

NEWS

# Social Services Agency Agrees to \$6.5M Settlement With Estate of Child Beaten to Death in Foster Care

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December 21, 2023

## What You Need to Know

- A social services agency has agreed to pay \$6.5 million to the estate of a girl who was beaten to death in her foster home.
- The plaintiffs claimed the defendant approved an unsafe foster home and failed to properly monitor the child's well-being.
- The plaintiffs attorney said the defendant also sought input on how to prevent future incidents going forward.

A Philadelphia social services agency has agreed to pay \$6.5 million to the estate of a child who was beaten to death while living in a foster home, according to **Kline & Specter partner Nadeem Bezar**.

Bezar, who represented the estate of 3-year-old Hope Jones alongside co-counsel Sherrell Dandy, said the parties reached the settlement Dec. 15, resolving the matter for about the highest amount available with the defendants' limited coverage plan.

"It was a situation where the NET recognized that this wasn't an ideal handling of a case, and they recognized that the injuries were bad," Bezar said, referring to defendant Northeast Treatment Centers.

The plaintiffs claimed the agency caused Jones' death by negligently approving an unsafe foster home and failing to properly monitor her well-being.

According to the complaint, Jones died from blunt force trauma injuries at her foster home in July 2022.

Jones' foster mother and case worker were both hit with criminal charges in connection to Jones' death. The caseworker was ultimately acquitted of third-degree murder and involuntary manslaughter charges, while murder charges against the foster mother are still pending.

The plaintiffs asserted that Jones should not have been placed in the foster home at all because a member of the household had a history of aggravated assault. They further claimed the case worker who conducted regular evaluations of Jones' situation failed to investigate signs that she was being abused.

"The system failed Hope," Dandy said in an email. "She was brutally beaten and deprived of food, causing her weight to drop drastically while living in the home that should have never been approved due to a household member's extensive criminal record. The signs of starvation and abuse went unnoticed by the people who were supposed to protect her," Dandy claimed.

O'Hagan Meyer partner John Morgenstern and of counsel Peter Kulp, who represented the defendants, did not respond to requests for comment, nor did Northeast Treatment Centers.

In answer to the plaintiff's complaint, the defendant's asserted that they "acted with all due and reasonable care, appropriate under the circumstances."

The suit, captioned *Behrens v. Northeast Treatment Centers*, was filed in the Philadelphia Court of Common Pleas.

Bezar said Northeast Treatment Centers worked to resolve the matter quickly, noting that the defendants expressed an interest in implementing changes to prevent similar incidents going forward.

Bezar said the agency “seems to be open to the possibility of someone, whether like myself or another outside group, coming in and reviewing their practices.”

According to Bezar, that sort of move to enact change has become more common in his experiences litigating abuse cases in recent years.

“I am seeing it more and more,” Bezar said, “because agencies that I think once wondered about my area of practice are now reaching out and saying, ‘hey you want to tell us how we can do things a little differently.’”

He said he was excited that Northeast Treatment Centers raised the possibility of working with him to discuss reforms.

“The NET has some really good people working there, and people who seem to be really trying hard,” Bezar said. “This is one that just got away from them.”