

## New Mexico's Children, Families Agency Links Database to Police

March 21, 2018



(TNS) — Omaree Varela became the face of child abuse in December 2013, when the 9-year-old was brutally kicked to death by his mother, while his abusive stepfather shot up heroin in an adjacent room.

It wasn't until Omaree's autopsy report was released months later that it became known that the state Children, Youth and Families Department had nine referrals to the family for alleged child abuse or neglect, even though only two of those referrals were substantiated.

Officers who made contact with the family six months before Omaree's death – after tracing an anonymous 911 call to the family home in which the stepfather profanely and abusively berated the boy – had no idea about those other referrals. Otherwise, they might have removed the child from the home at that time.

Now, CYFD has created a Law Enforcement Portal, a database that officers can access from their computers or mobile devices. The portal provides information gathered by CYFD about previous referrals and contacts with children and families, whether any of those referrals were substantiated, the names and phone numbers of case workers and other data. That way, when officers respond to a call, they go in having important background information that can help speed up and focus an investigation.

"It is absolutely critical for police officers to have this information," CYFD Cabinet Secretary Monique Jacobson said Tuesday during a training session for officers at CYFD's offices on San Mateo NE. CYFD invited local media to the session to update them on the program.

"It allows law enforcement to know so much more even before they knock on a door," she said. "They will know how many children are in the home and to check on their safety, and it helps the officers understand if the people they're talking to are being honest. They can get a better understanding on what's actually going on in that household."

Since training began last May, about 150 officers from various agencies have been instructed on how to use the portal. Twenty additional officers were training at computer stations on Tuesday. The officers have come from the New Mexico State Police, the Albuquerque Police Department, the Bernalillo County Sheriff's Office, the Las Cruces Police Department and the state Attorney General's Office.

CYFD conducts training classes about once a month, Jacobson said. "The goal is to have all law enforcement departments and investigative agencies around the state familiar with what kind of information might be found on the portal and how to navigate it," she said.

The portal can be accessed from a desktop computer, a laptop computer like those mounted in police cars, or from a mobile device.

Because the information on the portal is highly confidential, the portal also tracks who is accessing it and what information and cases that person is looking at, Jacobson said.

Sharron Duran, a State Police officer working out of the Raton area, was among those being trained Tuesday on the new portal. She said she and other officers have responded to many calls where child abuse was suspected, but background information about the child and family was not available until a call was made to CYFD's Statewide Central Intake, or SCI. "And we were not able to access SCI until we got back to the office," she said.

"Being able to have this hands-on from our in-car computer and our mobile devices is just amazing," Duran said. "It allows us to see what's going on within a home and if there is child abuse or drugs or something else that we need to look into a little more."

In the wake of Omaree's death, Gov. Susana Martinez issued a series of executive orders to reform CYFD, including ordering CYFD and law enforcement agencies statewide to better share information on cases involving crimes against children.

Jacobson, who was subsequently appointed to take over as head of CYFD, was charged with carrying out those reforms.

The Law Enforcement Portal was designed by in-house information technology staff at CYFD and funded by an allocation of \$480,000 from the state Legislature. The federal government helped to defray the cost by reimbursing \$100,000 of that cost, Jacobson said.

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<http://www.govtech.com/public-safety/New-Mexicos-Children-Families-Agency-Links-Database-to-Police.html>