the language is vague, advocates point to a federal policy manual published by the Administration for Children and Families -- a division of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, which implements CAPTA -- as the definitive interpretation. The manual says states do not have discretion in releasing information, unless disclosure would jeopardize a criminal investigation.

But several states, including Virginia, have added restrictions. According to its administrative code, Virginia social services officials "may" release information upon request, including summaries of past abuse reports, and how a social services agency responded. The state can withhold information for several reasons, including if the information is likely to endanger the "physical or emotional well-being" of anyone, or if a civil court case might be compromised, the code states.

Because of such restrictions, Virginia received a C- for transparency in a report last year co-published by the Children's Advocacy Institute in San Diego and First Star, a nonprofit child welfare advocacy group.

Gregg-Glover's case is being closely followed by several people who said they told authorities that they saw Gregg-Glover drive off with Lexie in the trunk of a car, saw bruises on Lexie and found her almost naked outside her house more than once. Byers made a report after finding Lexie outside his house Dec. 2, barely dressed in the freezing cold, famished and with a head wound.

"I want to know what they did," said Nancy Frederick, Lexie's former bus driver, referring to county officials who looked into the reports she made.

Simply waiting for the facts to come out in court is not a reliable strategy, said William L. Grimm, senior counsel with the National Center for Youth Law, who has successfully lobbied for more open policies in California.

"A lot of these cases never go to trial," Grimm said. "The abusers plead them out, or the trials are

delayed for so long that everybody sort of loses interest in it. . . . That's why it's so important to get the information out in the public domain."

Post a Comment

[View all comments](#) that have been posted about this article.

You must be logged in to leave a comment. [Login](#) | [Register](#)

**Submit**

Comments that include profanity or personal attacks or other inappropriate comments or material will be removed from the site. Additionally, entries that are unsigned or contain "signatures" by someone other than the actual author will be removed. Finally, we will take steps to block users who violate any of our posting standards, terms of use or privacy policies or any other policies governing this site. Please review the [full rules](#) governing commentaries and discussions. You are fully responsible for the content that you post.

© 2009 The Washington Post Company

Ads by Google

**Free Criminal Records**

Tons of Criminal Records Available Start Your Search Here Right Now!  
CyberDetectiveFree.com

**Jobs (Open Jobs)**

\$47/hr Part-Time Jobs Open. Requirements : Just a Computer.  
www.LosAngeles-Tribune.com/Jobs

**Free Arrest Records?**

Lookup Free Arrest Records On Anyone Right Now. Official Service  
ArrestRecords.GovArrestRecords.com