

## DES director questioned about Jhessye Shockley case, CPS

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PHOENIX (KPHO) -

Red flags went up at least once this spring -- months before 5-year-old Jhessye Shockley went missing.

Police began investigating reports about Jhessye's mom Jerice Hunter and possible child abuse. Hunter's cousin reported the suspicions, telling authorities she'd observed one of Hunter's children flinch and shake at a family gathering.

Police reports obtained by CBS 5 reveal a CPS case worker talked to the children and reported they "looked healthy" and denied abuse.

No crime was found, and the Glendale police investigation was closed. Officers confirm they never talked to Jerice or her kids in connection to the suspicions of abuse.

As for the CPS investigation, the agency has provided little information.

"There was contact in this case and based on that contact, CPS did do an investigation," said Clarence Carter, director of the Arizona Department of Economic Security, which oversees CPS.

Carter said privacy laws forbid him to answer specific questions about Jhessye's case.

"I've shared as much information as the law allows me to share at this point," said Carter.

He would not confirm how extensively CPS investigated whether Jhessye and her siblings were safe.

He also declined to say whether he thinks the system failed Jhessye.

When asked if the system has failed any child, he acknowledged the agency has made mistakes.

"Has the system made mistakes? It absolutely has. It's a human endeavor. Do we attempt to learn from those mistakes and make the system better? It's an every day, 24-7 pursuit," said Carter.

Working with Arizona's most vulnerable children is, without a doubt, a tough job. Critics say caseworkers are overworked and underpaid, and many of the most experienced staffers have been pushed out to save money.

Carter said he believes he has enough staff to handle the caseload. He believes the system is flawed.

A task force is overhauling the CPS investigative process. Carter said one of the biggest changes we'll see is cutting huge amounts of unnecessary paperwork, redundancy and other red tape.

"(The changes will) take almost 200,000 hours out of that (investigative) process, shrinking it from a process that took anywhere from 178 to 203 days down to 40 days," said Carter.

The changes will be tested in a pilot program slated for January. If all goes well, a new and improved system could be in place as early as April.

"Our heart breaks when a child is hurt. When a benefit is not paid. When someone can't make their life work so they need this system. But we believe it's our life's work. It's our obligation to help make this work," said Carter.

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