



Lawyer targets foster care agency over 10-year-old's death

Lawyer Nadeem Bezar is preparing to sue a foster care agency over the death of 10-year-old Ethan Okula.

There are a lot of tragic stories about foster care children who slip through the cracks.

But 10-year-old Ethan Okula isn't one of them. He was surrounded by his supposed caretakers on the day he died, none of whom got him the medical attention that could have saved his life.

"Everybody failed Ethan. Everybody," said attorney **Nadeem Bezar**, who is representing Ethan's family. "I don't think I've ever seen failure at every level like this."

In February 2016, Ethan fell ill at his North Philly elementary school in the morning. He was brought to his foster home that afternoon. By evening, he had stopped breathing. The cause of death was later determined to be an intestinal blockage.

Bezar, an attorney at Kline & Specter who specializes in child abuse and welfare cases, is in the early stages of a negligence action against Northeast Treatment Centers (NET), the agency that placed Ethan, who had a gastric condition, with a foster mother who “did not seem fully knowledgeable about Ethan’s service needs,” according to a state Department of Human Services report on his death.

“The day of his death, they thought, ‘Oh, he just ate too much,’” Bezar recounted. “But he had an underlying condition that required medical attention.”

NET declined to comment on the case due to pending litigation. “Our hearts remain heavy over the tragic death of Ethan Okula,” a spokeswoman said.

Bezar claims NET placed Ethan with a foster mother not properly trained in addressing his medical needs. He is also investigating possible misconduct by school district employees who released Ethan to the foster mother’s friend before he died.

“Nobody at the school called 911,” Bezar said, “and the school, I believe, knew that this friend of the foster mother was not going to take Ethan to a hospital.”

On the last day of his life, Ethan began complaining of severe stomach pain to his teacher. He couldn’t walk, and he vomited and defecated on himself, according to the state report.

A nurse asked his foster mother of the past seven months to pick him up at 9:38 a.m. The foster mother sent a friend, who arrived around 1 p.m. and brought Ethan home, despite a school police officer advising that Ethan needed medical care. Left on a couch, he stopped breathing, and was found to be dead on arrival at a hospital after his foster mother finally did call 911.

Bezar is representing Ethan’s grandparents, who were denied custody of Ethan because the grandmother uses a wheelchair and the grandfather works at night. (His brother, also in foster care, would be the beneficiary of his estate).

Ethan was removed from the home of his biological parents around the age of 1, as both had drug problems, and his father was physically abusive, according to Bezar. His mother is “devastated by everything that happened,” he said.

Before medical issues led to his death, Ethan reportedly suffered years of abuse, including being beaten by his father and at one point locked outside by previous foster parents. Nonetheless, the child was known to have a joyful personality.

"He was outgoing. He liked to dance, be goofy, he was fond of music, he had a bit of an infectious smile. ... Even on his last day, someone saw him dancing," Bezar said. "I'm sorry I didn't get to meet him."

But with his history of medical issues, and guardians who allegedly were unaware of them, the odds were stacked against Ethan.

"He was a sweet boy who had been through a lot," Bezar said. "His foster care mother has claimed she didn't know about his medical background. With all of that, how is an estranged little boy supposed to survive?"