

Evans' case illustrates dilemma

By ASSOCIATED PRESS

CONCORD — The state's tardy response to a warning about Kassidy Bortner illustrates the consequences of understaffing at New Hampshire's child protection agency, its director says.

The 21-month-old girl was beaten to death 14 months ago, nine days after the Division for Children, Youth and Families received an anonymous report alleging she was being abused.

The agency left two phone messages, but was unable to talk to her mother and the mother's live-in boyfriend — Chad Evans, a former Keene school board member — before the child's death. Last month, a jury convicted Evans of second-degree murder in the child's death.

The first phone call to authorities was made five days after the report was received, too late under the agency's own standards. Based on the urgency of the case, the standards range from face-to-face contact within 24 hours to contact by telephone within three days.

"The agency, in its process of doing assessment, did not meet our policy. I think that we did the best we could at the time with the resources that we had and with the information we had," said division Director Nancy Rollins in a telephone interview Thursday.

Kassidy's mother, 19-year-old

Amanda Bortner, and Evans, 30, lived in Rochester when Kassidy died on Nov. 9, 2000.

During his trial, about a dozen friends, relatives and co-workers of Bortner and Evans testified to seeing bruises on Kassidy for up to three months.

Evans' former wife, Tristan Evans, testified that on Oct. 31, 2000, she placed an anonymous call to report bruises she had seen. Patricia Hocter of the agency's Rochester office was assigned the next day to check it out, the trial showed.

Hocter testified that she called on Nov. 6 and, after receiving no response, left a second message the morning of Nov. 9, 2000.

But Kassidy's mother had already taken her to the Kittery, Maine, home of a relative that morning and Kassidy was within hours of death.

A committee monitoring the state's compliance with a court order agreed last month the division is understaffed.

"The panel found that (the division) is far from compliance in the provision of direct services to children and families," the committee said.

It said the division is making "valiant, but slow efforts" to improve but said it could "only shudder for the child whose vulnerability is now."

Rollins said the division has 208 employees, 156 fewer than it would need to meet national ac-

creditation standards.

She said the 58 employees who assess child abuse and neglect claims and tips have case-loads ranging from 21 to 30 apiece. She said the recommended national standard is 15 cases, which would require an additional 24 assessment workers.

Rollins said she sought money for 10 new employees last fiscal year and 20 this fiscal year, but got none.

"While I understand that there are significant issues around revenues and the budget, I feel that it's a great disservice to children and to families to not adequately provide and fund positions," she said.

By law, the division cannot discuss specific cases. But Foster's Daily Democrat reported Thursday that the division also was warned of suspected abuse shortly before the death of 3½-month-old Jeffrey D. Trudeau Jr. in Dover on Dec. 7, 2000. The paper said documents it obtained show that a doctor reported possible abuse nine days earlier.

Under New Hampshire law, all residents are required to report suspected child abuse. Maine made its comparable law tougher in response to the Bortner case.

To report suspected child abuse or neglect, call 800-894-5533 in New Hampshire or 800-452-1999 in Maine.