D.C. eyes required checks on adoptive parents

Sarah Karush ASSOCIATED PRESS
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The District might start requiring families who receive adoption subsidies to provide proof that the children are being cared for, following the deaths of two girls who were once-time D.C. foster children, the head of the city's child-welfare agency said Wednesday.

The girls' bodies were discovered last month in a freezer in Maryland. Their mother, Renee Bowman, is suspected of killing her adopted children and is jailed on an abuse charge in the beating of her youngest daughter. She had been receiving $2,400 a month in government adoption assistance - and the stipends continued long after the children were dead, officials said.

Roque Gerald, the interim director of the Child and Family Services Agency, said the city might request that parents receiving subsidies verify that their children are being immunized and are enrolled in school.

Mr. Gerald cited "lessons learned from the recent deaths" in introducing the idea, but cautioned against going too far in compromising the right of adoptive parents to privacy.

In the Bowman case, the girls, who would be 9 and 11, are thought to have been killed at least a year ago, but nobody reported them missing. Their bodies were found only after the surviving 7-year-old sister jumped out a second-floor window Sept. 26 and was found wandering the street, starving and severely beaten.

The children had apparently long been isolated from the outside world, and area school districts have no record of them ever being enrolled. Once an adoption is finalized, there generally is no mandatory follow-up.

"When a kid is adopted, that is really a statement that he's safe and has found a family with which he can live," said Matthew Fraidin, a law professor and child-welfare specialist at the University of the District of Columbia. "It's really a statement that this is a family like any other."

That principle should be respected, Mr. Gerald said.

"I really believe that the basic right of families around privacy extends to those who are also adopted," he said.

However, Mr. Gerald said some ongoing scrutiny also may be appropriate in cases where the government is providing a stipend.

Adoptive parents of foster children are entitled to assistance payments in some circumstances. The payments are funded partially by the federal government and partially by the state or local jurisdiction. The D.C. government currently...
administers the subsidy for 2,295 children, said mayoral spokeswoman Mafara Hobson. Since foster parents receive money for the care of foster children, adoption would mean taking on a new financial burden if the subsidies were not provided, Mr. Fraidin said.

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