



## Office of the Child Advocate

3312 Northside Drive, Suite D-250  
Macon, GA 31210

478-757-2661 or 1-800-254-2064  
www.gachildadvocate.org



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### Reacting Before a Crisis

By Tom C. Rawlings  
State Child Advocate for the Protection of Children

**"Lord, save us from another crisis."** For those in the child welfare system who believe in prayer, that one should be added to the daily list. It's a prayer that's probably on the top of the list for many child welfare and court administrators these days as we watch the case progress involving 416 children removed by child protective services from the Fundamentalist Latter Day Saints' ranch in Texas.

The "FLDS case," as the papers call it, could be considered the latest cautionary tale of what happens when we allow problems in communities to rise to the level where a crisis erupts. The case began April 3, when police and child protective services raided the communal ranch of the reclusive polygamous sect after a 16-year-old girl there called a local family violence shelter to report that her 50-year-old husband beat and raped her. Authorities have since alleged that girls as young as 13 are being married off in violation of Texas law.

As you can imagine, handling a sudden influx of hundreds of foster children creates a logistical nightmare. Where do you put them? How do you comfort them? How do you determine their needs? Many of the children are staying at a city coliseum. It also didn't help that a rash of chickenpox broke out among the children and quickly spread.

The court system soon found itself in a crisis, as well. The state bar sent out a call for lawyers to represent the over 100 children whom the child protective services agency determined should remain in foster care. Add to those numbers hundreds of lawyers for the parents, lawyers for the state, and one overwhelmed judge, and you've got a packed courtroom.

A court hearing on the case this week quickly "dissolved into chaos," according to the New York Times. At one point during testimony, hundreds of lawyers were objecting in unison to the admission of evidence. There is no telling how long it will take to get through the evidence in the case, and in the meantime the children's and families' lives are in limbo. In the end, this case is likely to exact an extremely heavy toll on the State of Texas – its child protective services staff, its courts, its indigent defense system, and especially its taxpayers. It will certainly have a traumatic impact on the hundreds of children involved.

The FLDS example may be extreme: after all, taking hundreds of children into care at once while trying to process their cases and preserve their rights and those of their parents through the court system is not an everyday occurrence. But it does give a clear example of how our traditional mode of *reacting* to child abuse cases is often cumbersome and expensive.

According to a recent Pew Charitable Foundation and Prevent Child Abuse America study, we spend \$33 billion a year responding to the direct effects of child abuse and neglect. Additionally, we incur another \$70 billion a year in costs related to the problems that child abuse victims suffer. In other words, the experts can tell us with some reasonable basis that child abuse and neglect takes a \$100 billion toll on our nation each year.

And why did the State of Texas feel the need to remove all those children? The answer, likely, is that state officials knew so little about this insular, withdrawn sect. This community, resistant to outside involvement for so many years, was an unknown factor. And when you combine a report of possibly widespread abuse with a lack of knowledge of the families involved, the logical decision is to remove all the children.

I'm not aware of any similar communities in Georgia. But the FLDS case emphasizes the need for our child welfare officials to understand and engage the at-risk families of our state *before* a crisis erupts. Otherwise, not knowing the family or the situation, we can likewise be prone to remove the child first and ask questions later.

So how do you get to know these families that might end up needing our intervention? You do it through programs that identify at-risk families early on. You engage at-risk families and provide helpful solutions and services to their problems before anything bad happens. You actively seek to be a source of support to them.

Unfortunately, across the nation we still emphasize reacting to child abuse reports rather than preventing child abuse by engaging families. For every federal dollar spent on foster care and adoption, less than 13 cents is spent on prevention. An Urban Institute study a few years back showed that of all state dollars spent on child welfare, only 10 to 15% were spent on prevention.

What if we were to take the time to provide families with the prevention and early intervention services needed to prevent abuse and neglect from occurring? What if we were to focus on *wellness* in family services the way we try to do in medicine? The answer? Fewer crises, healthier families, and – my attorney friends will forgive me for this – less need for lawyers. Happy Child Abuse Prevention Month.

*Tom Rawlings, Georgia's Child Advocate for the Protection of Children, was appointed by Governor Sonny Perdue to assure quality and efficiency in Georgia's child protective systems. The Office of Child Advocate is a resource for those interested in the welfare of our state's neglected and abused children. Tom can be reached through the OCA website at [www.gachildadvocate.org](http://www.gachildadvocate.org)*