

Editorial | Our View

# Increase vigilance over foster care

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COURTESY PHOTO

Zack Morris

We'd like to see all foster parents the same way: salt-of-the-earth people willing to

share their home and give their time to disadvantaged children. Such generosity can be key to a healthy and happy future for a child who has been abused or neglected.

And indeed many of Hawaii's foster children are cared for by big-hearted, trustworthy foster parents. But the troubling case involving foster parents Zack and Krystina Morris shines a glaring spotlight on apparent flaws in the state's vetting of those seeking license to care for some of the state's most vulnerable children.

Back in June 2011, three months before the state Department of Human Services issued a report that described Zack Morris as a "confirmed and untreated sex offender" and a threat to any child under his care, according to court records, DHS had certified the couple to care for up to five foster children.



Within a few weeks of the report's release, Morris was indicted, eventually pleaded no contest and is now serving a 20-year prison sentence. The children are left to contend with life-long impacts tied to his abuse — abuse that could have been avoided with more rigorous certification screening and follow-up oversight in the home setting.

The state has maintained that in 2008, when the Morrises were certified for foster care, a background check failed to flag their already problematic history because they had legally changed their last name while living in New York. But an attorney representing children who would be placed in the couple's home has rightly pointed out that hanging such a check on a name search is inadequate. Had DHS conducted a due diligence look at housing, for example, the agency would have found that the couple applied for subsidized Section 8 housing on Maui using their old names.

DHS officials have declined to comment on the case other than to say they do the best they can to vet applicants, with the priority being the safety and well-being of the child. They can do better. For the sake of the child, the screening process must keep pace

with practices yielding the most thorough background checks.

While heightened vigilance will flag more potentially dangerous applicants, there's little doubt that some could still slip through. Consequently, social workers play a critical role in assuring safety tied to foster placements. What they report should be given sufficient weight to touch off a quick stop to placements in homes in which a parent is suspected of being unfit.

In the Morris case, within weeks of the first placement, the child (a 14-year-old boy) told a social worker that Zack Morris had sexually abused him. In subsequent months the boy left the home and the DHS worker who investigated the case filed a complaint with police, alleging that Morris harassed her. It would be the the first of six police complaints filed against Morris during his tenure of nearly three years as a foster parent. Two more boys would disclose sexual abuse before the agency released its report tagging Morris as a sex offender.

On any given day, there are nearly 428,000 children in foster care in the U.S., according to estimates. In Hawaii, nearly 2,770 kids are in such settings. In addition to more careful scrutiny of foster homes and a tighter screening process, the state must do more to recruit fit foster parents. Increasing the state's monthly stipend rate would help.

The stipend now tops out at \$676 monthly for care of a child age 12 and older, which works out to \$22.53 per day. Is that enough to cover meals, school supplies and other necessities for a teenager living in the islands? Hardly. The state pays more than \$100 a day to house prison inmates. And earlier this year, the Legislature backed a bill that's now paving the way for \$70-a-day respite support for people caring for elders while remaining in the workforce.

Our foster children deserve better from a state that promotes ohana values.

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agree with the editorial. DHS needs to step up their monitoring of this area.

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