Secrecy in child welfare cases creates monsters

Harry Jaffe: Secrecy in child welfare cases creates monsters
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Remember the Renee Bowman case? It has to be one of the most despicable, heinous crimes ever in a region that's suffered some horrible ones. It's so heart-rending maybe you couldn't deal with it.

Police raided Bowman's home in 2008 when one of her three foster daughters, filthy and emaciated, was found wandering in a smock through a neighborhood in southern Maryland. Inside Bowman's home, cops found the bodies of her two other foster daughters. She had beaten all three, starved them, tortured them and killed two. Then froze them. The third escaped.

Bowman, 44, was convicted last month of killing Minnet and Jasmine Bowman. This week, Montgomery County Circuit Judge Michael Algeo sentenced Bowman to life in prison.

Algeo said the case was the most horrific he'd seen in his 25 years in the criminal justice system. Bowman apologized only for the abuse.

The fact that Bowman might spend the rest of her life behind bars was cold comfort to Richard Wexler. He and other advocates for children who are routinely abused inside the foster care and adoption systems, especially in D.C., want more than one woman's incarceration.

"We need to open the entire system to public view," says Wexler, executive director of the National Coalition for Child Protection Reform. Now the entire process — from the D.C. social service agencies to the family courts — is done in secret. "That does nothing to protect children and everything to allow agencies and courts to do sloppy work — and cover their mistakes."

Consider this mistake: Renee Bowman — a monster who beat the girls then sent e-mails to a friend that read: "They hate it — hahaha" — was a creation of the D.C. Child and Family Services Agency. In 2001, D.C.'s welfare agency recommended her as a suitable adoptive parent. D.C.'s social workers then blessed the adoption of her first daughter — who wound up in a freezer.

Really? Suitable?

During the course of their lives, as their "mother" beat them and fed them cat food, the District kept paying her subsidies. She was able to collect support money even after she had killed two girls and stuffed them in a freezer. She received an estimated $150,000 from D.C.

What can be done?

"Completely open the system," Wexler says. "It would allow us to see the mistakes, hopefully before they turn fatal. And the prospect that someone might be looking over their shoulders might encourage everyone — from social workers to judges — to do better work."

Right now 14 states have opened their child protection proceedings to the media and public. Maryland, Virginia and D.C. are not among them. Wexler and Matt Fraidin, a law professor at the University of the District of Columbia, have been lobbying D.C. council members to open the system. How far have they gotten?

"Nowhere," Wexler says.

With Renee Bowman's horror show still in mind, perhaps it's time. E-mail Harry Jaffe at hjaffe@washingtonexaminer.com.