

MIAMI-DADE COUNTY

Miami foster group home under scrutiny for video of kids fighting

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Judge Michael A. Hanzman has called a hearing on a group home where two foster children were encouraged to fight. Roberto Koltun *El Nuevo Herald*

A Miami group home for foster children is under fire after a video circulated on social media showing two 11-year-old boys in a violent brawl — egged on by the facility’s adult supervisor as other kids cheered.

“I saw a cockfight ... between foster kids,” Miami-Dade Circuit Judge Michael Hanzman said in court last week, describing the video as showing the employee “provoking and encouraging violence” while “these two boys battled it out and beat each other up.”

In extraordinarily blunt language, the judge blasted Children’s Home Society of Florida, a statewide company that runs 11 foster homes in Miami-Dade. Children’s Home Society has

a contract to operate the group homes through Our Kids of Miami-Dade, a nonprofit child welfare agency itself under contract to the Florida Department of Children and Families.

“What is really sad is these kids are abused, abandoned and neglected. And then they get taken from their parents. They come in expecting refuge,” the judge said. “And what they are subjected to is more abuse and neglect at the hands of ineptitude, and agencies who throw them in these group homes with incompetent people who stand around watching them have cockfights.”

The brawl led to one of the kids being beaten and then hospitalized against his will for psychiatric treatment. The Children’s Home Society employee has now been fired while DCF investigates whether the episode amounts to child abuse.

Another court hearing is to be held on Wednesday as lawyers for some of the parents of foster children seek to be included in the legal proceedings involving Children’s Home Society group homes.

There is reason “to believe that the incident in the case is not isolated, and that all of the children in the care of CHS are potentially in danger of similar abuse,” Eugene Zenobi, head of the publicly funded Regional Counsel office, wrote in a motion filed to the court Friday.

The two children — known only by their initials J.W. and N.L. — have since been moved out of the group home. The court motion filed by the Regional Counsel office said one of the kids was “severely beaten” during the brawl.

“We are working in partnership with Our Kids to review the matter and provide solutions/improvements,” Maggie Dante, the Southeast executive director of Children’s Home Society, said in a statement to the Miami Herald. “The employee was terminated and did acknowledge that she did not follow our de-escalation protocols.”

A DCF spokeswoman said the agency is “working closely with Our Kids to make certain all necessary steps are taken to ensure the safety and well-being of the children.”

Jackie Gonzalez, the CEO of Our Kids, acknowledged the “troubling matters raised in court” and said all three agencies are “conducting a thorough review” of the incident.

The judge’s venting is nothing new. Over the past several years, Hanzman has repeatedly chided DCF and its contracted agencies for failing to provide proper services to children under state care.

Much of his anger last week was directed toward Children’s Home Society, the longtime private Florida child welfare agency that oversees 100,000 children in 67 counties. The

agency made news in July when Microsoft awarded it \$7.2 million in grants to help train employees and disadvantaged youth with the latest technology.

The judge made no decisions last week — although he hinted at one course of action. “Are you going to shut down this group home or do you want me to do it for you?” he angrily asked.

Many of the details of the case, such as the location of the foster-care group home or the identity of the suspended staffer, have yet to be made public. Exactly how the video made its way to authorities remains unclear but Hanzman learned about the case Dec. 21 when J.W., who was supposed to receive Christmas gifts at a court hearing, missed the appointment because he was in the hospital.

According to the testimony in court, J.W. at some point had apparently been “hit with a heavy object” thrown by the other child. Instead of stopping the fight, the staffer “told them, quote, ‘Go ahead and fight it out,’ ” Hanzman recalled, according to a transcript of the hearing.

The fight continued unabated as a ring of other boys cheered and hollered, even as the staffer summoned police.

“I think that that person lost her composure,” Dante said.

“Oh she was very composed,” the judge retorted. “She encouraged the kids to fight. She said, go ahead and fight, just don’t use weapons. Let’s have a fight. She circled everybody around. Got the kids all riled up.”

Said Dante later: “This one particular staffer is not a reflection of the work we do everyday with these children.”

After the staffer summoned police, officers committed J.W. against his will to a hospital for days for psychiatric evaluation under the state’s Baker Act. Hanzman said the staffer clearly “lied to” officers about what happened.

“This kid is going to be labeled as having a mental illness his whole life. Probably won’t be able to get a job,” he said. “All because you have a stupid, inept case worker at your facility that encourages 11-year-olds to engage in brutal violence and stands around watching and cheering.”

Hanzman also raised concerns about the group homes having enough staffers at each group home and that Children’s Home Society reported the suspected child abuse first and only to DCF, not police.

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