TRACKING CHILD ABUSERS;
With deaths of children on rise statewide, lawmakers press to modernize investigations

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With the number of child abuse-related deaths climbing statewide, several state legislators are pushing measures aimed at improving the investigation of child abuse and neglect cases.

In 2012, 276 children died statewide from suspected abuse, neglect, or unknown reasons - up from 265 in 2010, according to the latest state Office of Children and Family Services figures.

Assemb. Crystal Peoples-Stokes and state Sen. Timothy M. Kennedy, both Buffalo Democrats, have submitted a package of more than a dozen bills that would modernize the way Child Protective Services cases are documented. The legislation would upgrade computer software used to document child abuse investigations and create a statewide online system for the public to report suspected abuse.

Software currently used by county CPS investigators dates to the late 1990s and has since only undergone minor upgrades, Peoples-Stokes said. A measure she filed with Senate sponsor Sen. Patrick Gallivan (R-Elma) would improve the system so investigators can upload digital photos taken of abuse victims to use as evidence in Family Court hearings.

Currently, each county's social services department operates a Child Protective Services bureau to investigate abuse and neglect claims. General information including descriptions of physical abuse and the child's living conditions is entered into the statewide system. But the lawmakers want a uniform state system, noting that several New York counties have developed their own image and document storage procedures in its absence.

"This is 2015 - they [the state] should be capable of storing those types of images and documents," Peoples-Stokes said in an interview. "They should be able to pull out a tablet, and check out the status of what's been going on with a particular case."

The fate of the legislation is uncertain.

Last year, Senate leaders declined to allow votes on the measures partly because of questions of how to fund the upgrades, Peoples-Stokes and Kennedy said.

Assemb. Donna Lupardo (D-Binghamton), chairwoman of the Assembly Committee on Children and Families, said the upgrades are a priority, but lawmakers are awaiting cost figures from the Office of Children and Family Services.
"With the flux at the Office of Children and Families in commissioners we haven't had the ability to figure out how much it would cost to make it into a budget item," Lupardo said of the agency, which has had three commissioners in the past year.

State Office of Children and Family Services spokeswoman Jennifer Givner said the department does not comment to the news media on pending legislation.

Spokesmen for Assembly Speaker Carl Heastie (D-Bronx) and Senate Majority Leader Dean Skelos (R-Rockville Centre) did not respond to requests for comment.

Peoples-Stokes and Kennedy first introduced the package of bills last year after two high-profile child abuse-related deaths in Erie County: the 2012 beating death of 10-year-old Abdifatah Mohamud by his stepfather, and the 2013 death of 5-year-old Eain Clayton Brooks, who was raped and murdered by his mother's boyfriend.

Long Island also has had several high-profile cases.

In November, Jonathan Thompson, 34, of Amityville, was sentenced to 15 years in prison on charges that he punched 4-year-old Adonis Reed to death in January 2013 when the boy complained he was sick. Thompson was the boyfriend of Reed's surrogate caretaker.

State Police are continuing to investigate the death of 17-month-old Justin Kowalczik. His body was found buried in the backyard of his family's Farmingdale home in October 2012, after a Suffolk Child Protective Services worker had questioned the boy's mother and stepfather about the child's whereabouts during a check on his other siblings.

The family had lived in Orange County before moving to Long Island. Authorities said it was unclear what led to the boy's death, but believed he had been buried for two years before his body was discovered.

Anthony Zenkus, director of education for the Safe Center LI, a Bethpage nonprofit that provides counseling to child abuse and domestic violence victims, said the proposed state legislation "could make it easier to coordinate such cases as people move around the state and also make it less likely that cases will fall through the cracks."

NY deaths tied to child abuse

Includes deaths that occurred during an ongoing Child Protective Services investigation, or while the child and family were participating in preventive social service programs. Fatalities that have "mysterious or unobvious circumstances" are included.

2010: 265
2011: 272
2012: 276

Source: New York State Office
of Children and Family Services

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GRAPHIC: 1) JESSICA ROTKIEWICZ - A memorial seen Oct. 7, 2012, at the Hallock Street home in Farmingdale where police dug up 17-month-old Justin Kowalczik. Authorities believed he had been buried for two years by then. 2) Photo - Adonis Reed, 4, died in 2013. Jonathan Thompson, 34, of Amityville, was sentenced last year to 15 years in prison for beating the boy to death. CHART -

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