EDITORIALS

How the bad apples got hired

It's up to Sheriff Baca to show that the hiring of problem deputies is the exception in his department.

SHERIFF LEE BACA had his hands full last week responding to the arrests of 18 of his current and former deputies amid a continuing investigation into abuse of inmates at Los Angeles County's jails, so let's hope he hasn't forgotten that he is due to report today on the previous week's scandal: the hiring of dozens of deputies with personnel records that showed lying, cheating, excessive force and irresponsible use of firearms.

The two matters aren't related in any formal sense; none of those arrested Dec. 9 was among the group that moved over to the Sheriff's Department in 2010 when the county's public safety police force was dissolved. But it doesn't take a leap of imagination to recognize a link between bad hiring practices and bad deputy conduct, especially if the sheriff's hiring of those 280 public safety officers three years ago followed standard policy.

Did it? An understandable assumption in the wake of The Times' investigation into the backgrounds of the former public safety officers is that something went wrong. Perhaps procedures were temporarily loosened or standards were lowered for this particular group of applicants based on their prior county service. Those are the sorts of explanations the Board of Supervisors is likely seeking from Baca.

But there is also the even more troubling possibility that nothing went wrong at all; or, more to the point, that the sheriff routinely hires deputies who, like dozens of the former public safety officers, are adept at evading polygraph exams, were rejected or fired by other law enforcement agencies, shoot at their spouses in the midst of arguments or pull their county-issued weapons merely to emphasize a point. Instead of being an enormous but one-time flub, the employment of deputies from the defunct county agency could be a window into the sheriff's regular hiring standards and procedures.

That's the threshold question: Whether the kinds of problems that ought to make applicants ineligible to carry badges and guns in county service are typical of sheriff's deputies. The burden is on the sheriff to show that they're not.

The public has little information about the personnel records of its deputies, so it has a hard time holding the sheriff accountable at election time for his competence at staffing his department. In this case, the egregious instances of alleged and proven misconduct could be reported by The Times only because they were leaked. The sheriff generally keeps such a tight hold on that kind of information that the department's first response to the story was to launch an investigation into the leak, not the bad hiring.

But the public must have the answer. Without it, it won't be clear what the problem is, so it won't be clear how to solve it.

Years ago, the Board of Supervisors established an Office of Independent Review and hired Michael Gennaco to track misconduct and evaluate the sheriff's internal handling of such matters; and it retained special counsel Merrick Bobb to monitor and report on the Sheriff's Department. Any full report on the transfer of the public safety officers must necessarily include an explanation of why neither of those two offices learned of the background investigations of the deputies who were hired in 2010.

But that's perhaps assuming too much. Did Gennaco's or Bobb's offices become aware of the problem hires? And if so, why did they not inform the Board of Supervisors? And even that may be assuming too much. It's a cliche from the Watergate era, but it fits: What did the county supervisors, not just the sheriff, know, and when did they know it? How credible is the assertion that they were unaware of the situation until The Times' report?

And if they were indeed aware, what action did they take? Was there special monitoring and retraining of the problem officers? Were they restricted to duties that would minimize the danger they posed to the public? Did the sheriff take any steps to reverse the hiring decision? Or did the elected officials just hope against hope that no one would ever find out?

Then, having dealt with those questions, any competent report by Baca or anyone else would deal with the political pressures and dynamics at play. Former undersheriff Larry Waldie — who Baca says was responsible for the hires — was quoted as saying that he was unaware of any problems with these officers. But he also was quoted as saying that he was under "significant pressure" from the Board of Supervisors.

What kind of pressure? Were board members running interference on behalf of any particular applicants? Were they pressing for a larger number of hires at the behest of the public safety officers union? It is not inconceivable that in order to get labor on board with the dissolution of the county police office, there was a promise that most of them would be hired (fewer than one-third of the officers who sought to move over to the Sheriff's Department were rejected).

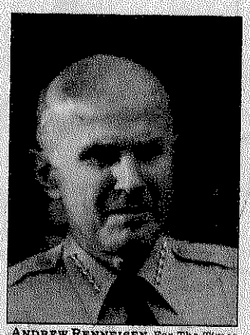
Twice this year county supervisors have applied significant pressure to other county department directors to step up hiring. In both cases — with the Department of Children and Family Services and the Probation Department — at least some of the supervisors demonstrated a surprising lack of awareness of the hiring process or an indifference to any lowering of standards that went along with stepping up the pace.

Baca's early comments have signaled an intention to blame the now-retired Waldie for the hiring and, only secondarily, himself for not second-guessing Waldie. But that's not enough. The subject of any inquiry cannot be limited to simply what happened in this case but what happens all the time, day in and day out, in county government.

Sheriff aide pledges swift hiring fixes

Official admits about 80 officers given jobs with the L.A. County department should've been disqualified.

By Robert Faturechi, Ben Poston and Seema Mehta



Andrew Renneisen For The Times

SHERIFF Lee Baca said he told an undersheriff at the time "to only hire qualified candidates."

The Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department acknowledged Tuesday that it hired about 80 officers who should have been disqualified because of problems in their backgrounds including criminal convictions and poor job performance.

Assistant Sheriff Todd Rogers said he was troubled by the hires and plans on "making some swift changes."

"People have to trust that we're hiring the best and brightest ... because of the awesome authority and responsibility our deputies have," he said in an interview. "Almost everything we do is predicated on public trust."

The admission came two weeks after a Times investigation found the agency hired dozens of officers from a disbanded county police force even though sheriff's investigators had found significant misconduct in their backgrounds. Internal agency files showed that jobs were given to officers who accidentally fired their weapons, had sex at work, committed theft, solicited prostitutes or falsified records.

The department's internal review has reached some of the same conclusions about the 2010 mass hire.

[See **Sheriff**, A16]

[**Sheriff,** from A1]

Rogers, whose duties include overseeing the personnel department, said officials were considering terminating some of the officers but probably would not be able to legally fire employees for misconduct that sheriff's officials knew about when they hired them. What's more realistic, he said, is moving the problem hires to less sensitive positions, giving them more training and putting them on administrative monitoring to limit future misconduct.

Some, he said, have already been disciplined for bad behavior since being hired, as The Times had reported.

Richard A. Shinee, an attorney for the union representing deputy sheriffs, said it would be "the height of hypocrisy and expediency" to take action against the deputies now.

"The department has known for years their background and that background was vetted, and the good and the bad was revealed. It went to the highest levels of the department for review," he said.

Rogers said the department identified the roughly 80 officers by comparing their background files with the department's hiring standards.

Some, he said, should have been disqualified automatically and others had problems that were less "black and white." He said he was legally restricted from providing the names and detailed histories of the officers. He said the group of problem hires included 51 sworn deputies and supervisors and an additional 33 custody assistants who work in the jails. He also stressed that the number was preliminary and might change as the investigation continues.

The records reviewed by The Times showed that for nearly 100 of the roughly 280 hires, investigators discovered evidence of dishonesty, such as making untrue statements or falsifying police records. At least 15 were caught cheating on the department's polygraph exams.

The officers all once worked at the county's smaller police force, the Office of Public Safety. To save money, the county disbanded that agency about four years ago, and its responsibilities — patrolling county buildings, parks and hospitals — were handed over to the Sheriff's Department.

The department was not required to hire any of the former county officers, officials said, but gave them the first shot at applying for the new sheriff's jobs. The majority were taken on as sworn deputies, and others were hired as custody assistants in the department's troubled jail system, as security guards or for other lower-level positions.

One applicant had been fired from another agency amid allegations he abused inmates, but was hired by the Sheriff's Department to work the jails, according to hiring records reviewed by The Times. Another hire was forced out of the Los Angeles Police Department after lying to a supervisor. A third admitted to using her service weapon to shoot at her husband while he ran away from her during a dispute.

After The Times' article, the county Board of Supervisors demanded that Sheriff Lee Baca report back about the mass hiring. In a two-page letter he sent to the board this week, Baca acknowledged that the hiring standards were violated. He said he had delegated the authority for making the hiring decisions to his undersheriff at the time, Larry Waldie.

"My direction was unequivocal that we were to only hire qualified candidates," Baca says in the letter.

Baca told the board that an audit found that the former undersheriff was responsible for hiring "several" officers who did not meet sheriff's standards. He did not reveal to the board that the internal review identified about 80 problem hires. Baca said no administrative action could be taken against Waldie now because he has retired. Waldie did not return calls seeking comment but said in an earlier interview that the department was pressured to hire some of the officers by county officials.

Board members, however, weren't satisfied with the report, and called on Baca to provide more details about the hires.

The department "is just one hell of a mess and we have an obligation to straighten it out," Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas said.

Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky said the report failed to identify why problem officers were hired.

"The issue is to find out why people who did not meet the basic standard for hiring in the Sheriff's Department got hired anyway, and how do we prevent that from happening in the future, and how do we know it's not happening today," Yaroslavsky said. "We need to know what happened."

Supervisor Michael D. Antonovich called on the sheriff to provide more information, including how many of the questionable hires have had conduct or performance problems since joining the department, personnel file information about those who should not have been hired, and whether there are any legal measures the county could take against Waldie.

Baca's spokesman Steve Whitmore said the sheriff "understood there are significant issues here."

"This is how he's responding," Whitmore said. "He's fixing it."

The department is still reviewing the hiring but is already planning to implement reforms.

Rogers said the problem appeared to have been Waldie's decision-making. He said the department's investigators did their job by completing thorough background checks.

Still, Rogers said, he's met with every background investigator, as well as the investigators' supervisors, to clarify the department's position on hiring.

"I expect them to only hire people who meet our hiring standards, period," he said.

"We're only going to hire the best. There's no equivocation."

The department is also changing the way it hires, Rogers said. Currently, the decision is made by a supervisor within the personnel division and cleared with an assistant sheriff.

The department now plans to create a panel of lieutenants and one civilian employee to make hiring decisions, with the more difficult cases decided by a panel of commanders.

"I believe we need to confront this head-on," Rogers said. "That's what we're doing."

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On the bus, goals in sight

Without a car, it's a 15-hour day, but family makes it work

STEVE LOPEZ

It is 5:35 a.m.

"Let's go," Carmen says to Andy, 14, and Nicole, 11, as they head up the street toward their Florence Avenue bus stop, all of them wearing backpacks.

On weekdays, Carmen Mendoza does not see the sun in her Bell Gardens neighborhood. She's out the door with her two kids before dawn, and the evening darkness always beats her home.

One reason for the 15-hour days is that like thousands of people in a region built for the automobile, Carmen Mendoza doesn't own a car. So she and the kids commute to work and school by bus, with lots of transfers along the way. On a typical day, the bus that takes them back home is their eighth or ninth of the day.

I joined them for the journey recently, meeting Mendoza and her kids as they emerged from their home to go catch the first bus of the day.

Nicole is still tired, and Andy seems to be sleepwalking, but to look at their mother, you wouldn't know the hour was so indecent. She has bounce in her step, and there is something expectant in her eyes.

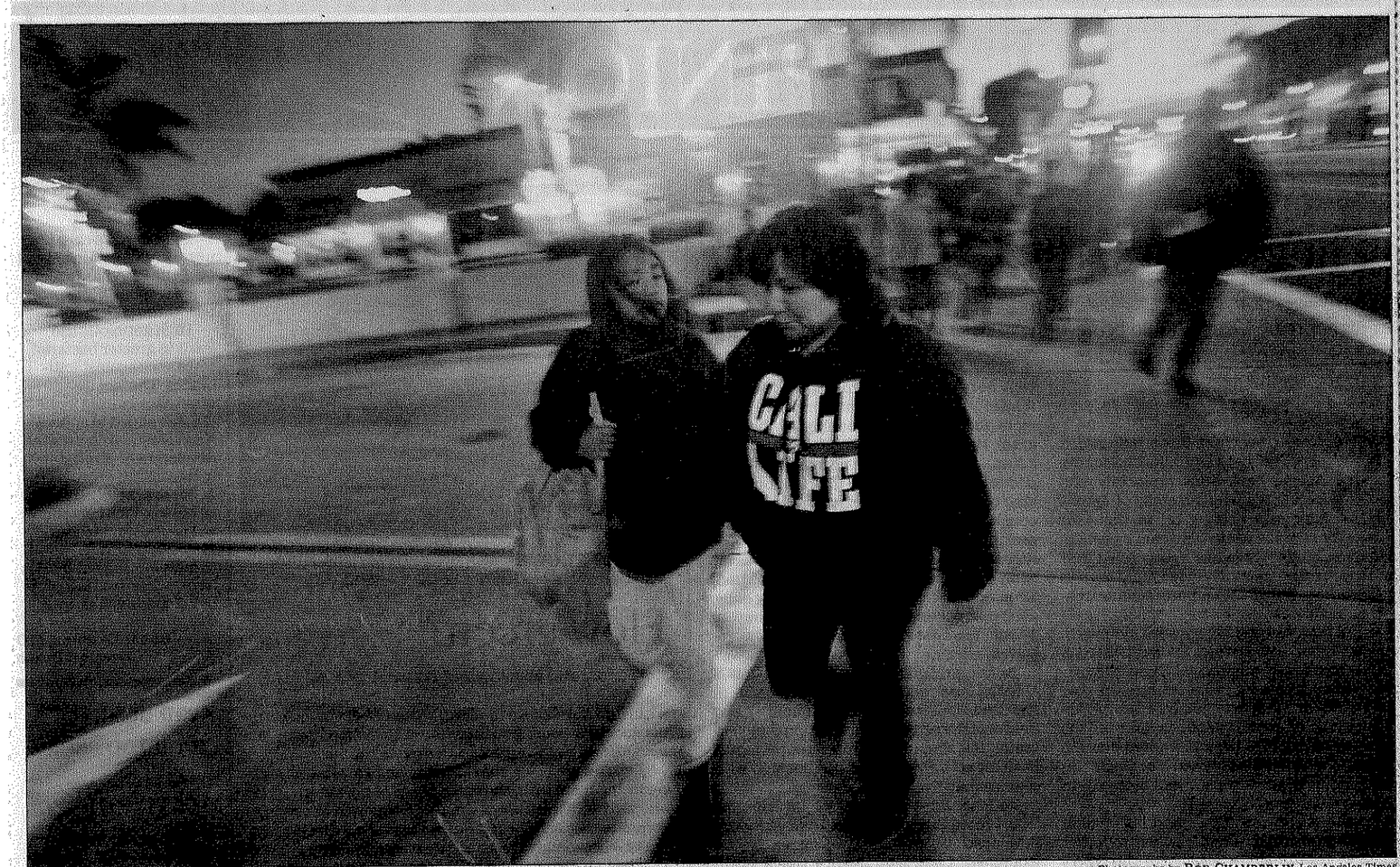
BOB CHAMBERLIN Los Angeles Times

CARMEN MENDOZA, left, and her children ride eight or nine buses to far-flung campuses and work; schools nearer to home don't meet Mendoza's standards.

About 1.1 million times a day, someone boards a Metro bus in greater Los Angeles. Metro officials say 79% of their riders list themselves as "transit dependent," 90% are minorities, and the average household income is $25,540.

At 5:50 a.m., the Mendozas' bus arrives and we board silently. Route 311 runs from Norwalk through Downey, Cudahy and Huntington Park, collecting its cargo of nannies, housekeepers, produce workers and students, shuttling

[See Lopez, A23]



Photographs by BOB CHAMBERLIN Los Angeles Times

CARMEN MENDOZA and daughter Nicole sprint for a bus in Huntington Park. Mendoza works in the garment district. Nicole attends school in downtown L.A.

Bus riders dream of brighter days

[**Lopez,** from A1]
them westward under cover of darkness.

"There are problems here, like drugs and gangs," Mendoza says, explaining why she doesn't send her kids to more convenient neighborhood schools. Mendoza and her husband, a delivery man for a health supply company, did not finish school in Mexico. It will be different for their children.

Carmen Mendoza visited nine schools before deciding on an Atwater Village charter called the Environmental Science and Technology High School for Andy. Nicole attends Para Los Niños Middle School Charter downtown.

The daily drill is to take Andy to the downtown L.A. stop where he catches his next bus, then backtrack to get Nicole to her school. Mendoza then races through the produce district to get to her job as a seamstress by 7 a.m.

In the evening, she repeats the trek, adding an extra leg. Nicole goes to dance class after school, while Andy plays for his high school soccer team. It makes for a long, grueling day, but Mendoza says they're used to it.

"I want them to have not just a good education, but other opportunities," Mendoza says.

It is still dark when we get off our first bus in Huntington Park.

"Hurry!" Mendoza implores her kids.

We turn the corner and hustle up Pacific Avenue as Bus No. 2, the 760, lumbers past us toward the stop half a block away.

We all make it and head north toward Vernon, where the bus lurches west before turning due north once again. It is still dark outside, the downtown skyline in lights. Riders who can't find seats grip railings and poles for balance, swaying in unison on turns. The bus plows ahead urgently, as if the life of the slumbering city — its waking breath — depends on the safe delivery of these calloused hands and strong backs.

We arrive at 7th and Broadway at 6:40 a.m. and walk to Hill Street, where Andy and his mother say goodbye. Then we catch the 51 to go back in the direction we just came from, toward Nicole's school.

Through the windows of the bus, dawn seems a revelation as the walls of skyscrapers begin to absorb light and the city is re-created. We bounce off the 51 at 9th and San Pedro, and Mendoza looks for the 66, but it's not coming, so we hoof it to Nicole's school at 8th and Sanford.

Mendoza has worked a deal to leave Nicole with the principal, Janet Alvarez, every morning just before 7 a.m. Nicole will rest, read and study for the hour before school begins. Mendoza races off to her job a few blocks away, hustling through the vast outdoor 7th Street Market, dodging forklifts and vehicles.

MENDOZA SEWS at Groceries Apparel, where she starts work at 7 a.m. The family leaves home before dawn and gets home around 8 p.m. most days.

Mendoza arrives at Groceries Apparel a few minutes late, but she says the owners know her situation and appreciate her work ethic, so they're flexible. She walks into the warehouse and sits at a sewing machine with a cheery hello to co-workers. Over the next eight hours, she will sew hems onto 600 shirts.

"She's amazing, she really is," says Patricc Reed, director of operations, who tells me he is about to promote Mendoza to a management position. "She knows all the machines, and she does all of our repairs."

When her shift ends at 3 p.m., Mendoza has an extra duty to take care of. This is one of the days she picks up her 7-year-old grandson, Daniel, at Para Los Niños Elementary before going back in the other direction to get Nicole. Mendoza has an older daughter who asked for steady help with Daniel, and Mendoza said OK. But only if, in addition to working, her daughter agreed to go back to school so she can build a better life for her family.

With Daniel in tow, we catch the 51 and take it back to Nicole's school, then walk from the garment district along the edge of skid row to the flower district to wait for the 360. We ride that line up to 7th and Hill, then transfer to the 720 to make our way toward MacArthur Park.

The city's rhythms are different by bus. You move slower, but you take in more. There's time to think, to read. You step off a bus and breathe the scent of flowers or sizzling food on a grill. You see people whose country of origin is hard to guess and hear languages you can't identify.

Mendoza reaches for the straps of her children's backpacks, for safety, as they cross a street. They see people they know at stops and on buses, members of their rolling community.

Mendoza had a car until 18 months ago, when she got into an accident. She decided to get rid of her wheels altogether rather than pay for repairs, gas and maintenance. She also got hit by a cyclist while walking and needed surgery on her arm. The lingering stiffness makes driving difficult.

Traveling by bus has all the obvious challenges, she says, but there are advantages, too.

"We're together," she says.

On the bus, she can look her children in the eye, talk about their days, help them with their homework. If she went off to work each day while they attended neighborhood schools, they'd have too much idle time, she says.

"I don't want them watching television or playing video games."

When Daniel sees a video game on my smartphone, he looks up at his grandmother for approval. She answers with a raised eyebrow, and Daniel knows he is out of luck. He returns to his math homework, and only after I quiz him on some problems does Mendoza let him use my phone's calculator to check his answers.

I heard about the Mendoza family from a friend named Liza Bercovici, who founded the nonprofit Everybody Dance in 2000 after her 13-year-old daughter, Gabriella, died in an accident. Gabriella loved to dance, and Bercovici, then a lawyer, wanted to honor her spirit by providing underserved kids a chance to learn ballet, jazz and other dance forms for as little as $7 a month. Nicole has been a student there for several years.

By the time we get Nicole to her class, it is exactly 12 hours from the time we caught the first bus that morning. But she still has the energy to twirl and leap across the floor with the other young gazelles. While his aunt dances, Daniel plays with a friend. Carmen Mendoza chats with another mom and checks in with Andy by phone. After three more bus rides from school, he has arrived home safely.

Just before 7 p.m., Carmen and Nicole board the 720 bus near MacArthur Park, pass back through downtown, over the river and into the working-class suburbs. Mendoza peers through a window to see who is on the street and what they are doing there, so she can make a smart decision about the safest connecting route. Her eighth bus of the day is the 258, heading south into Bell Gardens and dropping her off for a short walk to her home.

It is just before 8 p.m. and time for Mendoza to make dinner for her family.

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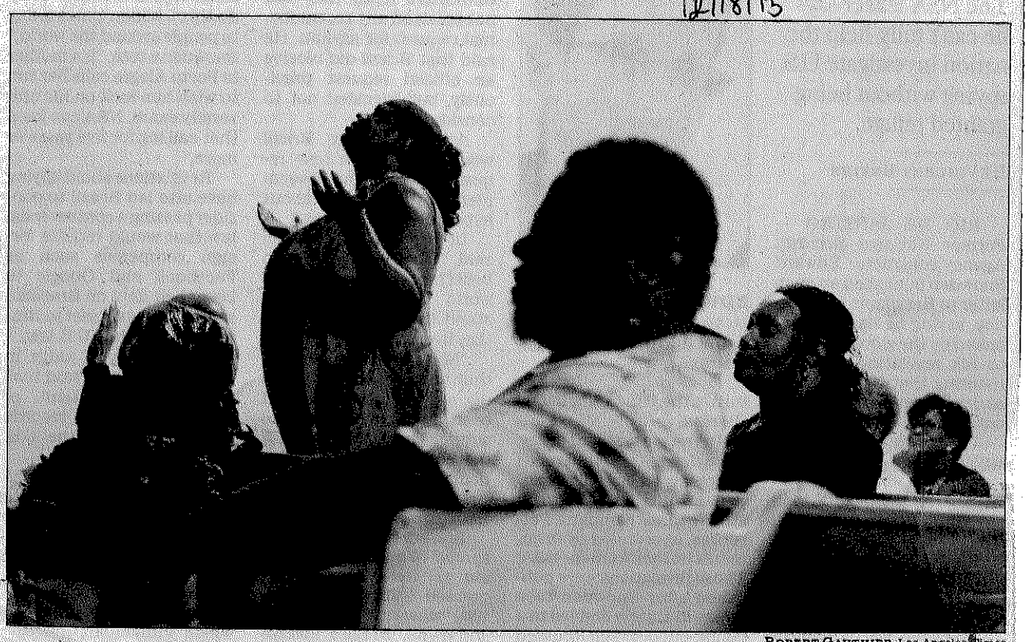


ROBERT GAUTHIER Los Angeles Times

OLIVIA VANCLIEF prays at a church service. Her daughter Viola Vanclief died in 2010 while under the care of a convicted thief, Kiana Barker, who was found guilty of second-degree murder in the 2-year-old's death.

Foster children put at risk

Those living in private agencies' homes are a third more likely to endure physical, emotional or sexual abuse, a Times analysis found.

BY GARRETT THEROLF

They were found barefoot in January, huddled under a blanket against the biting High Desert winter cold, two kids on the run from a former foster mother, who had bound their hands with zip-ties and beat them. Investigators substantiated in October that a Lancaster foster father sexually abused two young sisters in his care.

Such cases of abuse are scattered through the files of California's privatized foster care system — children whipped with belts, burned with a car cigarette lighter and traumatized by beatings and threats.

California began a modest experiment 27 years ago, privatizing a portion of foster care in the belief that it would better serve children and be less expensive. Lawmakers decided to enlist local charities to help recruit and supervise foster parents.

Today, the state's private foster family system — the largest in the nation — has become more expensive and more dangerous than the government-run homes it has largely replaced.

AFTER VIOLA Vanclief was killed, state officials imposed a $150 fine. They said the amount was the maximum penalty.

Those living in homes run by private agencies were about a third more likely to be the victims of serious physical, emotional or sexual abuse than children in state-supervised foster family homes, according to a Times analysis of more than 1 million hotline investigations over a recent three-year period.

In Los Angeles County, at least four children died as a result of abuse or neglect over the last five years in homes overseen by private agencies, according to county officials. No children died in government-run homes during that period.

The flow of money to private foster care — now about $400 million a year — introduced a powerful incentive for some to spend as little

[See Foster, A12]

[Foster, from A1]

as possible and pack homes with as many children as they could.

Those agencies are so short of homes that they accept convicted criminals as foster parents. The state has granted waivers to at least 5,300 people convicted of crimes. In the most egregious cases, people with waivers later maimed or killed children.

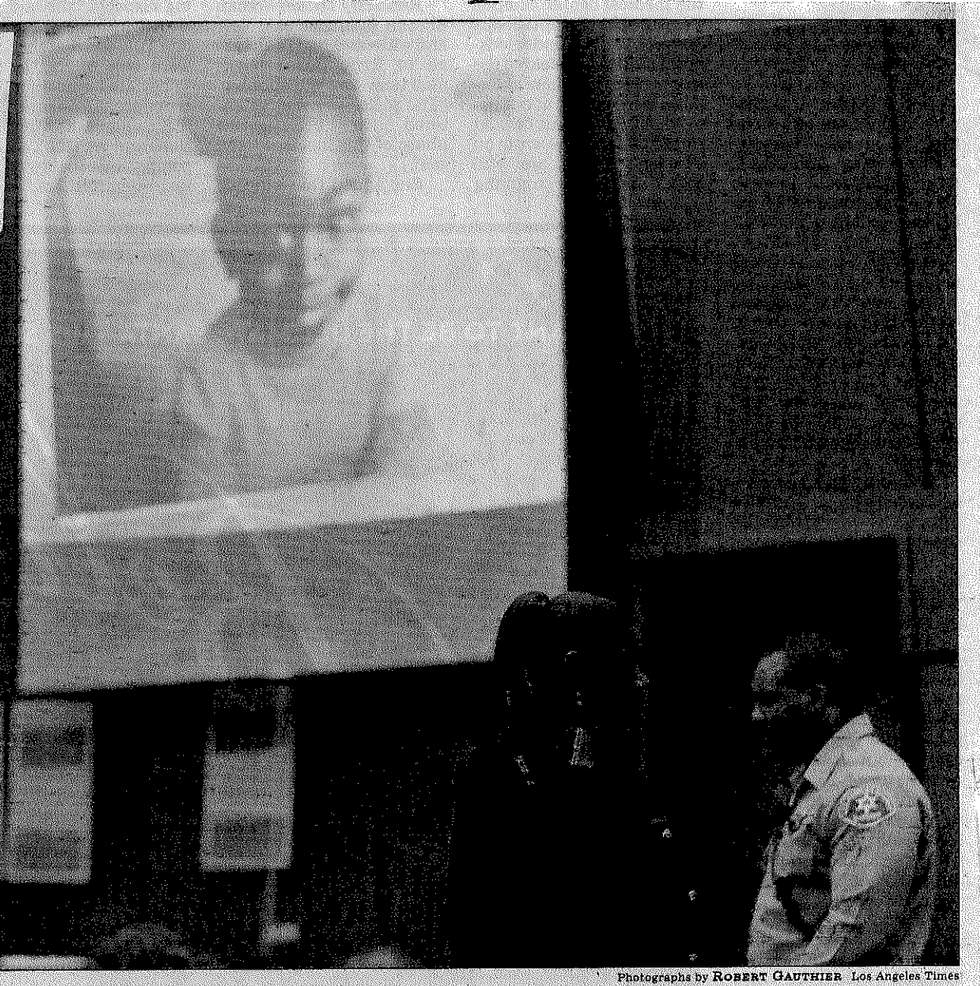
The system is so poorly monitored that foster care agencies with a history of abuse can continue caring for children for years.

Substantiated cases of wrongdoing can bring little punishment from regulators.

Private agencies now care for 15,000 children statewide. The care comes at greater cost — an additional $327 million between 2001 and 2010, the state auditor found.

Los Angeles County has come to heavily rely on this system; five out of six foster children who are not placed with relatives go to private homes.

It is "as bottom of the barrel as you can imagine," said Jill Duerr Berrick, co-director of the Center for Child and Youth Policy at UC Berkeley. "They are clearly not keeping track of quality issues. It's really quite surprising we don't have more tragedies."



Photographs by ROBERT GAUTHIER Los Angeles Times

OLIVIA VANCLIEF, in court, once said: "I promised [Viola] that it was going to be me and her against the world. The world won."

Into this system came 2-year-old Aiden, who in 2010 was removed from his family's San Bernardino County home because of neglect.

Social workers placed Aiden, his 3-year-old brother and 4-year-old sister with an unemployed Apple Valley couple who were recruited and supervised by the Joshua Foster Family Agency.

Their allegations are contained in an ongoing lawsuit filed by Aiden and his siblings against the agency.

Aiden's foster mother, Thursday Young, was approved even though county social workers had received complaints that she was abusing children.

Social workers certified her partner, Devon Kirk, despite his illegal drug use and, according to police, acknowledged gang connections.

Young and Kirk converted their garage into an indoor marijuana farm, police later discovered. "A shame I smoke 2 quarter pounds a month," Kirk wrote on his Facebook page.

A 13-year-old foster child living in the home complained that the couple were using drugs and hitting Aiden and his siblings, according to police. Social workers from the county and the private agency dismissed the girl's concerns, according to the lawsuit.

In June 2010, Aiden was taken to the hospital in a coma. He suffered severe abdominal damage, a skull fracture and brain injuries.

Young and Kirk pleaded guilty to child abuse. Young was placed on probation; Kirk is serving an eight-year sentence at La Palma Correctional Center in Arizona.

Aiden's father, Brian Fassett, regained custody of the children and moved the family to West Virginia. Aiden, he said, is blind in one eye and was left mentally disabled.

"My daughter is just old enough so that she'll never forget, but she walks around with it locked inside," Fassett said.

The former board president of Joshua Foster Family Agency and county officials declined to comment.

High demand

More than 59,000 children end up in California's foster care system because of abuse, neglect or abandonment.

Most are placed with relatives. The rest are sent to group homes or individual foster homes, which are either privately operated or run by the state and county.

Demand for these homes far outstrips availability, and it's not uncommon for social workers to make more than 100 calls before a vacant bed is secured, according to Los Angeles County officials.

The money that foster parents receive — about $748 a month in California, or $25 a day — is for the children's living expenses. The homes are not meant to be profit-making enterprises, but it is the sole income for some parents.

KIANA BARKER, found guilty of killing Viola Vanclief, was recruited as a foster parent despite her record and although she was living with a convicted robber.

In the 1980s, California relied heavily on group homes, some of which cost taxpayers up to $25,800 a year per child.

Legislators reasoned that charities, churches and community groups would be more efficient and nimble than the government bureaucracy. They gave them the power to recruit foster parents and hire their own social workers.

The law provides about $1,870 a month to care for each child and to cover administrative costs. The foster family receives about 40% of that amount, and the rest goes to the agency to pay for social workers, office rent and other expenses.

The legislation, in some ways, worked as planned, attracting community groups to join the foster system.

Gays and lesbians helped form the highly regarded Southern California Foster Family and Adoption Agency. Casey Family Programs, a respected philanthropy for disadvantaged children, created another.

It didn't take long, however, for some entrepreneurs to figure out the money-making potential of foster care.

Craig Woods, a former carpet and hair products salesman, started United Care in 1989 in a storefront on Crenshaw Boulevard.

Business was good. Nationwide, the crack epidemic had left tens of thousands of children without safe homes.

Woods filled United Care's board of directors with friends and relatives. Mitchell Preston, the board president, was caught selling stolen televisions at swap meets and was sent to prison for the crime.

United Care grew into one of the largest agencies in Los Angeles County, recently caring for nearly 800 children each year. It received $5.5 million in taxpayer money in 2009, according to the agency's tax return. Woods, who declined to comment for this article, received a salary that year of $175,000.

The currency of the system is children; the key to getting more children — and earning more money — is finding willing foster parents.

Woods pursued the goal with entrepreneurial zeal. He held contests for foster parents who were offered the chance to win a cruise to Ensenada if they recommended new applicants, according to the agency's newsletter.

Amid criticism that his selection process was too lax, Woods told county officials in 2010 that as many as half the foster parents he recruited had committed crimes. He told them other agencies had similar problems.

Foster parents are barred from having convictions for felonies or certain misdemeanors. But state regulators can waive that rule — and often do.

One of the people recruited by Woods' agency was Kiana Barker, a convicted thief. Her live-in boyfriend was a convicted robber. They shared a run-down bungalow on Gage Avenue in South Los Angeles.

Barker, who had lived in the neighborhood all her life, had at least three complaints lodged against her on the county's child abuse hotline, including a case of severe neglect.

Among the children sent into her care was an almond-eyed girl named Viola Vanclief, whose mother was a crack addict and prostitute living in a board-and-care facility for the mentally ill.

One day in 2010, after hours of heavy drinking, Barker burst into Viola's room and beat her, according to a witness' court testimony. When Barker was pulled away, the little girl was on the floor, struggling to breathe, the witness said.

59,000+
Number of children in California's foster care system.

15,000
Number of children in private foster care homes.

$1,870
Amount the state pays per month for each child in foster care.

$400 million
Amount the state pays annually to private foster homes.

5,300
Number of waivers given to private foster care parents previously convicted of crimes.

Viola died a day later at the age of 2, her body covered with red and purple bruises.

State officials slapped Woods' agency with what they said was the maximum penalty — a $150 fine. Barker was convicted of second-degree murder and is awaiting sentencing.

"Who does this to a child?" asked Viola's mother, Olivia.

The case provides an example of how poorly monitored and passive California's private foster care system has become. The system generates reams of documents and data, but often fails to capture the true condition of children. Action or punishment is rare.

Each week, a social worker from United Care, Elizabeth Valencia, was scheduled to visit Barker's house.

State rules prohibit social workers from monitoring more than 15 foster children at a time. Valencia oversaw more than that number, having three jobs at different foster family agencies, according to state records and interviews with co-workers. Valencia did not respond to requests for comment.

Half of the social workers at United Care, who made about $40,000 a year, also worked at another agency, according to state records.

The Times collected all available work records and found that at least 14 foster agencies in Los Angeles County had workers with multiple full-time jobs. The accounting is incomplete because many of the approximately 45 private agencies in the county failed to file the required staffing reports.

Viola's file contains hundreds of pages. Included are numerous reports from Valencia, who notes that she went to Barker's home every week. Her reports repeatedly state that Viola appeared "to be in overall good health and happy."

Even as Valencia was praising Barker, complaints to the child abuse hotline mounted.

County social workers substantiated one complaint out of six logged against Barker and her boyfriend.

The details have not been released because of confidentiality laws.

County social workers were also scheduled to visit the home once a month. They too recommended that Barker adopt Viola, according to the file.

Completing the adoption would have resulted in a $10,000 payment to United Care and extra money each month for Barker.

In the push to find homes for children, county social workers say problems are often overlooked.

Pamela Payton said her 14 years as a case worker with the county Department of Children and Family Services taught her that "workers would just skim the surface while assessing the home. If they came to know something of concern, they wouldn't make the report or act on it."

"It was clear that DCFS didn't want to lose the inventory of foster and group homes," Payton said.

Data analysis

By two key measures used by national child welfare groups, California's privatized system is worse than its government-run counterpart, according to a Times analysis of three years of data ending in 2011.

Youths in privately operated homes remained in the foster system 11% longer than those in other types of homes — 378 days compared to 341 days.

Those children were 15% more likely to move from one home to another.

The most egregious cases — youths who shuttled through five homes or more — occurred three times more often under the care of the private agencies.

Every call to a child abuse hotline, and the subsequent investigative report, is logged into a $1-billion computer system — one of the largest in the state.

The federal government requires complete information on abuse complaints for the state to receive billions of dollars in funding.

Each year, California must show that 99.68% of its foster children are free of abuse — and it always meets that benchmark.

But to hit their end-of-the-year deadline, state officials report investigative results for only three-quarters of the year. State and federal officials acknowledge that the results are incomplete, but have not acted to correct the problem.

Data for a full year is eventually published on a website run by UC Berkeley. That tally shows the state has failed since 2007 to meet the federal benchmark for abuse.

But even that report doesn't tell the full story.

To simplify report writing, the state does not require that all the questions be answered — including one asking whether a foster parent was responsible for the abuse or neglect. Without that detail, state regulators have no way to identify agencies with patterns of abuse.

From 1998 to 2000, there were widely publicized cases of foster children who were killed or severely injured, but the Berkeley website shows no reports of children being harmed anywhere in the state.

In the terabytes of information on foster care abuses is the investigative report on Viola Vanclief.

Olivia learned of her daughter's death in a phone call from a county social worker.

"I promised [Viola] that it was going to be me and her against the world," Olivia said. "The world won."

Viola was buried beneath the low hum of high-voltage lines skirting a cemetery along Central Avenue in Carson where jazz pianist Hampton Hawes is buried.

Viola's grave, located near a drainage ditch, remains unmarked.

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