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Audit and Investigation into D.H.S. After Death of Aaron Benjamin Lead to Changes, Disciplinary Actions

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A closed casket of Aaron Benjamin, Jr. By. CRUSELDA ROBERTS FOR VI CONSORTIUM

ST. CROIX — After persistent calls from the community and lawmakers for an investigation into the Dept. of Human Services following [the death of 4-year-old Aaron Benjamin](#), D.H.S. Commissioner Kimberley Causey-Gomez launched an internal audit and probe. The department had been criticized for its handling of the case, including an apparent failure to give the father, Aaron Benjamin, Sr., custody of the child, even after numerous attempts and after the father registered a number of complaints with D.H.S., fearing for safety of his children.

Young Aaron was found dead in his mother's Lorraine Village apartment. According to a court affidavit, the deceased child, who was examined by Dr. Leslie Burton at the Juan F. Luis Hospital, was dead on arrival. He also had a black and blue left eye, bite marks and fresh and old abrasions.

The child's mother, Delicia Daniel, 29, and her boyfriend, Kyle Christopher, 22, were both charged with the murder of the boy, who was buried on his 5th birthday on November 2.

Mr. Christopher told police that on Oct. 10 at about 7:00 a.m., he slapped Aaron in the face for stealing his sister's Caprisun drink. The boy stumbled and fell, hitting his head against a chair. Thereafter, Aaron started to vomit, according to Mr. Christopher, who also told police that the boy continued vomiting and stumbling throughout the day.

The following day, Oct. 11, Aaron's condition hadn't improved. Mr. Christopher told police that at about noon that day, Aaron asked to use the bathroom but couldn't stand on his own, so he had to be assisted. The boy then stopped breathing, Mr. Christopher told detectives, according to the affidavit.

Initially, Ms. Daniel told detectives that Mr. Christopher did not strike the children and that she was the only one to do so. Ms. Daniel later changed her statement to concede that Mr. Christopher did hit the children (Aaron has a sister who lived with the mother), although she said it wasn't in her presence.

Today, D.H.S. Commissioner Causey-Gomez said the audit and investigation revealed that there were internal staffing changes needed at the department, along with "intensive training." The department did not release a document with the results of the audit and the investigation. Instead, D.H.S. issued a press release with comments from Ms. Causey-Gomez.

"The Department of Human Services' recent audit of the U.S. Virgin Islands' child welfare system revealed a need to implement immediate staffing changes and a need to expedite our recruitment efforts to enhance staffing levels across units; a need for additional forensic and social services training; a need for a more stringent level of internal accountability and supervision; a mandate for implementation of current national evidence-based and outcome-oriented best practices; and a need to increase additional public awareness of resources, education and training on tools available through DHS and other community partners for child and family wellness," she said.

Adding, "To this end, DHS has begun to restructure its child protective services system including personnel changes coupled with efforts to provide additional training and supervision and accountability."

The commissioner said "DHS staff have begun participating in local and national trainings with federal and non-federal national partners, to include peer-to-peer on-site knowledge exchange. Technical assistance is underway to complete a review of the Virgin Islands statutory Children's Policy, in an effort to identify areas in need of federal compliance as a vehicle to inform needed upgrades to the local practice model for child welfare.

"The Department of Human Services realizes that while child protective services systems work every day to prevent instances of child fatality, efforts are never 100 percent guaranteed," Commissioner Causey-Gomez said. "Therefore, the territory will be joining the rest of the nation by establishing a Child Fatality Review Panel of multiagency experts to facilitate expeditious, transparent and ongoing assessment and investigation of any such future incidences to help aid in prevention. In the coming months, we will also be assertively engaging with key community

partners to help educate and empower our community to play a role in protecting children.”

Ms. Causey-Gomez said the audit revealed staff followed policies and procedures and did not uncover wanton negligence in the Aaron Benjamin Jr. case. However, as a result of changes brought about by the audit, disciplinary actions have been taken to address deficiencies by some staff in the execution of their duties. HIPAA regulations and protected personnel information prevent the department from sharing additional details, D.H.S. said.

DHS said it has just begun an exhaustive strategic planning process that will further identify objectives that will guide, enhance and improve the overall functioning the department.

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