

Father of Niagara baby begged son not be placed with abusive grandfather

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A 13-month-old baby was rushed to McMaster Children's Hospital on Saturday after suffering head injuries. The boy died on Sunday.

The father whose 13-month-old baby died last weekend while in the care of a convicted child abuser, said he pleaded with children's aid not to place his son with his grandfather.

"On the morning of the apprehension... I said flat-out: 'If you place him with my dad, you're most likely going to kill my son'," the 20-year-old father said about the day his baby was taken away. "I know that man, and he was violent with me my entire life."

As reported in Torstar News Service Thursday, a court document shows the Niagara children's aid society knew the grandfather had physically abused his own infant son in 1995. (The grandfather was just a teenager at the time and is now in his mid-30s, according to an affidavit filed Wednesday by Niagara children's aid in the Ontario Court of Justice.)

In May, Niagara children's aid placed the baby in

the care of the grandfather and his wife.

The baby was rushed to hospital with head injuries last Saturday and died Sunday.

Niagara Regional Police and the coroner are investigating.

The affidavit concerns a second grandchild, a 19-month-old girl with "unexplained historical injuries" previously in the grandfather's care.

Torstar is not publishing any names to protect the living child.

The bereaved young father told Torstar his own injuries at the hands of his father 20 years ago, when he was an infant, put him in hospital for three weeks.

"It was extremely touch and go. For the first week, the doctors didn't know if I was going to live because I had severe head trauma as well," he said.

Although he never lived with his father again for any significant time, he lived with his paternal grandfather and his wife for about eight years and continued to see his father.

"I got hit with a belt, a shovel," he said. "I thought it was just discipline."

Efforts to reach the grandfather Thursday were unsuccessful.

According to the affidavit, the grandfather told

police that the baby boy who died Sunday was knocked over by the family's 2-year-old Labrador and hit his head on the hardwood floor. The grandfather said the baby seemed fine and then went "limp and was making gagging noises."

In the document, children's aid explains that the second grandchild was placed in the grandfather's care in March 2014, shortly after she was born, because he "was open and honest about his criminal history and was willing to complete the necessary documents in order for the society to complete the assessment."

The baby's death raises fresh questions in light of the Jeffrey Baldwin case.

The 5-year-old boy died of starvation in 2002 while in the care of his maternal grandparents who were later found to have been convicted of abusing their own children.

At the time of Jeffrey's death, children's aid workers had not been required to do background checks when they placed children with other family members. Since 2006, all potential caregivers, including extended family members and kin, are required to undergo extensive background checks for any previous criminal or child protection concerns.

But as the Niagara case shows, children's aid workers continue to place children in the care of people with child abuse convictions, said NDP Children's critic Monique Taylor.

"The fact that this child was placed in the custody of a known offender raises serious questions about oversight," she said Thursday. "We urge the government to fully examine how such a terrible tragedy was allowed to occur and to take steps to prevent an incident like this from ever happening again in Ontario."

Chris Steven, executive director of Family and Children's Services Niagara, which includes children's aid in the area, was not able to comment on the case due to legal and privacy concerns.

However, he said such placements are "not our general practice" and are "unusual."

The Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies, which represents the province's 46 societies, said circumstances have changed since the Baldwin case.

Although background checks are now required for all placements, there is also a new emphasis on keeping families together.

"There is a desire to maintain family bonds whenever possible," said the association spokesperson Caroline Newton.

"That may have been a factor in trying to weigh risk and the best interest of the child," added Newton, who said she did not know the details of the Niagara case.

Ontario Children's Minister Tracy MacCharles expressed shock and sadness about the boy's death.

"My heart goes out to the family and those touched by these devastating events," she said in a statement. "Whenever a child dies, we have a responsibility to learn from what happened and take all necessary steps to prevent similar tragedies in the future."