



Missing Youth

A 6-year-old Florida girl in foster care disappeared. In New Jersey, a 7-year-old died. How computer systems fail to protect the most vulnerable. **BY DAVID F. CARR**

MOST OF THE SYSTEMS THAT FAILED RILYA WILSON were not computerized.

When the 6-year-old girl was discovered missing from a foster-care home in Miami, Fla., in April 2002, it turned out the case worker assigned to check on her at least once a month had not seen her in at least 15 months. Rilya still hasn't been found. The state later admitted it had lost track of 393 children in its care; 290 were found by year's end but others were still missing.

The scandal points to a broken system of supervision and accountability, but another factor was a long-promised computer system that was still being debugged when Rilya disappeared. Until recently, Florida's child-welfare cases were kept mostly on paper—three or four phone-book-sized binders where crucial details could be buried.

Since 1993, the U.S. Administration for Children and Families (ACF) has provided matching funds to encourage states to create integrated systems for tracking children in foster care and investigating abuse and neglect. So far, 36 states have put in place at least partially operational systems. Florida has been

working on what ACF calls a Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS) since 1994, and expects to spend \$230 million by the time it is completed in 2005.

At least Florida has been working on it. In New Jersey, which just now is preparing a request for proposals to install a welfare-information system, the death of Faheem Williams called attention to inadequate case management. In January, the 7-year-old boy was found dead in the basement of a Newark home, locked in along with two brothers. Although the family's record of abuse and neglect reports dated to 1992, a state worker closed the case in 2001 without visiting the children.

While not a cure-all, SACWIS can help managers monitor activities of field workers by proving reports on children seen and not seen, cases opened and closed. "One of the weaknesses we see in child welfare is a lack of adequate supervision," says Susan Orr, director of the children's bureau at ACF.

Clearly, computer systems alone can't protect children. In Florida's Rilya Wilson case, the state caseworker reportedly had been working a second job some of the time she was sup-

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY POLLY BECKER

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State Chief Information Officer: Kimberly Bahrami

Operations for 2002-2003: Budget of \$3.8 billion includes \$24.5 million for HomeSafenet project

Challenge: Complete HomeSafenet, a long-delayed child-welfare information system to improve identification of high-risk cases and improve child safety

BASELINE GOALS:

- ▶ Reduce child deaths that follow a report of abuse or neglect. In 2001, 35 such deaths were reported, and a study concluded that at least 74% were preventable
- ▶ Improve tracking of children in foster care, following a report that there were 393 unaccounted-for children in the state's care
- ▶ Eliminate backlog of about 30,000 cases

posed to be visiting children and was fired after she admitted falsifying child-visit reports. It might have been possible to falsify notes in a computer system as well. But without a computerized process for recording and reporting on the progress of each case, it has been hard for supervisors to identify and correct even honest oversights.

"To me, that's a no-brainer," says Florida's former Department of Children and Families (DCF) Chief Information Officer Randy Niewenhaus. "The real question is, why wasn't it done a long time ago?"

Sadly, whether the issue is improving information systems or reducing excessive caseloads, action tends to be driven by scandals. Before Rilya Wilson, the 1998 death of Kayla McKean—a 6-year-old who was murdered by her father after numerous abuse reports to the state—focused Florida's attention on the need to systematically identify high-risk cases. Florida now conducts an annual study of children who died after at least one prior report of abuse or neglect. The most recent report, in December, found 35 such deaths in 2001.

Different types of child-welfare cases are handled by different people. Protective investigators respond to complaints of abuse or neglect and decide whether they are substantiated. Child welfare caseworkers are responsible for long-term monitoring of the well-being of children in foster care or other programs. In Florida, responsibilities also are divided among workers employed directly by DCF, by regional agencies such as sheriff's offices, and, increasingly, by private organizations.

"20 SCREENS FOR BASIC INFORMATION"

Protective investigators have been working online longer, tracking summary information about each case through an existing computer system. But now investigators and caseworkers alike will record detailed case notes in Florida's Web-based system called HomeSafenet.

"Nobody's supposed to do a paper-and-pencil investigation and put it in a file anymore," says James Walker, assistant program administrator for child protective investigations at the Broward County Sheriff's Office, which handles abuse and neglect cases in the Fort Lauderdale area for DCF. "Nobody can say, 'I'm working on it, it's in my file' or 'we've lost that file.'"

Ultimately, the benefit will be a complete online record of

why the state has intervened, what service it has promised and the results.

Not that HomeSafenet is all there yet. It began rolling out in July 2001, with a release targeting foster care, but many caseworkers labeled it clunky. DCF Secretary Jerry Regier, who started work in September, acknowledged the flaws. "When a worker has to go through 20 screens to put in basic information, we've got a problem," he was quoted as saying.

For abuse and neglect cases, Broward protective investigators use the new Child Safety Assessment module, which is supposed to be deployed statewide this summer. But workers are encountering similar usability issues. For example, if records on one of the participants in a case need to be updated—say, if Mom has remarried, changed her name, or moved and received a new phone number—investigators have to click through to a different screen of the Web-based application to update each detail, rather than work with a single profile screen for that person. While demonstrating some of HomeSafenet's flaws, Walker shakes his head and says, "Some of this is really barbaric."

Yet, Walker sees great potential for the Child Safety Assessment, which guides investigators through a systematic process of evaluating risk factors for each child. For example, because young children are more likely to die of abuse or neglect, age is one of the first questions.

"Getting people to do the job in a standardized way is really important," Walker says. Otherwise, each investigator applies a slightly different standard for what constitutes abuse or neglect. "I'm not thrilled by the extremely complicated development process, but I am thrilled by what this will allow us to do," he adds.

Rona Baldini, a case manager employed by the Sarasota (Fla.) YMCA, has her own list of complaints about HomeSafenet, but also sees some benefits. The Web-based system makes it easier to collaborate with other caseworkers—for example, when a child she is responsible for is placed with a relative in another part of the state. In the future, HomeSafenet will also let workers review the case history when a mother is trying to regain custody. "You'll be able to see things like how often Mom moves around and the people she's hung out with," Baldini says.

THE \$230 MILLION DEBACLE

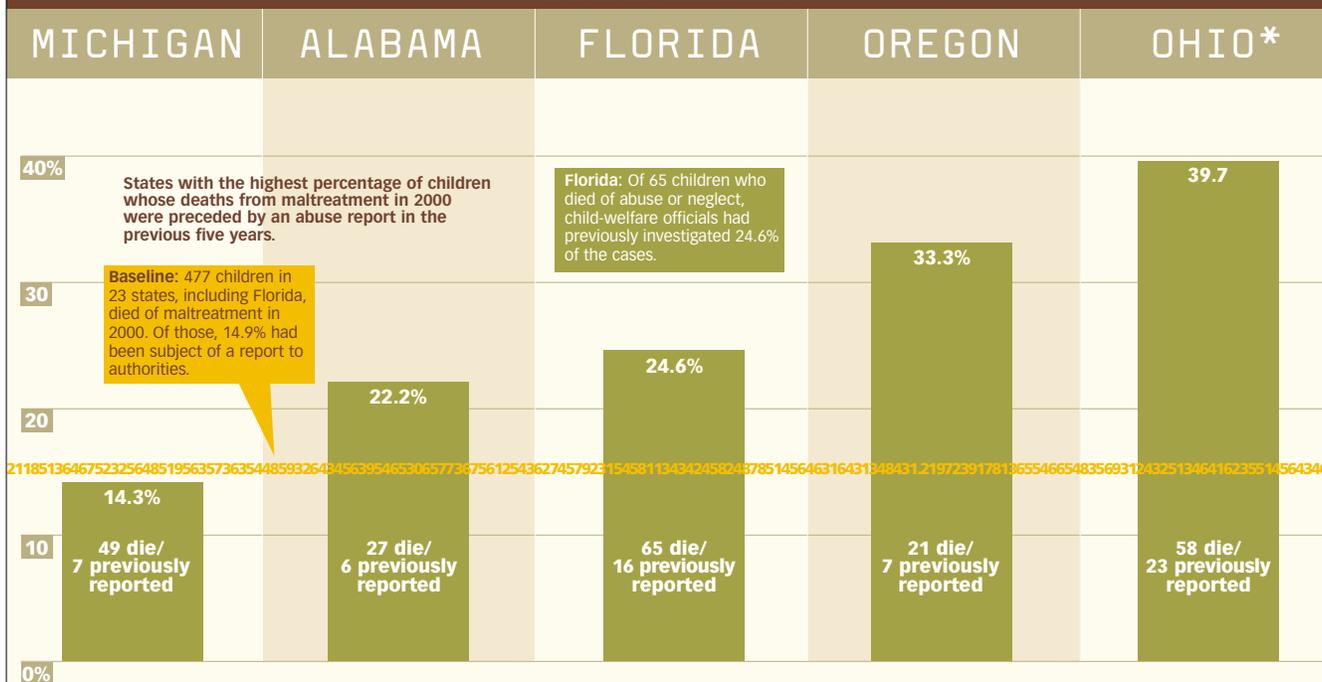
Just a few months before the Rilya Wilson scandal broke, the *South Florida Sun-Sentinel* newspaper ran a story about HomeSafenet headlined "Computerized Tracking Project Years Behind And \$198 Million Over Original Budget," explaining that the project wouldn't be finished until 2005. As the year went on, newspapers across the state began routinely referring to HomeSafenet as a "\$230 million debacle."

CIO Niewenhaus was forced to resign, and the State Technology Office took on more responsibility for the project.

Meanwhile, several usability-focused upgrades have been released. But except for proceeding with the statewide roll-out of protective investigations modules, Florida is slowing work on upgrades while considering more radical measures—such as the possibility of replacing some HomeSafenet software with off-the-shelf alternatives. Ben Harris, chief information officer for human services, says at a minimum he wants to discover some best practices to imitate from com-

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DEADLY DILEMMA



*OHIO PLANS TO INSTALL A NEW INFORMATION SYSTEM FOR CHILD-WELFARE CASES
SOURCE: U.S. ADMINISTRATION FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES, "CHILD MALTREATMENT 2000," PUBLISHED APRIL 2002

mercial products and other states' systems.

Niewenhaus complains that the scandal-focused news reports that led to his ouster exaggerated the growth in the project's budget and slighted the developers. "This was something a lot of us really put our heart and soul into," he says.

While Florida's SACWIS planning began in 1994, it took until 1997 to get a federally approved project plan and issue a request for proposals. In 1998, the state convinced one of two bidders, Unisys, to lower its bid from \$60 million to \$54 million—a figure that still wound up being rejected as too high.

The HomeSafenet project began in 1999, with Niewenhaus's \$210.5 million plan for DCF to act as its own integrator. In 2001, after reality-checking their progress, the DCF developers revised their estimate to \$230 million (actually a \$42 million increase because it didn't include post-production costs factored into the earlier figure). They also changed the projected completion date from 2003 to 2005.

But Niewenhaus says the "\$198 million over budget" headline is an exaggeration; it compared his cost projection to a \$32 million figure discussed in the early 1990s, before any serious planning or analysis had been done. Even the Unisys bid isn't directly comparable, he says, because it doesn't include the salaries of state workers assigned to the project.

The Unisys bid also was based on transferring software originally developed for other states. Florida decided its system should be Web-based for greater reach, and Niewenhaus thought it made more sense to create a system specifically architected for the Web rather than trying to graft a Web interface onto an imported system.

DCF selected the WebLogic application server from BEA Systems and began the task of migrating data out of six existing computer systems that HomeSafenet would ultimately replace. Beta testing started in November 2000, and Release 1.0 was deployed statewide in July 2001. By spring

2002, HomeSafenet had gone through an architectural update that included migrating to a newer version of WebLogic and making more use of Enterprise JavaBeans. Taking advantage of more advanced Java capabilities eliminated the need for a separate team of developers that had been writing code for BEA's Tuxedo middleware. The application server also moved from SCO Unix to Red Hat Linux.

"Without being stupid bleeding-edge, we were having success with technology in a way that's atypical of government," Niewenhaus says. He suggests his biggest mistake was authorizing early releases of the system without adequate support for generating reports. While developers struggled with the Unix version of Cognos, and ultimately switched to Crystal Reports, users were left without a good way of getting data out of the system.

Whether Niewenhaus made the right call by developing from scratch is debatable. AMS, a consulting firm, has taken the same basic SACWIS design originally created for Connecticut to several states and generations of technology, including a Web implementation in Wisconsin. That experience has produced a more user-friendly system, says Patricia Mellon, a senior principal in the AMS public sector practice.

The charge that the user interface needs improvement is "a fair observation," Niewenhaus says. But he also had to deal with requirements outside his control, like a dictate that users not be allowed to edit data once it was recorded in the system. Though intended to block fraud, this also made it impossible to fix unintentional mistakes. Niewenhaus says "it took forever" to alter that requirement to allow edits, with the appropriate audit trail.

Ultimately, the goal should be making the system "child-friendly" more than "user-friendly," Niewenhaus says. "The purpose isn't to make the worker's life easier—it's to protect children." ◀