

Suit: If they did their job, kids'd be alive

By Julia Terruso
STAFF WRITER

ANTHONY SINGLETON lies awake most nights haunted by questions of what he could have done to prevent the death of his infant son and 3-year-old stepdaughter. He searches for signs he might have missed in the behavior of his wife, who is charged with killing them.

"I thought she was all right," Singleton said last week. "This would be the last thing I thought she would do. The very last thing."

Singleton, 59, is suing the child welfare agency Turning Points for Children, a DHS contractor, that facilitated the reunification of his son, St. Leo, and stepdaughter, Ariel, with their mother, Sophia Hines. Hines is charged with smothering the children with a bedsheet in June 2016. She was ruled mentally incompetent to stand trial and is being held in a psychiatric facility in Florida.

The lawsuit, filed Monday, alleges that Turning Points, which was providing services to the family, failed to consult with Department of Human Services psychologists or review Hines' medical information before recommending that the court release the children back into her custody. Hines was on medication for an underlying psychiatric condition and suffering from postpartum depression, according to an agency review of the deaths.

"If they did their job, these kids would be alive today," said attorney Michael Shaffer, who is representing Singleton with his law partner Michael Gaier. "Anthony is not an expert. He's not a psychiatrist. He does not have the ability to evaluate what's appropriate for reunification. That's their job."

The suit alleges negligence and wrongful death, and seeks damages for Singleton on behalf of his son and for four relatives of Hines' on behalf of her daughter.

Turning Points CEO Michael

Vogel said Monday he could not comment on pending litigation. A review of the deaths found Hines had not signed consent to enable the agency to obtain her medical records.

"Turning Points for Children is deeply saddened by the tragic deaths of these children last year," Vogel said. "Our work in caring for and supporting children and families is challenging and complex, and while we cannot comment on open litigation or specific case details, we continue to stay focused on working closely with DHS to ensure the safety of all children and families in our community."

Singleton, a former Marine who works as a traffic flagger, met Hines, who emigrated from Jamaica, in 2015. Hines already had her then-2-year-old daughter, Ariel, whom Singleton called "the smartest little girl in the world."

"I've never seen a kid so young that remembers that much," Singleton said. "She was like a tape recorder. You told her you were going to do something, she remembered."

When Hines got pregnant with St. Leo, something shifted, Singleton said. She moved out of Singleton's home and into a shelter. Ten days after giving birth, she brought both of her children to Einstein Medical Center, saying she was depressed and overwhelmed.

The children were placed in foster care for six months, during which Hines and Singleton reunited and got married at a small ceremony at their home in Frankford. Singleton said that he wanted Hines to know he was fully committed to his new son and stepdaughter, and that he accompanied her to scheduled visits with the kids. Things seemed to be better between them, he said.

"I loved her, and I thought that was the right thing to do," he said. "I learned the hard way that you can't get married for anything



Lawyer Michael Shaffer (left) listens as his client Anthony Singleton talks about the death of his son and stepdaughter. JESSICA GRIFFIN / Staff Photographer

other than love."

In April 2016, Turning Points recommended to Family Court that Hines regain custody. It was later revealed in a review of the case that the agency did so without conducting a parenting-capacity evaluation and thus without knowledge of Hines' mental-health status. The reunification was based in part on a letter from a social work intern who knew Hines for less than a month.

Singleton said that if Hines was exhibiting signs of distress at the time, he missed them. He was working 12-hour days, and the couple were living together off and on.

Shaffer said his case will show the children were returned too soon.

"She tried to do the best she could when she took the kids back to Einstein initially. She told them, 'I'm in over my head here, help me,'" Shaffer said. "Then it's

their job to appropriately reunify. I wish I could say they did a bad job. They didn't do anything on the checklist they were supposed to do, and it's very clear reunification never should have happened — she was clearly not ready."

In mid-May, Hines told Singleton she was going to visit her brother in Queens, New York City. Instead, she took the children, via bus, to Miramar, Fla., where she stayed with a cousin. When she didn't answer Singleton's calls, he became alarmed.

On June 9, police responded to Hines' cousin's home and found both children unresponsive, lying side by side on a bed. Hines admitted to killing the children in an interview with police in which she answered few questions and appeared catatonic, according to police reports. The report said Hines had scratches on her face, which indicate Ariel, whom she said she killed second, fought back.

After finding out about his son's death, Singleton flew to Florida to identify the bodies and bring them home.

He said he couldn't work for nearly a year because of the shock. Now he regularly visits a psychiatrist at the Department of Veterans Affairs, and relies on his West Philadelphia church community and the distraction of his job.

He said he hopes the lawsuit promotes more diligence on the part of the agencies charged with protecting children.

"I just wanted justice for the kids. It wasn't any more than that. I felt really that they were wrong, and I said if somebody's responsible for that, make them know they were wrong so this won't happen to anyone else." ■

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