

## Is the Los Angeles Foster Care System Watching Out for Children?

By [Ed Coghlan](#) on Jun 7 2011



Vyctorya 'Tori' Sandoval

A Los Angeles Times story on Monday told of the death of 2 year old Vyctorya "Tori" Sandoval, a young girl who had been returned to her long-troubled biological parents. The tragic

irony is that the co-founder of a foster family agency that contracted with the county to provide care to the girl wrote a letter last fall outlining the risks of returning the little girl to her biological parents. "It is tragic that it takes another death of a child who is supposed to be under the protection of the juvenile court to get people concerned about what is happening in the Los Angeles County foster care system." says Margaret Coyne, Executive Director of Advokids, a legal advocacy nonprofit organization for children in foster care. Coyne, a lawyer with over 25 years of experience working in child welfare system, said her organization has been getting calls for years about policies and practices in Los Angeles County that potentially endanger children. Advokids operates a statewide telephone hotline providing legal information and referrals to any person who is

concerned about a child in foster care. The hotline gets several calls a week from foster parents, foster family agency staff, foster children, relatives, attorneys and other people working in the Los Angeles County child welfare system.

Most of those calls concern a placement decision the county has made that the person calling believes would not be in the best interests of the child. Advokids educates these people about the legal mechanisms that are available to them to bring their concerns to the attention of the juvenile court because the juvenile court is ultimately responsible for the well-being of every child in foster care. These mechanisms have been prescribed by the Legislature and include opportunities for caregivers, foster family agencies, and relatives to file reports with the court concerning the child's well-being and to make recommendations to the court concerning the child's best interests.

"We share the outrage over this death, but want to emphasize that there are procedures in the system to protect children. We spend a lot of our time educating people about those systems. They just don't seem to be working as well as they should in L.A. County," added Coyne.

Coyne indicated that Advokids has observed that the LA juvenile courts often don't want to hear from people who are caring for children in foster care and the county has actually punished people who try to bring additional information to the court's attention. "The system in L.A. can seem hostile to those of us who advocate for children. We know of cases where children have been removed from committed foster parents because the foster parent tried get involved in the court process to bring their concerns about the safety and well-being of the child to the court's attention," said Coyne who indicated that her organization has been informed repeatedly by foster family agencies that they are afraid to file reports with the court, even though they are required by law to do so, for fear that the county will

no longer place children with them if they tell the court something the county does not want the court to hear.

“It is also our experience,” said Coyne, “that when a concerned person reaches out to the child’s attorney, the child’s attorney is too often unwilling or unable to do any independent investigation and takes no position on behalf of the child with respect to the concerns brought to their attention by the caregiver, relative, or foster family agency.”

The LA Times story indicated that there is frustration among county officials over the recurring systemic problems in child protective services.

“The juvenile court system is supposed to be the safety net for these children. Children are not safe unless everyone in the system can be held accountable for their decisions. When decisions are made on the basis of incomplete information because people who have information about the well-being of the child are actively discouraged from sharing that information with the court, bad things happen to children,” said Coyne.

Resource: Advokids <http://www.advokids.org/>  
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