

By Daniel Pollack



Print Media Coverage of Child Fatalities When a Human Service Agency is Involved

When a child dies and we learn that a human service department or agency was involved, how well does the print media cover the story? How accurate and thorough is it? Does the story convey sufficient comprehensiveness and perspective to give the reader a solid understanding of the events? Is there any discernible information bias, either intentional or unintentional? Does the writer seem to have an agenda?

In short—is it fair? And, for our purposes, to what extent might a news story have an unintended effect on a subsequent legal proceeding regarding that same child fatality? There is no scientifically valid, objective approach to accurately answer these questions. Nonetheless, with a sincere effort at intellectual integrity, and given the space limitations, I attempt some meaningful observations. By no means should this be called a “study,” “research” or similar formal term; nor is this effort pro- or anti-department or agency.

In reviewing relevant articles, I looked at ones from 2014 to the present that had the terms “child died,” “department of human services,” and “custody” (and similar terms for each). I sifted through the results and read approximately 60 of them. In truth, I came away, not with good answers, but with tough questions:

1. Do journalists and society have an implicit assumption that a child should never die if a human service agency was involved?
2. When it comes to child fatalities, do some journalists feel they have a “calling” to expose perceived agency shortcomings, especially if



the circumstances of the death are particularly disturbing?

3. What evidence will be sufficient for a successful motion for a change of venue (and related motions)?

From a journalistic and social policy perspective, publicity of child fatalities poses a quandary. Such focus shines a bright light so that additional facts may be revealed and considered. It can also ensure that those overseeing the child welfare and justice systems will act honestly by subjecting their judgments to public scrutiny. Conversely, inaccurate reporting may lead to inadvertent negative perceptions and bias against family members, collateral professionals, and agency employees. Especially if there are criminal allegations, there is bound to be a clash of the First Amendment right of freedom of the press and the Fourteenth and Sixth Amendments’ right to a fair trial.

We expect journalists to bring clarity to complex issues, to present facts

in a logical sequence in their proper context. All the while, we expect them to probe in a good faith way—not to create news, just report the facts. The Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) believes “that public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy. Ethical journalism strives to ensure the free exchange of information that is accurate, fair and thorough. An ethical journalist acts with integrity.”¹

The SPJ *Code of Ethics* is a statement of abiding principles supported by additional explanations and position papers. The four principles of the Code are: 1) Ethical journalism should be accurate and fair. Journalists should be honest and courageous in gathering, reporting and interpreting information; 2) Ethical journalism treats sources, subjects, colleagues and members of the public as human beings deserving of respect; 3) The highest and primary

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suicide among young adults in their late teens and early twenties.

Task Force accomplishments have come through the work of the sub-committee partnerships that allow professionals and community members to unite around areas of expertise and passion.

The Task Force also supports larger projects, including an annual prevention conference sponsored by one of our largest providers, Lenape Valley Foundation. Additionally, Lenape Valley Foundation was selected as one of 20 organizations nationwide to be a part of this year's learning community on Zero Suicide and is lead agency for an annual fall Candlelight Vigil. Presently, the county is planning for an awareness walk scheduled for June 2016. The walk is a direct result of collaboration among Bucks County Commissioners and local school districts.

The Task Force partnership also has more tangible accomplishments in the short time it has been in existence, such as, creating a brochure and "business"

cards that are distributed specifically to first responders in postvention efforts. This card will be used to contact the county to send a basket of resources to the family after a suicide. In addition, the professional-volunteer group developed a letter and resources to provide physicians' offices to support their efforts in every part of the county.

As part of our overall strategy to eliminate suicide in Bucks County, Mental Health First Aid training for our First Responders and Mental Health First Aid has been offered throughout the county. The Task Force is also exploring, with the First Responder subcommittee, the development of a hotline specifically designated for those who respond to emergency situations to help deal with secondary trauma and real-life concerns and experiences of police, fire, EMS, and other emergency service teams.

A significant accomplishment of the Task Force has been posting National Suicide Prevention Lifeline signs at train stations system wide. The signs offer a 24-hour-a-day, 365-day-a-year

helpline number, 1-800-273-TALK. The local hotline is supported by another of the county's community partners in suicide prevention, the Family Services Association. This number has also been posted on all Bucks County Transport vehicles that provide transportation services throughout the county.

While many agencies are doing good work in this area, in Bucks County it is our strong belief that we will only achieve our Task Force mission "through advocacy, education, prevention, intervention, and postvention we will work to eliminate suicide" if we first focus on the "WE." This Task Force is a community-wide partnership of county government, private providers and professionals, and caring members of our Bucks County community. Together we will continue to move forward until we achieve that mission. □

Jon Rubin is the director of Human Services in Bucks County, Pennsylvania.

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obligation of ethical journalism is to serve the public; and, 4) Ethical journalism means taking responsibility for one's work and explaining one's decisions to the public."²

Reporting about child fatalities has built-in limitations. Some essential information may not be readily available. In addition, against a backdrop of confidentiality laws, only selected facts may be presented to reporters by the sources themselves, thereby compromising any hope of verification. California attorney Evelyn Cox notes that "determining whether a child welfare agency is at fault or not when there is a child fatality is not the work of the media, it is the work of the court. It is a properly informed public that makes our democracy work. Of course we don't want to see child care workers spend time away from protecting children because they are involved in a "media

circus" but it seems to me that child welfare agencies have legal counsel and should be able to handle the scrutiny. If there is a bias on behalf of a specific reporter or the media in general, it will reveal itself soon enough."

Maryland attorney Harvey Schweitzer has another viewpoint: "Having represented social workers and child serving agencies for many years I am dismayed at how readily the media concludes that it is the agency and the worker who must be to blame when a child in care dies. There have been times when, because I was familiar with the facts of a particular tragic situation, I was interviewed by a journalist whose approach left little doubt in my mind that the agency and the worker were the targets of what passes for 'investigative reporting.' It is sad that too frequently reporters are unwilling to sift through complex factual circumstances to

uncover the chain of events that led to a child's death, but instead engage in 'gotcha' reporting."

Attorneys are acutely aware of the impact pretrial publicity can have on juries. Without a fair press we risk inadvertently prejudicing the justice system later on. The guilty may go free, and the innocent may suffer undeserving penalties or miss their opportunity for compensation. Undoubtedly, more thought and rigorous research needs to be done. □

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Reference Notes

1. <http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>
2. See the SJP Code of Ethics at <http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>