

ELIZABETH BARTHOLET AND DANIEL HEIMPEL

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THE LATEST scandal involving child welfare in Massachusetts has our leaders once again blaming low-level child protection services workers and proclaiming that the problem is aberrational, not systemic. The Department of Children and Families has fired the social worker and supervisor deemed responsible for failing to protect Jeremiah Oliver, who is now feared dead. The governor has said he expects the DCF commissioner to conduct a further inquiry, but asserts flatly that there is no broader policy problem in the department.

But the truth is that it is our leaders who are responsible for putting many children at risk. They have chosen policies that systematically favor family preservation, keeping children like Jeremiah at home even when home represents a serious danger.

Like a majority of states, Massachusetts has embraced “differential response,” a practice that represents the latest fad in extreme forms of family preservation. Differential response is designed to divert some 70 percent of maltreatment cases from the child protective services to a voluntary “family-friendly” track.

Jeremiah's case was on the traditional child protective services, not on the differential response track. But cases that look in the first instance like Jeremiah's case, where the facts were unclear and no brutal treatment blatantly obvious, will often be diverted to the differential response track. Such cases are typically categorized as neglect rather than abuse, and neglect cases are generally diverted to the differential response track. This is despite the fact that most neglect cases involve, as apparently did Jeremiah's, parental mental illness and substance abuse, along with other predictors for serious maltreatment.

Once on the differential response track, the point is to be family-friendly, which may cause key facts to be overlooked. Differential response policy generally prohibits children from being interviewed separately from their parents so as to avoid being too threatening to the parents. Of course Jeremiah's suspicious absence and the abuse he and his siblings had apparently suffered surfaced only because his sister was interviewed separately, at school. Most children threatened by their parents will not talk openly in front of those parents.

Differential response services are entirely voluntary. Parents are given rent payments and other financial subsidies but are not required to do anything like, for example, engage in substance abuse treatment or other rehabilitative services designed to ensure parental fitness.

While the claim is that differential response will not compromise child safety, there is every reason to believe it will. Nonetheless the practice is spreading rapidly throughout the nation, promoted by the wealthy Casey Family Programs. It leads a coalition of self-styled child welfare reformers in a sophisticated strategy that includes funding pilot programs, promoting self-serving research, and lobbying state and federal governments to implement these programs.

Funding for the new differential response track comes primarily from the traditional child protection system. Taking funds from the already resource-starved child protection agencies represents a threat to children. But it fits with the Casey agenda of reducing foster care by half and eventually eliminating it entirely. Advocates celebrate the cost savings involved in a reduced foster care system. But the evidence indicates that foster care serves as a vital protection for children, and that we should be providing child protection services systems with more, rather than fewer, resources.

Some in the research community have begun to question whether differential response serves children's interests. The research claiming its success seems to rely on advocacy rather than true social science.

The governor and the commissioner of Child Welfare rightly argue that surveillance should have been more rigorous in Jeremiah's case. But instead of supporting differential response, they should be thinking about how to strengthen the child protection services system so that it

can provide more surveillance and mandated rehabilitation services, remove to foster care more children at serious risk in their homes, and move more children whose parents are incapable of rehabilitation on to nurturing adoptive homes.

Elizabeth Bartholet, Professor of Law and Director, Child Advocacy Program, Harvard Law School, is author of "Nobody's Children: Abuse and Neglect, Foster Drift, and the Adoption Alternative." Daniel Heimpel is director of Fostering Media Connections, a foster-care advocacy group.

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