

***The following articles were published in the Los Angeles Daily Journal on November 12, 2002.
This submission tied for 2nd Place in the 2003 Price Child Health and Welfare Journalism Awards.***

DAILY JOURNAL ARTICLE
<http://www.dailyjournal.com>
© The Daily Journal Corporation. All rights reserved.

**Misty, Who Got No Breaks --
Disturbing Life, Death Produce Harrowing Tale Of Foster Care --
Child Spiraled Down in Foster-Care System**

Daily Journal - Nov 12, 2002

By **Cheryl Romo**
Daily Journal Staff Writer

LOS ANGELES - Paramedics responding to a 911 call from a rundown apartment on 11th Street East in Palmdale March 7 found a bleeding, comatose girl with a long brown ponytail lying on the bed in a disheveled bedroom.

The three adults present said they didn't know the child's name.

The girl was a transient whom they had taken in the day before.

The blue-eyed, baby-faced teen-ager became known to emergency workers and Sheriff's Department investigators as "Jane Doe."

The 5-foot-2 child with Down syndrome looked to have been the victim of a violent physical and sexual assault.

Blood and mucus stained her face. One of her eyes had hemorrhaged, indicating suffocation or strangulation. There were marks on her neck and injuries to her genitalia and rectum. Her stomach and other parts of her body showed massive bruising. And there appeared to be a bite mark on her right breast.

After being admitted to Antelope Valley Hospital, Jane Doe was airlifted to Children's Hospital. That day, authorities learned that Jane Doe was Misty Dawn Marie Siegfried, 17, a retarded foster child and insulin-dependent diabetic.

Misty had run away 12 days before from MacLaren Children's Center, the county's only emergency shelter for juveniles, where she had lived on and off throughout her nine years in foster care.

In the four years she was kept there, she had fled at least a half-dozen times, according to her court files, which were made accessible to the Daily Journal by Presiding Judge Michael Nash of the Los Angeles Juvenile Court.

The El Monte shelter, facing closure after decades of controversy over alleged abuse and mistreatment of foster children living there, was where the chaos that eventually took hold of Misty began.

In the end, those who knew Misty say, she may have freed herself the only way she knew how.

"The first thing the coroner told me was that she was brutally raped," Stanley Biber, Misty's father, said.

"They said she was raped, and then they said she wasn't," Martha Siegfried, the child's maternal grandmother, remembered.

The county coroner released a preliminary autopsy report July 25 that attributed the cause

of Misty's death to "diabetic ketoacidosis and unestablished factors," meaning her insulin level became so high or so low that she lapsed into a coma.

In September, officials from the Department of Children and Family Services, who had overseen Misty's care since she was 7, told the media that Misty died of a diabetic seizure.

In late October, the coroner's office revised the report, saying that the cause of the child's death was "undetermined" but that a possible "airway compromise" could not be ruled out.

Despite what appeared to be severe injuries, the lead investigator into Misty's death believes the cause of her death was not homicide.

"It does not appear that she was raped," sheriff's homicide Detective David Carver said. "Right now, technically, the case is not closed because the coroner's office is still reviewing the case. But everything we have in reviewing the case showed she died of natural causes."

"What would you expect from a dysfunctional system?" asked Wayne Morrow, a veteran supervising attorney with Dependency Court Legal Services Inc., a nonprofit law firm representing children in Los Angeles. The firm represented Misty for most of her life.

Whatever the truth, the mystery surrounding Misty's death is no more disturbing than the story of her life.

Her story is told in the court file, to which the Daily Journal obtained access after petitioning the Juvenile Court in April, asking to be allowed to see the child's dependency records.

Both Pamela Tripp, Misty's attorney, and Deputy County Counsel Brandon T. Nichols, the attorney for the Department of Children and Family Services, objected.

In August, Judge Nash granted the Daily Journal's petition. In re Misty S., CK04837 (Los Angeles Super. Ct., filed April 28, 1993).

The file details the story of a child who was dealt no breaks in birth and even fewer after she was taken into the care of Los Angeles County. It is a harrowing tale of nine years in the system.

During that time, Misty was in eight failed placements, in 14 psychiatric hospitals and spent the rest of her time at MacLaren.

She had six attorneys appointed by the dependency court, had an equal number of social workers and saw dozens of mental health professionals. She was prescribed at least a dozen psychotropic medications and ran away at least a dozen times.

It's unclear from the thousands of documents in the file whether the Daily Journal was permitted to see all documents in Misty Siegfried's dependency court case.

What's clear from this cluttered file and interviews with family, lawyers and others who knew Misty, however, is that Misty's life was one long cry for help - and an example of the clear and tragic failure of a government system that is unable to do more than shuffle children from one place to another.

"At the end of this month, I will have been at MacLaren for nine months. I'm starting to get very depressed because I feel that people have given up on me," Misty wrote in a letter dated Aug. 29, 2000, more than a year before she died.

"I'm trying very hard to do what it takes to show more improvement," she wrote. "I know I have in the past showed some disrespectful and defiant behaviors. But I have been working on my mistakes, such as not being hospitalized, except one time in July.

"I haven't tried to hurt myself. I've been complying with my nurse staff and cottage staff to take my medications, such as my insulin. Also, I have not tried to run away from [the] shelter. I feel I have not been given a chance to say what I feel that will make me happy."

Happiness, Misty wrote, would come when people in the system showed they had confidence in her and respected her as a human being.

Happiness didn't arrive.

Days before she ran away from MacLaren one last time, Misty told her Department of

Children and Family Services' social worker, "Get me out of here. I don't care where it is. I'll go anywhere."

In all Misty's years in the system, she had but one judge assigned to her dependency case, Juvenile Court Commissioner Albert Garcia, who is based at the Children's Court in Monterey Park.

One attorney called Garcia "the only beacon of light in Misty's life," while others blamed him for giving her the keys to freedom that led to her death.

Garcia has a reputation around the courthouse as being a tough guy and hard on kids, like Misty, who don't conform to the rules. But that's not what came through during several telephone conversations aimed at coaxing the bench officer to share his feelings about a child he had watched grow up and die tragically.

In the end, Garcia declined to share his recollections about Misty: "I'm not saying I'll never talk about it. I just don't want to talk right now."

Misty was the product of a brief love affair between Cynthia Margaret Siegfried, 20, and Stanley John Biber, 31.

Biber's whereabouts were listed throughout the file as "unknown," though he was living in Los Angeles County for much of Misty's life and was listed in the phone book. The Daily Journal located him from his entry in the registry of those who attended Misty's funeral.

He said that, after Cynthia told him she was pregnant, he tried hard to make their relationship work.

"I met Cindy in a blackout," Biber, a recovering alcoholic, said. "I was still in my disease. I was lost then."

After Cynthia told him she was pregnant, Biber took her to Mustang, Okla., to be near his family. Not long after they arrived, Cynthia returned to California, where she gave birth to Misty Dawn Marie Siegfried Nov. 9, 1984, at Memorial Hospital of Hawthorne.

Cynthia and Stanley never saw each other again.

In 1990, Biber, a painting contractor, returned to Los Angeles and confronted his drinking problem. As he began putting his life back together, he tried to find the woman he couldn't hold and the child he had yet to meet.

"I tried to make amends and tried to find them and couldn't," he said. "It wasn't like I could financially do anything then. But I could say I was sorry."

While Biber was trying to find his lost family, Cynthia, a striking beauty, was struggling with her life. Cynthia had two children and a live-in boyfriend, the father of her second child.

The boyfriend allegedly beat Cynthia regularly.

Still, it was a simple incident that began Misty's nine years under the supervision of the Department of Children and Family Services.

In late August 1992, Misty and a cousin got into a fight over who got to play with an Etch a Sketch. When Cynthia's boyfriend began spanking Misty, Cynthia called the police. Officers arrived and reported that both adults smelled of alcohol and that the house was a mess.

Just five days later, according to court documents, the family was placed under "informal supervision" by the Department of Children and Family Services.

Police are required to report abuse to DCFS, which begins to investigate the family situation, including a child's attendance at school.

Six months later, on April 2, 1993, social workers arrived to take 8-year-old Misty and her 3-year-old half-brother from their South Bay home.

The youngsters arrived at MacLaren Children's Center that evening. They were placed there, according to the court file, on charges that Cynthia's boyfriend had physically abused Misty when he spanked her and because the "abuse places her sibling at risk of abuse."

It was later alleged that Misty's mother was "unable to protect" her daughter and failed to send her to school regularly. Both adults also were accused of being substance abusers.

Three days later, Misty and her brother were moved from MacLaren to a foster home operated by the Children's Home Society. At the time, Misty wore glasses and was described as a "cute" little girl with long-brown hair. Her favorite food, as it would remain throughout her life, was peanut butter.

On April 28, the Juvenile Court assigned Garcia to handle the family's case. At the first court hearing, Cynthia and her boyfriend acknowledged they had substance-abuse problems.

Just two weeks later, Misty and her brother officially were declared dependents of the Los Angeles Juvenile Court. They were ordered into long-term foster care with Children's Home Society, and Garcia found that Cynthia's boyfriend had abused the child.

Though the extended Siegfried family stepped forward to ask that the children be allowed to live with them, DCFS found that none of the relatives was suitable.

Grandmother Martha Siegfried was considered inappropriate because of a physical disability, epilepsy, that did not permit her to drive a vehicle and because a child hot-line referral was made against her boyfriend 11 years earlier.

Donna Eastep, Cynthia's sister, also asked that her niece and nephew be permitted to come live with her family in Reno, Nev. Although the Easteps were determined to be "truly nice people" and suitable caretakers by social workers, DCFS denied the request because their home was considered too small.

"They wouldn't let [them] live with us because we didn't have an extra bedroom," Eastep said recently. "And they had [Misty] sleeping in the hall at MacLaren."

A psychological assessment of Misty, then 8, found her to be a special-needs child who had delayed development and a limited vocabulary.

"She seems to be indicating a need for love," a psychologist reported to the court. "She drew a picture of a house with no doorknob or windows."

Less than a month after this assessment, Misty's foster parents asked that the little girl be removed from their home in West Hills because of poor behavior toward other children - and because she was considered too possessive of her 3-year-old brother.

Her brother remained in the foster home, and Misty was moved to Five Acres, a residential treatment facility in Altadena for emotionally disturbed kids. There, she told a therapist that she was worried about her mother's safety.

Meanwhile, Cynthia Siegfried was struggling to improve. She attended court-ordered therapy, "rap" groups and parenting classes, according to court documents, and her drug tests were clean.

She found a part-time job as a temporary clerical worker and broke up with her boyfriend. Cynthia had moved into her mother's home and was hopeful about getting her kids back.

Garcia gave the Department of Children and Family Services discretion to liberalize visits between the children and their mother, whose visits had been required to be monitored. According to Martha Siegfried, Cynthia had been prohibited from touching her children.

Those unmonitored visits apparently didn't happen. Martha Siegfried remembered that her daughter was kept away from her children. On one occasion, Cynthia reportedly got down on her hands and knees and begged a social worker to tell her what else she had to do to get her kids back.

"My daughter did everything they asked - and they didn't give my daughter a chance," Martha Siegfried recalled.

Then tragedy struck.

On June 12, 1994, Cynthia was an innocent bystander, killed by a stray bullet fired by a man aiming a gun at his wife during a domestic dispute in Lomita. The 30-year-old woman died the same day as Nicole Brown Simpson and Ronald Goldman. The story of Cynthia's murder was recounted in a poignant story in the Los Angeles Times.

The Times' article mentioned that the Siegfried family was too poor to buy Cynthia a grave

marker. An anonymous donor stepped forward to help them buy one.

The entire Siegfried family has never quite recovered from the loss of Cynthia.

"She was the good one in our family. She just tangled up with this guy," Donna Eastep, her older sister, said. "But she died sober, and she had just gotten baptized. She was turning her life around, and she loved her kids."

Misty was perhaps hit hardest by her mother's death. In the next few years, the files show a child plummeting downhill.

She became suicidal, was no longer considered adoptable, and was relegated to shuttling among MacLaren, mental health facilities and temporary placements, most of the time on a heavy mix of psychotropic drugs.

In a way, Misty died twice: once on June 12, 1994, then again on March 8, 2002.

Following her mother's death, Misty's behavior changed markedly. Court documents describe her as impulsive, aggressive, defiant, depressed and destructive. Therapists were sure the changes were "related to the sudden death of her mother."

As the child deteriorated, Eastep asked DCFS whether Misty could visit her family for the holidays. The family couldn't afford to pay for the child's travel expenses. But DCFS could have paid transportation costs; Misty's lawyer could have asked Garcia to order that she be allowed to visit.

No one helped.

"That little girl was hurting because of the death of her mother," Eastep - who continued to call, write and send Misty gifts - said. "They should work with trying to get these kids with their families. Instead, they're making money off of them."

By the time Misty was 10, she was described as "developmentally disabled and emotionally disturbed."

Still grieving for her lost mother, according to the reports of therapists hired by the county, Misty was having trouble sleeping and began talking about suicide.

Just six months after her mother's death, Misty was classified as unadoptable. While she was still a resident of Five Acres, the court referred Misty to Harbor Regional Center, a nonprofit state agency that provides services to the mentally retarded.

One bright spot was that, once a month, Misty was allowed to visit her brother at her former foster home. In addition, Misty's grandmother visited the girl regularly and remained in close contact with Misty's therapist. However, Misty's grandmother would no longer speak to anyone representing DCFS.

Misty still had her good days. She loved to hear fairy tales and liked to draw. During an interview with her social workers, she said that her goal was to live with "a nice family, stay there forever and never leave."

But there were also the bad days, more and more of them, according to the staff at Five Acres. Misty was "verbally and physically provoking," according to a report dated April 13, 1995, which said Misty was a follower who was associating with "bad company." A treatment plan described her as at-risk and showing "mild signs of organic brain dysfunction."

Efforts were stepped up to try and figure out what to do with Misty. Although Five Acres had classified Misty as unadoptable, her DCFS social worker, Florence McCaffery, disagreed, saying "Misty deserves a chance."

Garcia ordered that efforts continue to find a suitable adoption for Misty.

On Aug. 17, 1995, the Department of Children and Family Services placed a legal notice in the Los Angeles Daily Journal seeking the whereabouts of Misty's presumed father.

Though Stanley Biber said that he was listed in the telephone directory and never tried to hide his identity, DCFS reported to the court the next year that - after an exhaustive search - Misty's father could not be found.

"That was a lie that they couldn't find me," Biber said. "I asked one of the social workers at

Misty's funeral what was going on, and she said, 'We screwed up.'"

Still, there were those who tried to help. Misty was especially attached to her Five Acres' therapist, Diana Poulin, who took Misty and her grandmother to visit Cynthia's grave and to visit her Aunt Lorra and Uncle Billy.

Poulin and DCFS social worker Sandra Parker also tried to ensure that Misty could continue to see her brother. However, his caretakers refused and would not return calls from Poulin and Parker.

In the summer of 1996, Poulin left Five Acres during a reported management shakeup. Misty said she was lonely and couldn't sleep. She was devastated.

Three days after Christmas 1996, Misty threatened to jump from a rooftop at Five Acres. She was admitted to a psychiatric hospital and diagnosed as suffering from major depression and post-traumatic stress disorder.

She cut her arm in what was considered a suicide attempt and was taken to another hospital, where psychiatrist diagnosed her as having bipolar disorder. They later switched the diagnosis to major depression and conduct disorder.

After 3 1/2 years at Five Acres, the facility suggested Misty go live somewhere else.

Misty was returned to MacLaren in February 1997.

That month, Misty also was sent to mental health court where Superior Court Judge Owen Lee Kwong signed an order that stated Misty was voluntarily applying to become a patient at Harbor View Center, a psychiatric facility in Long Beach, where she would remain for a year.

At Harbor View, 12-year-old Misty was placed on a road she would not escape for the rest of her life - one that relied on heavy doses of psychotropic medications to address a range of symptoms and sedate the often-troubled child.

At Harbor View, she was put on Zoloft, Senequan, Lithium, Depakote, Thorazine, Benadryl, Prozac and Cogentin.

She continued to deteriorate. Harbor View reported that Misty was isolating herself and refusing to attend school. In addition, the hospital report stated that the child had no concept of organization or sense of time and that Misty's family and friends "have had a negative influence" on her treatment.

"She was a zombie when we would go see her," Lorra Siegfried, a maternal aunt, recalled.

Because of cases like Misty's, the medical community remains divided about the use of psychotropic medications on children.

Although an official with the American Academy of Pediatrics declined to discuss the specifics of Misty's case, he said the use of psychotropic medications on Down syndrome children is cause for real concern because their systems react differently to the chemicals.

"This is very problematic," Richard Gorman, chairman of the academy's drug committee, said. "The amount of instability in the foster care system frightens me."

Gorman, an Ellicott, Md., pediatrician who has treated foster children said that mental health diagnoses in children are less precise than they are in adults.

"These drugs have been tested on adults," he said, "and, in the greatest part, not on children."

In desperation, Misty told her DCFS social worker that she wanted to live with her grandmother and didn't need Harbor View any longer. In October 1997, Garcia began to exert more control over the child's case. He ordered that Martha Siegfried's visits with the child be liberalized.

On March 27, 1998, Misty, 13, was transferred to Kenmore Group Home. Before the end of the day, Kenmore officials called DCFS and asked that she be removed.

Misty was returned to MacLaren. There, she asked Craig Nishioka, her new DCFS social worker, why she couldn't see her little brother. According to available court records, it appears that Misty had not seen her brother for at least a year. Nishioka told her he thought the boy had

been adopted.

Misty became "very irate and could not understand how he could be adopted without her permission," Nishioka wrote on April 7, 1998.

The next month, Misty was moved to the Inglewood foster home of Marie Waltz.

Waltz, a state-licensed foster parent for 37 years, said she and her family fell in love with the child.

"Her death was a real tragedy. I can't even talk about it without crying," she said. "She was a lovely girl. But there was something wrong with her. She had this diabetes situation ... The reason she left my home was because she was going through a stage where she was throwing things."

"The foster mother was a great woman, and she loved Misty," Eastep said. "The problem in her home was that the system put Misty on the wrong medication."

Misty stayed with Waltz for one month and was taken away after the police were called.

DCFS sent Misty to Florence Crittenton Center, a treatment facility. An assessment done there said the sixth-grade student was receiving multiple psychotropic medications, including Prozac, Haldol and Depakote.

The child was described as "very quiet, appears to be low functioning, and has no concept of time."

On June 1, 1998, Misty again attempted suicide and was rushed to another psychiatric hospital. This time, a hospital psychiatrist diagnosed her as "mentally retarded and suffering from schizophrenia for 10 years."

Days later, DCFS sent her back to MacLaren. Misty told the staff that she didn't want to go to any more group homes or hospitals because she would never want to leave her new boyfriend, another shelter resident named "Leroy." MacLaren staff reported that the 13-year-old had suddenly gone "boy crazy."

Because of Misty's medical needs, DCFS concurred, reporting to the court that no placements were available for her. The department reported that living at MacLaren, which was intended to be an emergency shelter, was "having no negative effects upon Misty Siegfried."

A staff psychiatrist prescribed Prozac and Seroquel to treat Misty's "depression and irritability." A psychiatric evaluation on Aug. 12 indicated she was "still sad" and wanted to see her brother.

During therapy sessions, Misty told her MacLaren therapist that she was a gang member, and she claimed to have been arrested, although nothing in court documents indicated either of these things to be true.

Misty said her goal was to get married and have a family. The therapist felt the girl was suffering from depression, mild mental retardation and diabetes.

On Nov. 20, DCFS found an opening for Misty, and she was moved to Diamond Ranch in Pomona, another group home. While at Diamond Ranch, Karen Lee, a child psychiatrist, reported Misty was suffering from a major depressive disorder with psychotic features. The girl was described as aggressive, having irrational thoughts, angry outbursts and inappropriate laughing. Lee prescribed Prozac, Seroquel and Depakote.

Four months later, Misty's DCFS social worker reported to the court that she had adjusted to her placement and was "very proud of her excellent grades."

However, just three months later, on July 6, 1999, Misty was abruptly returned to MacLaren. No reason is given in the court files.

During this period, Misty began running away from MacLaren and was "acting out sexually."

She refused to take her psychotropic medications and was given a new DCFS social worker, Katrina Warren.

Warren recommended that Misty be placed in a state psychiatric hospital because she

was a suicide risk, had a history of arson and could become involved with illicit drugs. Warren also reported a "lack of cooperation" and interference from the child's relatives.

On Aug. 6, 1999, DCFS found a placement for Misty at Halinor Group Home, where she stayed for seven hours before running away. Three days later, Misty showed up at Martha Siegfried's door, and she notified authorities.

Misty again went home to MacLaren.

Her deterioration worsened. She was hospitalized three times in the next five months for "self-abusive behavior." Each time, she was sent to Van Nuys Hospital, a psychiatric hospital for children that was closed last year.

In August, a psychological evaluation found that Misty was searching for her identity and threatening to kill herself. While hospitalized at Van Nuys Hospital on a 72-hour hold, Misty said she wanted to become pregnant.

She refused medication, saying "it might hurt the baby," although a pregnancy test came back negative.

After she was returned to MacLaren in mid-August, a county psychiatrist recommended that all psychotropic medications be discontinued because of their potential to cause emotional breakdown when given in large quantities.

After a few days, Misty, then 14, threatened to kill herself. She was returned to Van Nuys Hospital, where she was placed in restraints for throwing furniture and assaulting staff and peers.

In September, a depressed and suicidal Misty was rushed back to Van Nuys Hospital, where she was diagnosed as having "depressive and psychotic disorder." She was prescribed Paxil, Thorazine and Risperdal.

During her two-week stay, Misty repeatedly threatened suicide, had hallucinations of her dead mother and was caught sneaking food.

Her behavior was described as "regressing," and she began receiving Paxil, Thorazine, Risperdal and Prozac. Ronald Sager, a hospital psychiatrist, recommended she be placed in a locked facility "for her safety and the safety of others."

She was returned to MacLaren Nov. 3, 1999. A week later, she was moved to Aviva Center Group Home, from which she ran away three days later.

By December, Misty was back in a different psychiatric hospital but was returned home to MacLaren within the week - only to be hospitalized again three days later for threatening to kill herself and for refusing to take medication.

The Department of Children and Family Services informed the court it was investigating a conservatorship.

Misty continued to refuse to take psychotropic medications and began refusing insulin shots for her diabetes. Judge Nancy Brown issued a court order Dec. 17, 1999, allowing MacLaren staff to physically restrain Misty to give her insulin injections.

Misty began the new millennium being physically restrained by MacLaren staff.

Several days later, Misty's court-appointed attorney, Alexandra Movel of Dependency Court Legal Services, was relieved of her duties. Attempts to contact Movel for comment were unsuccessful.

Douglas Hunter, also with the legal services group, was appointed Misty's new lawyer.

Hunter, who since has joined the county counsel's office, recalled that, when he first met Misty, "she put up this hard exterior."

"I sat down with her a couple of times and said, 'If you work with me, I'll work with you.' And she was fine after that," he said.

Misty was one of his favorite clients, Hunter said, and he visited her at MacLaren and talked to her on the telephone.

"She would call me and say, 'Doug, I have a problem. Could we work on it?'" he

remembered.

Misty was a regular kid, Hunter said, who liked to do all the things other kids liked to do.

"She seemed to have a bad reputation with the people at Mac. But she had a soft side, and contrary to what some people said, she got along with a lot of the girls at Mac," Hunter said. "When I was her attorney, her problem wasn't running away. It was taking her medication. What she really wanted was to go see her grandmother and go on outings."

By mid-January, it appears that Judge Garcia was growing increasingly concerned about Misty and her oversight by DCFS.

Following a report by DCFS to the court on Jan. 18, 2000, that Metropolitan State Hospital, a psychiatric facility, would not take Misty as a patient because her "overall IQ is too low functioning," Garcia ordered that Misty appear in court Feb. 2, and he demanded that DCFS provide all medical and incident reports regarding the child.

Garcia also ordered the department to evaluate Waltz, Misty's former foster mother, to see whether she could live at the woman's home. A week later, DCFS reported that Waltz had lost her license.

MacLaren School reported to the court that it had completed a psycho-educational evaluation of the 15-year-old girl and determined that she was "mentally retarded with a depressive disorder."

Misty, the report noted, had a "social age of 4- to 6-years-old and is mentally about 8 years, 9 months old. ... Misty is able to read, write and comprehend text at the second- to third-grade level."

Misty denied being suicidal and said she didn't have hallucinations or delusions. But she said she had used drugs and alcohol and was sexually active "because it was appropriate teenage behavior."

The school evaluation concluded that the teen-ager used sex to get attention and as "a form of socialization and bonding with people."

Warren, Misty's social worker, reported to Garcia that Misty had verbally abused her, threatened suicide, refused her medications, and threatened to run away.

About the same time, Misty reported to Warren that she would like to be placed at GLASS, a specialized group home for gay and lesbian youth. Officials at GLASS interviewed the child and indicated they would accept her.

But MacLaren officials twice blocked the move because, according to court documents, they would not allow the placement unless "the entire group home staff" was trained to treat diabetes. GLASS officials responded that such a demand was not economically feasible.

Still at MacLaren in April, Misty called police to report that MacLaren staff members were "hitting her." When law enforcement arrived to take her statement, the staff told police it was the other way around: Misty was assaulting them.

Two weeks later, staff physically restrained Misty and reported that she was not attending school and "going out of bounds." The girl was restrained twice more in May for allegedly trying to assault a staff member.

July 2000 brought one trouble after another. Misty was beaten up by another child, she injured her hand, was physically restrained, and in an alleged suicide attempt, she and another girl ingested Nair hair remover and shampoo.

On July 13, the Department of Children and Family Services reported to the court that "detainment at MacLaren appears to have no negative effect on Misty Siegfried."

Misty asked the judge whether she could have a new social worker.

On July 19, Garcia made several orders, all aimed at helping Misty:

- Warren should visit the child weekly.
- An interstate investigation should be completed to see whether it would be feasible for Misty to live with Florence Siegfried, her great grandmother, in New York.

- DCFS has the discretion to allow unmonitored visits with her relatives in California.
- Misty should be allowed to see her brother.

The next day, Misty was hospitalized at Pine Grove psychiatric facility after ingesting soap and hair remover.

Misty's MacLaren therapist wrote a letter saying the child desperately wanted to leave the shelter: "She requested to go to a diabetic camp, a group home or to New York with her grandmother. This is a recurrent theme with Misty; to want to get away regardless of where she goes. She feels hopeless," Maricres A. Lew, a psychiatric social worker wrote.

Hospitalization, Lew reported, had become Misty's "form of escape."

A mental health evaluation Aug. 1 concluded Misty was suicidal. As the situation worsened in August, Garcia issued more orders:

- Misty was to come to court with her social worker every 15 days.
- DCFS was to contact the Los Angeles Big Sisters Club to find a mentor for Misty.
- DCFS was to provide the girl with a clothing allowance.
- Misty was to be allowed to go on outings with her therapist.
- MacLaren medical staff was to check Misty for allergic reactions to soap.
- Martha Siegfried was to be reimbursed for travel expenses when she visited her granddaughter.
- And if Katrina Warren did not appear in court Sept. 5, the case would be transferred to another social worker.

While DCFS asked for a rehearing on all of Garcia's orders, Misty got a clothing allowance and a visit to medical staff, and her grandmother received bus fare.

Still, Misty's situation at MacLaren continued to worsen. MacLaren staff continued to restrain Misty regularly. In addition, the girl was generally on the receiving end when fights broke out among MacLaren residents.

"She was always covered in bruises," said a MacLaren employee who asked to remain unidentified. "She was a really sweet kid with a lot of problems. She would eat candy, and she couldn't because of her diabetes. She was getting candy from somewhere. Some of the staff would give kids food to shut them up. They used it as a reward."

She also allegedly was being sexually abused by MacLaren staff. Former MacLaren cook Greg A. Lyons stated in a Sept. 7, 2001, declaration, that adult employees sexually abused Misty and other foster children.

Recently, Lyons said it was "common knowledge" at MacLaren that at least one county worker was giving Misty food in exchange for sexual favors. Lyons' declaration was part of a class action filed last year on behalf of foster children who allegedly were abused by MacLaren staff. *Jazzmon R. v. County of Los Angeles*, BC153854 (Los Angeles Super. Ct., filed April 6, 2001; amended as a class action, July 11, 2001).

At the time, MacLaren officials couldn't figure out where Misty was getting food, like a jar of peanut butter a day. Lyon also alleged that Misty was forced to perform sexual acts while being held prisoner one night in a closet at one of the older boys' cottages. None of these incidents was mentioned in Misty's dependency files reviewed by the Daily Journal.

Lisa Nunez, the acting director of MacLaren, said she spoke for all MacLaren employees when she declined requests for interviews for this article.

In September, MacLaren had been Misty's permanent home for more than a year.

In court documents, Oscar M. Sandoval, a children's therapist with Alma Family Services, wrote that Misty's "episodes of depression are now associated with her stay at MacLaren ... Unfortunately, any child who remains for such a long period of time in a shelter-oriented facility, it becomes counterproductive toward the well being of their mental state. In regards to Misty, she is a remarkable child who has been able to endure over this period of time."

The problems between Misty and the staff continued. She was physically restrained time

and again. Her Department of Mental Health therapist again wrote that the child was "demonstrating symptoms of depression related to her lengthy stay at MacLaren."

"Misty feels that people have given up on her, hence a placement has not been found," the therapist wrote. "[She is] constantly worried about whether or not a placement has been found.

"In addition, she is also anxious about whether or not the placement will want her. Misty's extensive stay at MacLaren contributes to her anxiety and depression [and she] sometimes lacks the motivation to behave appropriately."

On Oct. 4, 2000, a physician with Children's Hospital wrote DCFS urging that Misty be moved out of MacLaren and into a group home. Children's Hospital volunteered to give free medical training to anyone caring for a child with diabetes.

Warren reported to the court that she was continuing to investigate a conservatorship so that the girl could be committed to a state mental hospital because no other facility would accept her.

"With her 16th birthday, Misty is anxious about another year passing by in which she spends her birthday and other important milestones at MacLaren," Lew, her therapist, wrote on Nov. 6. It is the undersigned's recommendation that Misty be offered an opportunity to engage or be involved in an activity outside of MacLaren.

"Misty's last AWOL attempt, which subsequently led to a hospitalization, was her way of having freedom from MacLaren, even if for a short time," Lew wrote.

But sweet 16 came and went. Misty, in her junior year at MacLaren School, was suspended for being "totally obnoxious and rude."

When her blood-sugar level skyrocketed, she refused to take insulin. She continued to be restrained by MacLaren staff for walking out of school and being "verbally assaultive."

"Misty seemed tired," a staff member reported, "cried a little and was angry when talking about her boyfriend."

When Misty's boyfriend broke up with her, she fell apart.

On Dec. 14, 2000, MacLaren School's principal offered to allow Misty to enter a half-day program if she could maintain a "good attitude for one week."

Later that day, Misty scratched herself with sharp objects and banged her head on a wall.

A week before Christmas Misty again threatened to kill herself and was placed on one-on-one supervision, a form of suicide watch. Over the holidays, her grandmother and two aunts came to visit.

The New Year brought more torment.

Misty was doing poorly in independent study school. DCFS, at the urging of Garcia, got Misty a placement at another foster home. However, Misty refused to stay and threatened to trash the home if she wasn't allowed to leave.

When the foster mother called the sheriff, Misty ran away and was found by the mother, wandering the streets. She was hospitalized at Las Encinas and prescribed Depakote, Benadryl and Insulin.

In February, the Mental Health Court, Dept. 95, held a hearing for Misty, but no one remembered to bring her. An angry Garcia ordered DCFS to explain why the girl was not transported to Dept. 95, and he ordered that the child's DCFS social worker, her supervisor, her regional administrator and another social worker appear in his courtroom Feb. 15.

The little courtroom at the Children's Court in Monterey Park was crowded that day: court personnel, attorneys, six DCFS representatives and Misty. Again, Garcia ordered Warren to comply with a Juvenile Court directive and visit the child, back at MacLaren, weekly.

Meanwhile, an official with Harbor Regional Center reported in an undated "To Whom it May Concern" letter, that MacLaren staff believed Misty was "committing slow suicide," which precluded "her acceptance at any group home available in the Regional Center system, given the extreme liability involved."

Misty's only options were at MacLaren or with her grandmother.

In March 2001, Garcia ordered that Misty be allowed overnight visits with her grandmother and that she be permitted to visit her mother's grave.

At the same time, MacLaren staff saw a child who had become "a loner" and who had been caught eating packets of sugar. She was also described as verbally abusive, sexually active and unwilling to take insulin.

Misty also got a new lawyer from DCLS when her previous one moved on. Many lawyers join DCLS just out of law school, get trained and move on. As a result, children in the dependency system can have numerous lawyers.

Her new lawyer, Michele Breslauer, said that what touched her about Misty was her innocence.

"I don't think she had a mean bone in her body. She didn't have the capacity to be mean. I think she fought with people to get attention," Breslauer recalled, "Once she got to know me, she was straight with me."

At Breslauer's urging, Garcia again made a series of orders to help Misty:

- DCFS was to complete a medical evaluation to address problems Misty was having with her kidneys.
- Misty was to be able to visit her mother's grave again.
- Misty was to be taken to Planned Parenthood to discuss reproductive issues and possible birth control.
- Misty was to be allowed to have twice a month, overnight visits with her grandmother from Friday evening until Sunday evening. These weekend visits were conditioned on Misty's complying with MacLaren's rules, behaving appropriately and going to school.

But complying with rules was often beyond Misty's grasp. Breslauer said that mentally Misty was 10.

"Misty was a good person, but she just didn't understand everything," Breslauer said. "When she got freedom, she didn't know how to be out in the real world, and when you are at MacLaren, you are sexualized. I'm sure puberty had something to do with it; or maybe it was just MacLaren."

In May, Misty pierced her tongue with a metal rod and "put dirty erasers on each end." She refused to remove the rod and was taken to the infirmary.

That same month, MacLaren School reported that Misty was receiving straight Fs because she refused to remain in class.

After one of Misty's weekend visits with her grandmother, MacLaren officials reported that Misty was found with an unlit cigarette in her hand and an empty book of matches; a month later, staff discovered her with a cigarette and a cigarette lighter.

By December, Misty had upped the ante and returned from a weekend visit with a pack of Newport cigarettes, a cigar, and a cigarette lighter.

Garcia ordered DCFS to look at an alternative education plan and possible conservatorship so that the Department of Mental Health could find a suitable placement for the child.

Garcia ordered the department to read to Misty the contents of her MacLaren cottage file, and he ordered MacLaren to buy her new clothes that fit.

Misty continued to have "temper tantrums and crying fits when she did not get her way." She also continued to harm herself, strangling herself with a plastic bag around her neck, and she assaulted staff and damaged property.

She was taken to the crisis stabilization unit at MacLaren, and DCFS again requested that the Department of Mental Health place Misty in a locked facility.

The months of July and August 2001 were filled with court reports that Misty was lashing out at staff and being attacked by other residents. Even with a private tutor, the child's grades

were reported as straight D-s.

On August 14, Misty slashed her arms with a razor.

Breslauer filed a motion asking that Harbor Regional Center be joined as a party in Misty's dependency case. She cited as her authority Welfare and Institutions Code Section 32, which allows the court to join any agency "that fails to meet its legal obligations to a child."

Breslauer charged that "there is a real danger that the agencies will continue to pass the buck and Misty will not receive the help that she needs to find a placement more permanent than MacLaren Children's Center."

Harbor Regional Center, represented by sole practitioner Richard O. Schwartz, responded that it had "met its legal duty under the Lanterman Act as well as complying with the working agreement between the Los Angeles Department of Children and Family Services and the Los Angeles County Regional Center."

Schwartz cited Misty's failed placement history, writing that her "non-compliance with medical treatment poses a severe barrier to any placement options." In addition, he wrote that the Juvenile Court's order authorizing restraint to administer diabetes medication to the child "is prohibited in any regional center facility."

Despite its opposition, Garcia granted Breslauer's motion Sept. 1 and joined Harbor Regional Center in Misty's case.

Breslauer also contacted the Superior Court's child advocates office to ask for a volunteer to help Misty. The office declined to handle Misty's case because the child was "not receptive to services offered" and the office could think of no other services that would help the child.

Misty had become frightened "about being eventually placed in a locked facility."

Not long after she expressed this apprehension, Misty was attacked by another MacLaren resident and was treated in the infirmary for black eyes, bruises and scratches. She said she felt "emotional fear" and wanted to call the police and press charges.

Harbor Regional Center found a placement for Misty in a home run by Betty Wesley. Misty still wanted to live with her maternal grandmother and see her brother.

But DCFS reported that, when Misty was unstable around her brother, he became unstable.

On Oct. 14, 2001, Misty ran away from Wesley's home.

Garcia issued a protective custody warrant. On Oct. 31, she was found at Lancaster Hospital with a "soaring blood-sugar level" and was returned to MacLaren.

On Nov. 2, she ran away from MacLaren again and was found by police with a young man who was arrested and taken into custody. Misty was admitted to Antelope Valley Hospital and placed on a 72-hour hold because of "out of control behaviors."

On Nov. 5, Misty was returned to MacLaren.

The next day, Breslauer was relieved as Misty's attorney because her firm also represented a child with whom Misty had a conflict.

On Nov. 8, Pamela Tripp, a veteran panel attorney and a sole practitioner, took over Misty's case.

Tripp remembered Misty as a personable young woman struggling to grow up, be free, and make something of her life.

"I interviewed her half a dozen times in the last six months of her life," Tripp said. "Misty was very precocious. She appeared to be very bright, despite the documentation that she was developmentally disabled.

"She wanted very much to go to school to become a nursing assistant because of her diabetes. She wanted to help other kids that might be in the same situation."

Misty wrote a letter on Sunday, Dec. 2, 2001, her last.

To Whom [it] May Ever Concern:

I, Misty Siegfried, have been in the system since I was 5 or 6. I [have] been through a lot. I lost my mother; then I lost my brother over lies from the [foster mother]. I've asked over and over to see my baby brother [name withheld], but my answer was never offered to me.

I just had my birthday. I am 17-years-old. Next year, 2003, I'll be 18-years-old. I have a lot of plans: Go to adult school and get a GED of [cosmetology].

I know in my history I did a lot of mistakes. I've been in a lot of hospitals [because] of the sadness of losing my mother Cindy Siegfried and hearing I can't see my brother.

I didn't know how to express my feelings but hurt myself. But I've been realized that that's not the way to express them. I found other ways. I visited my mother once a year.

I really wanna be independent. I've learned how to [be] independent, do my insulin and I've been doing it since I've come back to MacLaren Hall from AWOL. I AWOL-ed because I'm tired of people putting me down. None of the people working on my case doesn't help me. I'm tired of going to places that are not normal. I wanna live in a placement that has [independent living program] classes and people that will help me to start the [process] of living by myself.

I believe in myself.

I just need someone to help me, take me where I need to start.

My grandmother and friends don't have cars and it's too far to take buses all day for my grandmother. I was wishing if I could have a pass to take a bus to see them and come back the same day. I know I AWOL and you guys don't trust me, but I've never had those chances before, and it will give me a chance to learn.

See, when I am 18, I can do things on my own. I wanna start going job hunting and for interviews for placements, such as places for 17-18 housing.

I'm ready for changing. I just need to find people to give me those chances. On the weekends, [there isn't] nothing to do and [no MacLaren] staff to take me most of the time. And I feel bad when I see other people go home.

I was thinking to go to school every week and take my blood sugars and have no problems. And I can get ... out on my own and come back at a time you say. I need to have you believe in me - and if I have that it will make me work harder.

I have another question. I was wondering if I can be on SSI and save up that money so that when I get [to be] 18 I can use the money to get [an] apartment and food.

I also heard I can get a job. My dream is to help old people, like a nurse for old people, something like that. I have a fallback. It's doing hair and nails.

Well, I hope that [with] my goals people can help me see I can be somebody.

Thanks,

Misty Siegfried

Garcia ordered DCFS to investigate Misty's request to attend a trade school and ordered

MacLaren staff to turn over all its "confidential information in detention reports" related to Misty.

In response, DCFS suggested that Harbor Regional Center should find a home for Misty who was "becoming frustrated to impatient with being in MacLaren."

Misty was still reportedly eating a jar of peanut butter a day and had "convinced staff to buy her candy and sweets."

Her behavior became so bad that the MacLaren infirmary reportedly had to put a lock on its refrigerator to keep her out.

In December 2001, Misty's new DCFS social worker, Diquitha Aubrey, reported that "no facility is capable of meeting Misty's needs" because of her medical problems, suicide risks, history of arson, aggressive behavior, sexual acting out, runaways, drug/alcohol involvement, lack of cooperation and interference.

Harbor Regional Center also reported that its attempts to place the child failed because she is too "street smart."

MacLaren staff reported, "Misty is her usual profane self. Misty continues to be rude, belligerent, argumentative and dismissive."

Meanwhile, Misty, who never missed a counseling session, was again refusing to attend school. Garcia ordered Misty's social worker, her supervisor, and regional administrators to explain why the girl wasn't being allowed to participate in a program offered by a vocational school for nursing.

On Feb. 7, Misty was assaulted by another resident. She was placed overnight in a crisis center run by the Department of Mental Health before she was returned to MacLaren the next day.

She appeared in Garcia's courtroom for the last time Feb. 13.

A transcript of that hearing indicates Garcia talked to Misty about her goals and behavior.

Garcia asked, "So what do I care about third grade, seventh grade level? She's in zero level. All I want her to do is to be in a program. So what are we going to do?"

Misty told Garcia that she wanted to earn a general education diploma through the Job Corps.

Garcia told Misty that she had a "Ph.D. in giving everybody a hard time."

Garcia said he'd heard she had been in a fight and that he was angry with her for not taking her diabetes medication.

"I'm sorry," Misty said.

Tripp then said the child wanted to know whether she could have a pass to visit her grandmother. Tripp explained that MacLaren officials denied the pass because they didn't have any personnel available to drive her to Gardena.

Misty asked, "Can I take the bus?"

"What would be the possibility of her taking the bus?" Garcia responded. "Oh, don't tell me about AWOL-ing. She can AWOL without taking the bus. So let's not talk about that. OK?"

Misty promised Garcia she would be gone only from 3:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. Garcia authorized the bus pass and ordered DCFS to pay for the transportation.

Misty and her social worker were ordered to appear again Feb. 27.

Misty took the bus to her grandmother's home Feb. 15. She made it there, but the family won't talk about how long she stayed or what happened.

On Feb. 22, Misty returned to MacLaren and reported she'd been raped while she was on leave. The next day, she was transported to USC Medical Center and ran away again.

She was missing until March 7, when the paramedics discovered a dying girl in a Palmdale apartment.

Stuart Riskin, a spokesman for the Department of Children and Family Services, said he could not comment on details of Misty's case. But he said that he had contacted Misty's last social worker and her supervisor to comment for this story.

"They don't feel comfortable talking about Misty," Riskin said. "The people involved in this case were very emotionally involved with this child. They were in pain when she died, and they are still grieving."

Misty's attorneys also said they were grief-stricken.

"I think she was just restless, a restless teen-ager," Tripp said. "In one respect, she was a very normal teen-ager: She just wanted to split for the weekend [and] she might have gotten in over her head."

Breslauer said she was in the hospital, giving birth, when she learned of Misty's death.

"I think she wanted someone to love her, and she was just looking for that," Breslauer said. "I don't want to be crass or demeaning, but this was inevitable."

When Hunter heard that a foster child with diabetes had died, he instinctively knew who it was.

"I just knew it was Misty Siegfried," he said. "I just shook my head. These kids need to be able to reach out to other people, reach out to counselors, teachers, social workers, attorneys. They also have to learn to trust themselves."

Misty's family simply fell apart.

Lorra Siegfried believes that her niece was murdered and that nothing will be done about it.

"I still think she was murdered. People took advantage of that poor little girl," Siegfried said. "What the system did was wrong."

"They took her life away," Eastep added.

Biber didn't know until his phone rang one morning in March that the family he had been searching for a dozen years was gone.

"I got a call one morning," Biber said, "and this guy - I thought he was a cop - said, 'Is Misty Siegfried your daughter?'"

"And I said, 'Yeah. I'll come get her.' I thought she was in some kind of trouble, like she was in juvenile hall or something.

"Then he said, 'You better sit down.'"

Until Biber attended the funeral, he wasn't sure Misty was his child.

"I didn't know anyone," he said. "But I looked at her, and she had my eyes and my mouth."

Misty, who would have turned 18 Nov. 9, is buried in an unmarked grave next to her mother at Holy Cross Cemetery in Culver City.

It is Martha Siegfried's dream to be able to buy a house near the cemetery so that she can be closer to her daughter and granddaughter.

"Some people say Misty's mother called her home. Maybe she did," Siegfried said. "But the system should have protected her."

DAILY JOURNAL ARTICLE

<http://www.dailyjournal.com>

© The Daily Journal Corporation. All rights reserved.

Maze of Mental-Health Services Failed Misty, All Agree Daily Journal - Nov 12, 2002

By Cheryl Romo
Daily Journal Staff Writer

LOS ANGELES - Hundreds of troubled children, many of them suicidal, are in Los Angeles' County's foster-care system, according to dependency court attorneys. Half of these children have serious mental health problems that are compounded by

developmental delays, the lawyers say.

While most kids learn to walk, talk and think at about the same age, for reasons that are not yet understood some kids don't.

Misty Siegfried, a 17-year-old mentally retarded girl, was such a child. She died under suspicious circumstances 12 days after she ran away earlier this year from MacLaren Children's Center, a county shelter in El Monte.

"MacLaren is full of Mistys," Pamela Tripp, the girl's last dependency attorney, said. "Just take a walk through there."

"There are so many of these kids out there. There are hundreds, and I probably represent a dozen," said another of Misty's former attorneys, Michele Breslauer of Dependency Court Legal Services Inc. "They move from foster home to foster home. There are more and more of these kids out there."

Those who knew Misty said that she was aware she could die if she didn't receive insulin treatment for her diabetes. And, during her nine years in the foster-care system, Misty attempted suicide numerous times, and she often had to be physically restrained in order to administer the insulin she needed.

Tripp, a sole practitioner who represents parents and children on a panel at the dependency court, believes Misty indirectly may have taken her own life.

"Yes," Tripp said. "She was somebody in that frame of mind."

Breslauer said her former client's death was probably inevitable.

Only one-third of the children ever get the help they need from the foster-care system.

"There is a gap," Tripp said. "The main thing is to get them the professional mental health services they need."

By the time she was retained as a court-appointed attorney for Misty, Tripp said, it might have been too late.

"I don't want to pass the buck. But I was only involved in the last eight-to-nine months. She had so many attorneys and social workers," Tripp said. "If there was one thing that should have been contributed, it was the self-esteem issue. During the time I represented her, she didn't take care of herself medically. If she had, she would have felt better about herself."

Breslauer tried to get help for Misty when she represented her in the year or so before her death.

"As a lawyer, you are also a social worker," Breslauer said, "I think I care too much. I tend to relate most to my teen-age girls. I think that sometimes we all care too much."

"If someone like me does all these things and then what?" her voice trailed off. "I don't know the answer. If more people were involved, maybe it would help. At the minimum, we should be getting these services that I now have to fight for."

Breslauer fought for Misty to receive a variety of services: She persuaded Superior Court Commissioner Albert Garcia, Misty's dependency court judge, to join Harbor Regional Center, a state agency serving the retarded, as a party in the case; she arranged for Misty to visit Planned Parenthood to learn about reproductive services; she made it possible for Misty to see her family more often; and she ensured that Misty attended court hearings regularly.

Among the organizations Breslauer appealed to for help was the Los Angeles Superior Court's Child Advocates Office/CASA. However, on Sept. 12, 2001, six months before her death, the office declined to help Misty Siegfried.

CASA volunteers try to cut through any red tape to get kids the services they need. They are appointed by dependency judges to investigate, facilitate and advocate for the best interest of the child. They report directly to the court and monitor compliance with court orders.

The rejection letter, found in dependency court case documents, said Misty had been offered numerous services and had not been receptive.

"She was almost too troubled for them. It's a daily thing for kids like Misty," Breslauer said.

"They said 'no' then, but they might have accepted her today."

In the past, CASA did not focus its efforts on older children with mental health diagnoses or mental health disability.

When Shahrzad Talieh took over as director last year, she took a new approach.

Formerly a children's attorney with Dependency Court Legal Services, Talieh this summer launched a CASA specialized advocacy unit, funded through CASA's national organization, for foster children with significant developmental and psychiatric issues.

"The Child Advocates Office realizes that children in circumstances like Misty's are in need of advocacy and services the most," Talieh said. "I believe that the county and the court, as well as the attorneys and all the other players in the system, need to focus on these children more because they are the most vulnerable to arriving at horrendous outcomes, such as suicide, incarceration and unsuccessful emancipation."

Talieh believes Los Angeles County is failing children who hunger for a sense of stability in their lives.

"Unless we do something about this, we are not going to see any different results," Talieh said. "What happened to Misty is tragic. We have to do everything we can to ensure that this doesn't happen to another child. We need to think of Misty every day when we plan for the future.

"And having an advocate isn't enough. The county has to create placements so these children don't bounce from place to place."

The specialized advocacy unit's training sessions are being taught by Mental Health Advocacy Services' Nancy Shea, a legal expert in mental health issues affecting children.

"The need is so great," Shea said. "We are just not meeting their needs. And, as a result, we see the worst possible thing that can happen, which is what happened to Misty.

"If children don't get the services, then they flunk out of school and they are on the streets. We need to serve these children and provide the appropriate services so that they can move into adulthood and live as productive a life as possible.

"If we don't, terrible things happen to them and, in the long run, to society."

Talieh stressed that volunteers are needed for the new unit.

"We are short of volunteers," she said, urging anyone with a little extra time to call the child advocates office.

Breslauer believes reform starts at the top.

"There's this whole issue of money and who is going to pay for what," she said. "It starts at the top. You have to have the Department of Children and Family Services, the Department of Mental Health and the regional centers meet, at a minimum of once a month, with a mediator.

"They can't point fingers. They have to decide how much money they will put on the table. And someone from the court should be there, too."