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[Editorials/Op-Ed](#)[Readers' Opinions](#)

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Two Years After Girl Disappeared, Little Has Changed in Florida Agency

By DANA CANEDY

MIAMI, Jan. 18 — A new family has moved into the tan corner house on a well-kept street in the suburb of Kendall, southwest of Miami. Still, neighbors who pass by are more interested in remembering the girl who once lived there.

Two years have passed since the girl, Rilya Wilson, disappeared from the house while under the supervision of the state child-welfare agency. Her case drew national attention, exposed problems in Florida's child-welfare agency and became an issue in the governor's race last fall.

Gov. Jeb Bush appointed a new administrator of child welfare in August to fix the troubled agency, but he has said the Florida Department of Children and Families is in crisis. Caseworkers are still overburdened; hundreds of foster children are still missing; and the agency continues to struggle with a backlog of child-abuse investigations.

The agency's new administrator, Jerry Regier, has estimated that he needs a budget increase of almost \$500 million this year to raise salaries, hire about 1,000 additional workers and give bonuses to keep workers already looking after children in state care. Governor Bush has said he does not intend to approve such a big increase, leaving some state lawmakers and children's advocates asking how the agency is expected to improve care for 45,000 children.

Mr. Bush's office referred calls to the child-welfare agency, which would not comment on budget matters, changes in policies and procedures, or its efforts to find Rilya.

Critics of the agency say it simply has no answers about how to look after so many children while struggling with so many problems.

"We've seen blue-ribbon panels, budget requests and quality expert recommendations as to how to fix the system, and all that is being tossed into the shredder," said Howard Talenfeld, a lawyer and children's

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advocate in Fort Lauderdale. "The only changes I've seen in the department are superficial."

The agency has made some changes and has a plan for more improvements. It has, for example, begun stricter enforcement of procedures requiring immediate notification of the police when a child is missing, and it has updated criminal history checks on all people who care for children. Most of the more substantial planned improvements, however, have yet to be made.

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The agency also intends to have private agencies take over some cases to reduce the backlog, to equip counselors with digital cameras to photograph children for identification and to create a Web site to help workers coordinate efforts.

While the agency seeks better ways to protect children, law enforcement officials from nearly half a dozen local, state and federal agencies are no closer to finding Rilya.

"We have nothing," said Detective Lupo Jimenez, a spokesman for the Miami-Dade police. "We have passed the case on to homicide because of the time that has elapsed since the time she was last seen."

The Department of Children and Families and Geralyn Graham, Rilya's guardian, who says she is her grandmother, lost track of the girl on Jan. 18, 2001. No one noticed Rilya was absent for 15 months because a caseworker, who has since been fired, falsely reported visits that never took place, the agency contends.

The state realized the girl was missing only after a new caseworker tried to check on her at Ms. Graham's house. Ms. Graham, who is facing fraud charges in the case, and the child-welfare agency each say they thought the other had Rilya, who was 4 when she vanished.

"We remain hopeful that she will be located, and we continue to work with law enforcement authorities toward that goal," the agency said in a statement today.

To mark the anniversary of her disappearance, state legislators, child-welfare advocates and people who knew Rilya held a news conference today in front of the house where she lived.

"They say the trail is cold, but Rilya's presence is felt every day," State Senator Frederica Wilson, in whose district Rilya lived, told those gathered for the news conference. "Rilya is a textbook example of what is wrong with the Department of Children and Families. Without the proper funding and support, there will be hundreds of Rilyas out there."

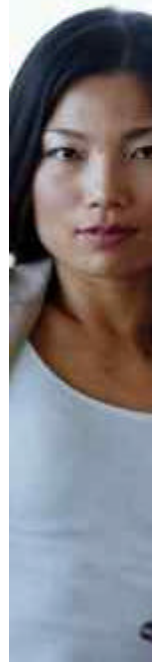
Annie Betancourt, a former state representative, said she attended the news conference because "it's a way of creating awareness and putting



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pressure of elected officials."

"People say, oh, another missing child," Ms. Betancourt said. "No, it actually another missing life."
Neighbors on the street where Rilya last lived said they would not soon forget her.

"I remember seeing Rilya with her braids," said Margarita Zevallos, a neighbor. "Everything looked normal. When police knocked on my door and told me what happened, I was left with my mouth open."

Despite a \$100,000 reward from the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, interviews with the girl's caregivers and searches for Rilya by police officers and agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation in at least four states and the Bahamas, law enforcement officials have no solid leads in the case.

Detective Jimenez said, "We have hit a brick wall."

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