

**Deryl McElvarr**

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**From:** Commissioner  
**Sent:** Thursday, July 14, 2016 1:06 PM  
**Subject:** Commissioner's Message - Child Fatality

Dear Colleagues,

As you may be aware from media reports, late last month 4-year-old Christopher Lassiter was tragically shot and killed by his 5-year-old brother while visiting their mother's home.

We are investigating the incident and reviewing our involvement with Christopher's family. We plan to disclose as much information as legally permitted. Our review is ongoing, but we can share some key information about the family's prior involvement with the state's child welfare system.

We received a report on April 13, 2012, that Christopher's mother and her two minor children were living in a home with structural damage and no electricity. A Child Protective Services investigation assigned to our Newark South local office concluded a child abuse and neglect allegation against Christopher's mother was unfounded. At the conclusion of the investigation, the case remained open to provide supportive services, including purchasing furniture, for the family.

While the case remained open to provide services, the state's child abuse hotline received a report on November 19, 2012, that Christopher and his brother were unattended in the hallway of an aunt's residence. A Child Protective Services investigation, initiated by Child Protection and Permanency's After Hours Response Team and later assigned to the Newark South local office, concluded a child abuse and neglect allegation against Christopher's mother was unfounded. The case was transferred to the Union West local office in December 2012, and remained open for services until closed on May 3, 2013.

We received a report on July 2, 2014, that Christopher's mother was ill. The individual making the report was uncertain that the children were safe. A Child Protective Services investigation was conducted by our Newark South local office and the finding was not established.

While this case remained open, a report received August 6, 2014, claimed Christopher and his brother were seen outside wearing only their underwear. Christopher's mother explained she and her children had been napping and that her children awoke before she awoke. She further explained that her children managed to unlock the door and leave the apartment. A Child Protective Services investigation was conducted by our Newark South local office and the finding was not established. We provided Christopher's mother referrals for a substance abuse evaluation and parenting counseling. In December 2014, Christopher entered the legal custody of a close relative. The case remained open for services until December 22, 2014.

Our next involvement with the family was when we were notified of the shooting on June 25, 2016. Our Middlesex Central local office immediately opened a new case with Christopher's family. At the time of the incident, Christopher and his brother were living with a close relative. Christopher's brother returned to that relative's care following this tragic incident. Additionally, as has been reported in the press, a third younger child was also present at the time of the incident. That child was visiting at the time and remains in the care of his mother.

As we continue to investigate and review Christopher's family's involvement with the child welfare system, we will continue to offer supportive services to the children and families impacted by this tragedy.

We are deeply saddened by Christopher's death and troubled about the circumstances surrounding his death. Christopher's family deserves a thorough and accurate review of the facts.

On behalf of the New Jersey Department of Children and Families, we extend our deepest condolences to Christopher's family.

Sincerely,  
Allison

Allison Blake, PhD, LSW  
Commissioner  
NJ Department of Children and Families