

DCF Knew: School officials repeatedly sounded alarm about boy's well-being

School officials trying to save a bright 7-year-old Central Massachusetts boy — allegedly burned, beaten and starved by his father — repeatedly alerted child welfare workers as the child shrunk down to 38 pounds, according to the town's top school official.

Staff at Hardwick Elementary School continued to notify the Department of Children and Families about their concern for the well-being of little Jack Loiselle throughout last school year — including within the past couple months as police said Jack lost up to 15 pounds, Maureen M. Marshall, superintendent of the Quabbin Regional School District, told the Herald.

“The school department had on a number of occasions requested the help of the Department of Children and Families,” Marshall said in a phone interview last week. “We’ve turned all those records over to state police. Obviously this has become a criminal matter and teachers and our staff are cooperating fully.”

But school officials weren't the only ones aware of Jack's deteriorating condition. Several caseworkers who were supposed to be watching over Jack told police they were concerned about his nutrition, and a therapist “addressed” his father's insistence on limiting Jack's food and water as late as May, records show.

In fact, police used interviews with DCF's own workers and contractors — who were all aware of the shocking conditions inside the 7-year-old's home — to build the abuse case against Jack's father, 26-year-old Randall Lints.

Caseworkers told police Lints would punish Jack, a good student, by not allowing him to go to school or do homework. They also reported the boy was kept in his bedroom most of the time with an alarm on the door, had few toys to play with and wasn't allowed in the living room. That's where the three children of Lint's girlfriend — including the two youngest he fathered — would play video games and watch television, according to investigators' interviews with employees at several state agencies and two private DCF contractors, Luk Inc. and Catholic Charities of Worcester County.

DCF officials did not respond to more than a dozen questions about Jack's case, including why they didn't remove him from his father's home despite multiple calls from his school and widespread concerns about his nutrition. DCF also ignored a Herald request to speak with Commissioner Linda S. Spears.

At a glance, it can be difficult to identify a malnourished child — who may just appear to be younger than his age to a passerby — but adults who regularly see a child would notice rapid weight loss, according to a local medical expert.

“Kids come in all shapes and sizes,” said Dr. Michael Agus, an ICU doctor and endocrinologist at Boston Children's Hospital, who couldn't comment specifically on Jack's case. “For it to really stand out, you would have to know the child over a length of time. But someone who sees a child over a period of time would notice a significant weight change.”

Agus said lack of food — and especially water — can lead to profound weight loss that will cause a child to appear gaunt, weak and depressed, and alter the ability to think clearly.

“With a lack of fat tissue, the muscles and bones look more pronounced, but in no way would you look healthy,” said Agus. “A healthy child should essentially never lose weight. That’s the whole point of childhood — to grow. If it goes in the opposite direction, there’s either a serious illness or there is malnourishment.”

Officials at both Luk and Worcester Catholic Charities refused to say whether their workers brought concerns about Jack to DCF or pushed for his removal from his father’s home.

The state does not license outpatient services provided by DCF contractors, but Luk has faced licensing problems in the past for separate residential and foster care placement programs. The Department of Early Education and Care has opened 37 investigations into complaints against Luk at its four locations in Fitchburg since 2010; of those, 11 cases showed findings of abuse or neglect by staff.

Luk CEO Richard Hooks Wayman defended his agency, saying, “Luk has responded immediately and comprehensively to all concerns and accepted recommendations by EEC.”

Meanwhile, the Office of the Child Advocate has opened an independent probe into Jack’s case, pledging a comprehensive look at DCF workers, contractors and other involved with Jack and his family.

Lints remains behind bars pending an Aug. 19 dangerousness hearing.

By Erin Smith