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State's children need a watchdog

By Cathleen Palm

The physical and sexual abuse endured by Charleni Ferreira raise the question of how a child could suffer so much without any effective intervention by the adults who knew her.

In recent proceedings, Municipal Court Judge Patrick Dugan appropriately scolded all those "who didn't stand up and holler" about the abuse of the Philadelphia girl, who died last year at the age of 10. We should also wonder what became of the hollering of those who did sound an alarm - such as the school nurse who is said to have relentlessly questioned whether Charleni was safe.

Charleni's stepmother, who allegedly inflicted the abuse, should certainly be held accountable, but so should every system that intersected with the child's life. Besides an honest assessment of what went wrong and how it can be addressed, the case should spur the creation of an independent children's ombudsperson's office to act as a watchdog for the child-welfare system.

Pennsylvania has a state-administered, county-operated child-welfare system that is comprehensive and well-financed in its efforts to investigate and treat child abuse and neglect. It can point to many strengths as well as challenges.

At every turn, though, the system's quality assurance rests entirely with the state Department of Public Welfare and its partners, county children and youth agencies and contracted private providers. There is no independent or impartial oversight of the child-welfare system.

Pennsylvania policymakers from both sides of the aisle have long talked about creating a children's ombudsperson. There have been bills introduced and recommendations within government studies, but they have not yielded results.

The need for accountability and transparency in the child-welfare system creeps up the priority list each time headlines remind us that some children pay the ultimate price for abuse. All too quickly, however, the outrage subsides, and efforts to improve the system, including the creation of a children's ombudsperson, fall off the radar screen.

An ombudsperson's office could independently evaluate and assure the safety of children when the child-welfare system appears to have fallen short. It could create a forum where the bell can be rung louder by those legally required to report suspected abuse. It could guard

against the violation of children's and parents rights. And it could facilitate public accountability and transparency.

Charlenni's death was a shameful example of the toll abuse takes on Pennsylvania's children. And, sadly, hers was not the only child-abuse-related death in 2009.

The creation of a children's ombudsperson's office would be an important signal that Harrisburg has finally summoned the political will to protect the children of the commonwealth. The children have already waited too long.

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