

# Florida Sen. Ronda Storms demands answers in child deaths

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Sen. Ronda Storms told Gov. Rick Scott's social services secretary Wednesday to "dispense with the niceties" and demanded he provide some answers to recent child abuse deaths that have exposed cracks in his agency.

"Welcome to your baptism by fire," said Storms, the chairwoman of the Children, Families and Elder Affairs Committee as David Wilkins stood before her committee for the first time. "You've had very difficult days and weeks and I respect that."

Then she barreled ahead, asking him to explain what the state Department of Children and Families is doing to address the "horrible atrocities" surrounding the 10-year-old Miami twins tortured by their adoptive parents after being in state protective custody.

Wilkins, 50, a former global managing director for Accenture Health and Public Service, has been on the job only a month, yet he has had to confront the death 10-year-old Nubia Barahona, of Miami, and the discovery of two Delray Beach siblings, 10-year-old Jermaine McNeil and 6-year-old Ju'Tyra Allen, whose bodies were found last week stuffed in suitcases and dumped in a canal.

Nubia's body was found on Valentine's Day in the flatbed of her adoptive father's pest control truck, drenched in toxic chemicals. Her twin, Victor, was found hours earlier in the pickup's cab, burned by caustic chemicals and convulsing but still alive. He is recovering at a therapeutic foster home after being released from the Jackson Memorial Hospital's burn unit. The adoptive parents, Jorge and Carmen Barahona, face charges of first-degree murder, aggravated child abuse and child neglect. In the case of the Delray Beach siblings, police have a suspect in custody, but he has not been charged.

Wilkins said he traveled to Miami the day after Nubia Barahona's body was found and said he encountered "finger pointing of all the different parties."

"I realized the situation was much more complicated than I understood," he said. "I believe an overall systematic failure contributed to this process due to outdated business processes, conflicting rules and responsibilities that exist in this agency, institutional lapses in quality, governance and accountability."

But Storms interrupted Wilkins as he tried to describe the panel of social service experts he appointed to conduct an independent review.

"I appreciate what you're saying, but what I want to know is how will this be different?" said Storms, a Republican from Valrico. "How many more investigations, how many more death reviews will we have?"

Wilkins promised to work "very aggressively" to reform DCF, and he called the case "the defining moment of my early tenure."

He said he wants to restructure the jobs of child protection investigators — the agency's "first line of defense" — and enhance their tools and technology. He said he has worked side by side with them, but is concerned about their lack of experience. More than 56 percent of DCF investigators have less than two years' experience and turnover is high — 64 percent — in three regions of the state.

Wilkins acknowledged that DCF's problems are deep. He said the limited training requirements "are misdirected" because they focus on case management and social work instead of "how to assess a situation." He offered no immediate remedy for the current situation.

The review panel's report on the Barahona case is due out Monday and Wilkins said he promises to adopt the recommendations.

Storms, however, said the agency failure goes beyond DCF. She blamed Community Based Care, a local organization contracted to handle the agency's work.

"I'm tired of just throwing caseworkers under the bus," Storms said. She said she agreed to give local groups more flexibility, but they "are not doing their job."

She lambasted the groups for "having some gall" to ask the Legislature for exemptions from liability for negligence and chastised their executives. She then urged Wilkins not to defend them: "You should just duck and stay out of the way."

Wilkins said he will use his business experience to improve the agency's hotline and call centers, increase "community engagement" and keep the focus on accountability.

Storms then finished with a commendation and a plea. She thanked Wilkins for leaving a comfortable retirement from the private sector to work for the state.

"Please do not disappoint us," she said. "Do not shrink away from the job. You have a short window of opportunity for goodwill ... take that goodwill and exploit it."

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