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Despite Changes, Horrors Endure

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The Administration for Children's Services, the city agency created to protect children from abuse, was born from tragedy: the 1995 death of Elisa Izquierdo, who was tormented and fatally beaten by her mother, though several public agencies had known of her plight.

Six-year-old Elisa died Nov. 21, 1995, from an act of child abuse so horrible that many New Yorkers were reduced to tears. Born of a crack addict mother, she was imprisoned rather than sent to school, beaten, burned and used as a mop with her curly hair.

She became a symbol for everything wrong with the city bureaucracy charged with protecting children. Her story became a national disgrace, and its impact lingered long after Elisa's mother, Awilda Lopez, was sentenced to from 15 years to life in prison for murder.

After her death, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani in January 1996 abolished the city's Child Welfare Administration, rebuilt it from top to bottom and replaced it with the new Administration for Children's Services.

But the new agency, despite unprecedented sanctions against incompetent caseworkers, millions of dollars of additional funding, renovated buildings and new laws, could do nothing for Sylena Herrnkind, the 3-year-old malnourished Staten Island girl allegedly killed by her abusive parents. The family had a long history with the agency, which often investigated then dismissed allegations of abuse lodged against Sylena's parents.

Sylena joined a number of highly publicized deaths of children whose cases somehow had slipped through the cracks: Lisa Steinberg, Elisa, Nadine Lockwood and Daytwon Bennett. Each of their deaths brought public outrage and cries for reform.

In a case that riveted national attention on domestic violence, Lisa Steinberg, 6, died in 1987 at the hands of Joel Steinberg, a lawyer who had beaten Lisa and his longtime companion, Hedda Nussbaum, for years.

Joel Steinberg, who had received Lisa at birth from an unmarried teenager and never put her up for adoption, was convicted of first-degree manslaughter and was sentenced to 8⅓ to 25 years in prison.

A 16-month-old boy who was found tethered to a playpen in the couple's filthy Greenwich Village apartment was eventually returned to his natural mother on Long Island.

Nadine Lockwood, a month short of 5, was found starved to death in her Washington Heights apartment on Aug. 31, 1996. She weighed 15½ pounds. Her mother, Carla Lockwood, who had nine other children, later pleaded guilty to murder and was sentenced to a minimum of 15 years in prison.

The mother told authorities that she hated her daughter, referring to her as "it." At her sentencing, Carla Lockwood whispered: "The media has already created a monster of me, but I am a very loving and caring woman."

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