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EDITORIAL

Mend child safety net

Assessing W.Va., Pa. agencies that protect children urgent

When watchdogs lie silent, we ought to be alarmed.

Either the culprits are so familiar they don't arouse suspicion, or the watchdog has not only lost its bark, but its bite, too.

Earlier this month, a 15-month-old child, Madison Violet Dodson, was found dead in her parents' home in Point Marion, Pa.

Both parents face serious charges and are being held without bail in the Fayette County (Pa.) Jail.

That alone is very disturbing and cause for great concern in our area.

But more disturbing is the number of times child protective agencies in Pennsylvania and West Virginia were contacted about concerns for this baby, and failed to come to her aid.

These calls that began in Morgantown to our state's Child Protective Services (CPS) began just months after this baby girl was born and continued up until late last year in Point Marion.

According to the family's former landlord and neighbors, they called the Fayette County office of Pennsylvania's Children and Youth Services (CYS) more than 20 times.

At least one of the family's brief acquaintances in Morgantown contacted CPS in December 2009.

We are not attempting to try the parents of this baby — one of eight children living in a home police described as in "deplorable" condition — here. Nor are we indicting CYS or CPS, yet.

However, we have reason to suspect there needs to be a thorough assessment of both these agencies, and not just routine review, either.

Some answers we think are long overdue, for instance, are:

How many active case files do these agencies' social workers maintain on average?

Is it overly complicated to remove a child from a home?

How much time elapses between a complaint and an investigation?

What is the procedure for citizens to follow up on their complaints?

Everyone is aware some state programs fall short of the staff necessary to fulfill their mandate.

Yet, in cases where imminent risks to children are involved, there should be no shortfalls. If anything, there must be a failsafe procedure in place that allows no margin of error.

We have to wonder how many families and how many children have not gotten the consideration they deserve in such cases. We suspect more than just Madison's.

Last week, at least one legislator, Delegate Barbara Fleischauer, D-Monongalia, met with officials from the Department of Health and Human Resources about this case and CPS.

We urge her and other lawmakers in West Virginia and Pennsylvania to sound the alarm.