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Tearful Apology in Boy's Death

County: A \$1-million payout is OKd. Molina, moved by a mother's plea, vows answers in foster care case.

By GARRETT THEROLF
TIMES STAFF WRITER

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A mother's plea for a criminal investigation into the death of her son--whose life ended while he was in the Los Angeles County foster care system--Tuesday elicited a trembling and tearful apology from county Supervisor Gloria Molina, who pledged to demand answers from county officials about what happened.

Hours later, Molina and her colleagues approved a \$1-million settlement in the lawsuit brought over the boy's death.

Molina's remarks and the board action followed an emotional appeal by the boy's mother.

Debra Reid, 44, entered the hearing room grim-faced, flanked by eight family members dressed in black. At her side was her son Debin, who was placed in foster care for 15 months in 1997. His older brother, Jonathan, was taken away at the same time. The children were taken from their mother after social workers concluded that she was unstable and not tending properly to their medical needs.

But Jonathan died six weeks after being placed in foster care, where social workers, by the county's admission, failed to inform medical workers of his severe asthma. Reid has been fighting the county in the courts ever since.

"This is five years in coming," Reid began.

Racked with sobs, Reid recalled how she begged social workers to treat Jonathan's asthma. Social workers had dismissed Reid's account of the severity of the child's asthma, county officials acknowledged.

"They said my child was healthy," Reid told the board. "Well, that child now lies in an Inglewood cemetery."

None of the social workers has been disciplined in the case, county officials said. Reid begged supervisors to launch a criminal investigation, alleging that social workers had falsified reports to take the boy from her.

"We have sought true justice and we have not received it until someone sends this case for criminal investigation," Reid said. "All we have received is a payoff, and we're not satisfied with a payoff."

"Not one person from the county," Reid said, "has bothered to apologize."

Reid's appeal to the board is one of many that the supervisors have heard involving the foster care system.

Virtually every week, a parade of parents come before the supervisors, pleading for help in getting their children out of that system. Most weeks, they leave empty-handed, as supervisors insist that they cannot involve themselves in matters that are before the courts. The pleas often meet with indifference from county officials, who typically talk among themselves as parents address the supervisors.

Tuesday was different.

As Reid spoke, the hearing room went silent. Aides and department heads dabbed at tears. In an adjacent chamber where county administrators eat snacks and drink coffee, all movement ceased.

Supervisor Yvonne Brathwaite Burke asked Reid whether she was satisfied with the settlement. After conferring with her attorney, Reid said she was, but reiterated her call for justice.

Then Molina spoke, her voice trembling, her eyes watering.

She recalled how supervisors routinely rebuff requests for help in foster care cases, and how she had told a congresswoman pleading on Reid's behalf that she had to trust the courts to do the right thing.

"I don't know that my apology to you will help you at all," Molina said. "I can only say I apologize for not being more attentive."

Promising to personally pursue the issue, Molina said, "We've got to really take the gloves off on this thing, because this is a real battle. If that department [the Department of Children and Family Services] could not protect those children, then we should not be empowering that department to carry out this work."

Supervisor Mike Antonovich quickly added his apology. Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky said the whole board apologized for what happened to Jonathan.

After the meeting, Reid said Molina's apology "meant a lot. She was sincere. That is the first sign of remorse I have seen in the county."

Reid said Tuesday's hearing and the conclusion of two civil cases filed over Jonathan's death and Debvin's placement in foster care were gratifying milestones in her family's quest for justice.

The determination to press for further action on Jonathan's death has occupied Reid and her family for years, she said Tuesday. At each step of the way, nine family members have gathered to vote on strategic decisions about how to pursue the case, she said

Along the way, the family has turned to one lawyer after another--seven in all.

"Every time a lawyer didn't believe in me or in this case we got rid of them," Reid said. "Jonathan is still very much a part of this family."