“Assaulted NJ Child Welfare Worker Not Surprised by New Attacks”
By Susan K. Livio
(Originally published via NJ Advance Media, 8/15/15)

TRENTON — When two child welfare caseworkers were assaulted on the job in July, Leah Coleman, who survived a vicious attack by a knife-wielding client in November, said she felt disgusted.

But she wasn't surprised.

The violent incident could have been avoided had the state provided better protection for its child welfare workers, according to Coleman's Facebook post following the July 14 attacks in Salem County. And, she added, there is lots of anger by families because the state Division of Child Protection and Permanency is viewed by some as an "unjust" force in their lives.

"When I was attacked I read the articles written about me as well as the comments in reply to these articles and most of them were to the point of me deserving what happened to me. You might be surprised I was in no way offended because comments like these were geared towards the agency as a whole, because none of the people knew me or my value for integrity, empathy, and treating others with respect," Coleman wrote. "I say this to say that many employees of this agency don't share these same values."

While making clear she was not speaking about the assaulted caseworkers, Coleman said she had "all too often witnessed the people served being treated unjustly, spoken to as if they are less than human all because a worker feels he or she has the power to do so. Child protective service misuse of power is as rampant as police brutality and misuse of power."

"There needs to be some individual internal reflection, and some community connections being built," she added. "So to my fellow DCPP workers I challenge you to reflect on your values and the way you treat the people you serve, as this is an important part of the solution."

Coleman, 30, of Camden, is on medical leave and declined to be interviewed for this report, referring a reporter to her attorney, who did not return phone calls.

But her comments on social media highlight the inherent conflict of a child protection worker's job: to protect vulnerable children while simultaneously trying to stabilize families that may not want help.

The job remains an adversarial and at times, a dangerous one. Last week, a Vermont mother who lost custody of her 9-year-old girl used a high-caliber hunting rifle to kill the worker involved in her case. A 2005 survey of 5,000 social workers by the National Association of Social Workers found 55 percent said they faced safety issues on the job, and 68 percent of them said their employers had not adequately addressed their concerns.

Mary McManus-Smith, chief counsel for family law at Legal Services of New Jersey, said she was not surprised by Coleman's statements, noting there is a perception among some clients that African-Americans and the poor are unfairly targeted by the child welfare system.
She noted that in New Jersey, "African-American children are disproportionately represented in foster care... (and) the rate of poverty of families in child protection matters tends to be exceedingly high."

About 13 percent of New Jersey children are black, but they make up about 40 percent of those in foster care in 2013, according to the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges. From 2005 to 2011, 95 percent of all parents and guardians investigated for abuse or neglect or were at risk of losing their children were too poor to afford an attorney, McManus-Smith said. Legal Services credits the state child welfare agency's Director Lisa von Pier with taking aim at a big problem that has prompted children to be removed from families: homelessness. She recently appeared in a video produced by Legal Services and in public saying, "housing is a human right." Homelessness "can be an instigator as why children are removed, and the director has said this should not be a basis," McManus-Smith said.

About a decade ago, the division as part of a long-term, court-ordered overhaul of how it operates began training its workers to "family team meetings," to encourage discussion between caseworkers and family members about how to fix problems that threaten a child's safety and well-being. The most recent monitoring report released in January found the frequency of these meetings "remain below levels expected by the Department of Children and Families leadership."

Hetty Rosenstein, state director for Communications Workers of America union, which represents child welfare employees, said the impact of these meetings is unclear. "One point that workers made after Leah was stabbed is that there are requirements that workers and the division repeatedly 'engage' with parents who everybody knows can't recover their children," Rosenstein said.

Brad Forenza, an assistant professor at the McCormick School of Child Advocacy and Policy at Montclair University who teaches future child welfare workers, said he thought the relationship between parents and the agency had improved, partly because of these meetings.

That said, Forenza said he was surprised a police presence is not mandatory when children are removed from a home.

While inviting the police along "may amplify how adversarial the relationship is between the parent and the caseworker, a security detail does seem intuitive and appropriate," Forenza said. "It's nice to think as a caseworker you don't need a security detail — 'I know these parents, they are cooperative and understand my role' — but at the end of the day you are removing a child for just cause. That is not going to bode well."

Coleman was stabbed more than 20 times inside her office building in Camden by a parent with a history of mental illness who had parental rights and had made threats against other caseworkers. The Nov. 17 attack came days after the Department of Human Services disbanded a special unit of its police force that had been assigned to accompany child welfare workers to risky neighbors and volatile homes. Officers are still available upon request.

In the most recent attack, Pennsville Township Police arrested Alexis Plater, 41, of Woodstown, for punching a female caseworker, and striking a male worker in the head with a flashlight while they removed a child from his home. The unidentified caseworkers were treated and released from the hospital the same day. The Salem County workers did not request police backup. The recent assaults
immediately renewed calls to restore the disbanded police unit. Democratic legislators introduced a bill that would require an officer to be assigned to each of the local child welfare offices, and upon request, accompany caseworkers on a call.

The Christie administration installed armed security officers and metal detectors in the local offices following the near-fatal attack on Coleman, but has resisted reinstating the special police unit.

"All on duty Human Services Police officers are available to respond to local office requests for an escort," said Ernest Landante, spokesman for the Department of Children and Families.

"While DCF has taken several significant steps over the last several months to improve security, some workers still feel a police escort can contribute to escalating emotions and cause an otherwise peaceful child hand off to turn unpleasant," Landante said. "If a police escort is desired, our workers always have access to not only Human Services Police, but to the State Police and local law enforcement as well, which are required by law to escort our workers if requested."

Since June, the agency has offered courses in personal safety, everyday self-defense and the "Art of Awareness," Children and Families spokeswoman Leida Arce said. About 940 employees have attended, she said. She declined to respond directly to Coleman's statements.

CWA State Director Hetty Rosenstein called the training "a cheap fix for a serious issue."

"As usual, the administration shifts responsibility from management to workers. And seriously — two days of personal safety, a half-day of self defense and a half-day of awareness?"

*Susan K. Livio, NJ Advance Media*