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Recent Deaths Highlight Child Abuse Problem

BALTIMORE (WJZ) — Five children killed, two mothers charged. Now, growing evidence of past abuse problems in both cases are causing some to question whether these children could have been saved.

Dennis Edwards has the latest on a pair of disturbing cases.

The similarities are impossible to ignore. Some health care professionals say until there are changes in the Social Services system, this will happen again.

The decomposing bodies of four children, ages 5 to 17, were found inside a northwest Washington, D.C. house. Their mother, Bonita Jacks, was charged with four counts of first-degree murder after telling police they were possessed by demons and died in their sleep.

Investigators later learned a social worker suspected the apparently mentally challenged mother of holding one daughter hostage from school, but those fears were never investigated.

Health care officials say there are similarities between that case and cases here in Baltimore. The problem, they say, is a breakdown in the Social Services system.

Dr. Peter Beilenson says the methadone overdose death of Bryanna Harris is a classic example.

Before Bryanna was born, two of her mother's daughters were taken away from her because of abuse allegations.

"Child Protective Services then closes the case with that family. Those parents almost inevitably get pregnant again down the road. No one is following that family," he said.

Vernice Harris is charged with murder after Bryanna's death, the same charges Jacks is facing in D.C., but Beilenson says the lack of Social Services followup that allows abusive parents to eventually kill is never corrected.

"The media goes nuts. The health officials, the public officials rain on DSS. DSS hunkers down, waits for the furor to subside, which happens after three or four weeks, then goes back about their business," he said.

He believes the solution is for DSS to keep closer tabs on abusive parents who have additional children to prevent them from repeating potentially fatal behavior.

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Bryanna Harris was killed with an overdose of methadone.

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