

W16 – In-depth or investigative reporting

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The Virginian-Pilot

### **Foster care system victimized children**

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### **How Norfolk's foster care system victimized the city's most vulnerable children**

[https://www.pilotonline.com/government/local/article\\_5543fec8-40fb-11e9-acb7-6b49a13bbad8.html](https://www.pilotonline.com/government/local/article_5543fec8-40fb-11e9-acb7-6b49a13bbad8.html)

They wanted to put the troubled foster child, who loves spaghetti and writing poetry, in a residential care facility for children.

But because the teenage girl had spent years in foster care, she knew Virginia's laws. They couldn't do that without her consent.

So they tricked her. The city of Norfolk's foster care program arranged for Serena Doucette to go to Florida, she says, by dangling two words in front of her: Disney World.

When she arrived at the airport, a white van from the nearby children's facility was waiting. By the time she realized what was going on, it was too late. Florida law doesn't require the juvenile's consent. So off she went to the residential center with brightly-colored cottages, palm trees and, at times, she said, feces smeared on the walls.

"It just made me like, 'Wow, you all really stooped this low just to get me down there,' " said Doucette, now 21. " 'You just lied to my face — and had a whole setup — just to get me down there.' "

Doucette is one of an untold number of children who have paid a price for chronic problems in Norfolk's foster care program. A Virginian-Pilot investigation, based on interviews with nearly 20 former Norfolk case workers and supervisors, found a pattern of mismanagement, retribution and poor performance that stretches back years.

The employees say they saw the foster care program go from bad to worse. It started with children languishing in foster care for years, with little done to get them adopted. In more recent years, case workers said they've been pressured to get kids off the foster care rolls by any means necessary, even if that sometimes meant putting the children in harm's way.

The division charged with protecting the community's most vulnerable children has sometimes done the opposite, creating situations in which foster children were assaulted and sexually molested. Case workers said they sometimes had to battle their supervisors just to keep children safe.

The division also has frequently failed to conduct required visits to monitor conditions at foster homes — a key step in ensuring children are safe and well cared for — and has misled adoptive parents about the troubled backgrounds of emotionally disturbed children.

"If I had documented it, it would be a series or a bestseller tomorrow," one former Norfolk staffer said. "And I'm not proud of that."

Stephen Hawks, the director of Norfolk's Department of Human Services, which includes the foster care program, declined a request for an interview. Hawks also sent an email to his staff in connection with the reporting of this article, reminding them that city policy prohibits them from talking to reporters.

The former employees spoke on condition of anonymity because most are still in the field of social work and fear they could lose their jobs — or struggle to find work — if they went public. They also worry that, in Hampton Roads' relatively small child welfare community, certain Norfolk supervisors would use their connections to retaliate against them.

The Virginian-Pilot contacted the sources individually, and they largely agreed to speak because of their concerns about Norfolk's foster care program and those who run it. The newspaper also spoke to numerous foster parents, adoptive parents, former foster children and others to gain insight into Norfolk's program.

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### **"Just a rag doll"**

Serena Doucette is happy to have a visitor in jail. She hasn't had many.

She enjoys answering questions about herself, even ones about a part of her life that she'd rather forget. She smiles easily and giggles in a way that reminds you she's college age.

Doucette isn't a foster child anymore. It's June, and she's inmate No. 0041883 in the Hampton Roads Regional Jail. On this day, she's wearing a red jumpsuit because she was put in isolation for fighting her cellmate over a missing cup.

Doucette has light skin and hazel eyes. During two lengthy interviews, she talked to a reporter through a thick pane of glass in an inmate visitation area.

She's being held without bail on burglary and grand larceny charges from Norfolk. Doucette is accused of sneaking into an Ocean View apartment through a window and stealing money and a television — and then failing to appear in court on those charges.

She said she entered foster care when she was around 12. She rattles off several mental disorders she's been diagnosed with, including bipolar disorder. At one point in foster care, she said, she took as many as 11 pills a day.

The city would not give The Pilot access to the foster care files of Doucette and other former foster children interviewed for this article, citing confidentiality laws.

By all accounts, Doucette was a handful. She giggled when told that one case worker said she was as time-consuming as five typical foster children combined. "That's what I've heard, too," she said.

She said she lived in about 50 foster homes, group homes and residential centers. Her mother says it was closer to 80. Of course, Doucette played a role in that: If she wasn't running away from a home, she was getting kicked out, according to Doucette and former case workers.

"You feel like you're just going place to place, like you're just a rag doll getting tossed somewhere," she said.

Doucette's mother also suffers from bipolar disorder and her father is in prison for a drug conviction. Doucette was living in Norfolk with her maternal grandmother, but ended up in foster care after the grandmother said she lost control of her.

It's been about five years since, Doucette said, Norfolk officials lured her to Florida. Doucette said a counselor — later identified as an employee of a city vendor — told her she was going to take her to Disney World. She believes that the city used the therapist to feed her the story because Doucette trusted her.

Reached by phone, the counselor declined an interview request.

A former employee involved in sending Doucette to Florida said she did not recall Disney World being the bait to get her there. But she acknowledged that Doucette did not know until she arrived in Florida that she was going to be left there to live in the residential facility.

"Had she known that, she would never have gotten on the plane," the former employee said.

Doucette said she knew something was wrong when they landed in Melbourne, Fla. "Because I know Disney World's in Orlando," she said.

Outside the airport, when she encountered staff from the treatment center, she tried to get away, running back inside. But they eventually got her to go in the van.

Elissa Glucksman Hyne, a senior policy analyst at a watchdog organization named Children's Rights, questioned the appropriateness of Norfolk transporting a child to another state to do something the city couldn't legally do in Virginia.

While she couldn't say the city's maneuvers regarding Doucette were illegal, they "definitely violate the spirit of the laws," said Glucksman Hyne, who also holds a law degree.

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## "Norfolk is toxic"

Children generally are brought into foster care because they've been neglected or abused. If staffers can't find a suitable family member to care for a child, he or she is placed in a foster home, a group home or a residential facility.

If returning a child to a family member is possible, the state and federal standard is to do so within 12 months. If not, the city is supposed to find a family to adopt the child within two years.

Yet Norfolk's foster children have, in recent years, spent more time in care than most other cities in South Hampton Roads, according to state statistics.

At the start of this year, 28 percent of the foster children in Norfolk's system had been in care for more than two years, according to the city.

Last year, 28 percent of the children who left the foster care aged out of the system, city statistics show.

Former case workers describe a division stuck in a cycle of low performance, where key steps in the foster care process don't get the attention they need:

They say city workers often didn't strive hard enough to find blood relatives to adopt foster children.

The city has for years fallen short on recruiting quality foster parents, particularly those looking to adopt.

Foster children have been too often placed anywhere with an available bed, rather than finding living situations that are the best fit for each child.

Some case workers have done little to find adoptive parents for children.

The case workers, whose entry-level salaries start at around \$37,000 a year, describe overwhelming caseloads, low morale and some supervisors who care more about making the department appear in tip-top shape than about doing the heavy lifting of getting it there.

"Norfolk is toxic," a former Norfolk employee said. "They have lost all perspective of professionalism. It's not children first. That's not paramount."

Around 2014, five homeless brothers, who had been living on the streets of Norfolk with their mother, came into foster care. The city placed the boys, ranging from about 2 to 10 years old, in a foster home in Norfolk, according to a former employee with direct knowledge of the case.

But what the city overlooked was that a teenage boy already living in the home had a documented history of inappropriate sexual behavior, the former worker said. Within days, at least two of the boys had been molested by the teen.

The foster home was shut down and the city moved the brothers.

"They should never have put the kids in there. Period," according to another source with knowledge of the incident.

A few years ago, the city temporarily placed a boy in a foster home with another foster boy in it. Both were pre-teens.

The visiting boy, however, had a history of sexually abusive behavior, but the staff didn't look into that before placing him in the home, said a case worker with direct knowledge of the incident.

Within a couple days, the visiting boy sexually molested the other one, the worker said.

"They were in too much of a hurry," she said of the city. "So, due to that, [the foster child] was the victim of sexual abuse in our care."

Around 2016, it was the city's refusal to act that resulted in violence, according to three former employees who have direct knowledge of the situation.

A teenage foster girl was having suicidal thoughts, but her foster mother wouldn't take her to the hospital. The two had a volatile relationship. A police officer who went to the home that day noticed it, too. She recommended to a case worker on call that evening that the girl be moved.

When the case worker relayed the officer's recommendation to management, she got an unusual reaction: A supervisor accused her of lying.

When contacted directly by one of the supervisors, the police officer confirmed the case worker had told the truth. Still, the city left the girl in the home. A short time later, she and the foster mother got into a fistfight. Only then did the Norfolk officials remove the teen.

"Even the police officer said, 'Something bad is going to happen,' " a former case worker said. "And something bad did happen."

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### **Pushing back, pushed out**

For case workers, keeping children safe sometimes meant defying their supervisors, they said.

Around 2016, a teenager transitioning from foster care to living on her own had a toddler whom she wasn't caring for properly, according to a former case worker with direct knowledge of the matter. The teen mother wasn't feeding the baby enough and left her unattended in the bath. The home was filthy.

"There were so many red flags," the former employee said.

The teenager's case worker voiced concerns to her supervisor. The supervisor brushed them aside. But the employee pushed harder.

The employee "continuously told [the supervisor] the baby should be removed," according to another case worker.

The case worker's concerns prompted meetings with the supervisor and others. The supervisor resisted the move, but other staff supported the case worker and the baby was taken from the teen.

The conflict came at a hefty price, though: The supervisor went after the case worker by being antagonistic, giving her additional work and setting unrealistic deadlines, among other things. Three other former case workers said they witnessed the mistreatment.

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### **Roaches and meatloaf**

Irie Martin pulls towels from a dryer while working at a hotel on Jan. 18, 2019, in Norfolk. After aging out of the traditional foster care system at age 18, Martin went into the city's independent living program until he turned 21. He works long hours to support himself.

Irie Martin pulls towels from a dryer while working at a hotel on Jan. 18, 2019, in Norfolk. After aging out of the traditional foster care system at age 18, Martin went into the city's independent living program until he turned 21. He works long hours to support himself. (Kaitlin McKeown)

Children who end up in foster care usually have sad stories, even horrific. They tell stories such as being fed meatloaf mixed with dead roaches, being beaten with wood canes and visiting their mother or father in jail.

Children whose lives start out with trauma and turmoil tend to develop patterns of negative behavior, the former case workers said. They don't trust easily. They push people away. They fight.

Irie Martin built emotional walls so powerful that he says if a close friend were shot to death in front of him, he wouldn't cry. Martin, now 21, spent more than a decade in foster care, never got adopted and said he doesn't care.

He remembers the day he was taken from his mother. He was around 7 years old. She apologized to him.

"She was sorry," he said. "She was going to find me. She was going to get me back."

She never did.

Martin is tall, skinny as a string bean and wears glasses. He's refreshingly honest and without ego. He said he can be antisocial but admits he gets lonely. He said one foster couple wouldn't let him sit on their couch because he had dandruff.

Martin developed an aversion to water bugs because one foster home was infested with them. Another foster parent, he said, physically abused him and threatened his life if he ever told anyone. By the time he landed with a good foster family, in high school, his emotional walls had grown tall and strong.

Martin doesn't have a college degree. He took a handful of classes at Tidewater Community College, but found himself putting his energy into whatever job was in front of him.

He makes \$9.50 an hour folding laundry at a downtown Norfolk hotel and sometimes has to decide which bills he can pay and which he can't. He shares an apartment in a rough Norfolk neighborhood where he doesn't like to be outside after dark.

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### **All about the numbers**

Case workers aren't without fault in the breakdown of Norfolk's child welfare system. Most, however, blame their questionable actions on pressure from certain supervisors.

Several former employees said the staff would push them into moving children out of foster care prematurely, putting them in questionable living situations and rushing adoptions that weren't in the best interests of the children.

"It was always about numbers. It was never the quality of your work," said one former worker. "It was always the quantity."

One case worker guilted a couple into adopting a boy with behavioral issues — even though she knew they weren't ready for it, according to a source with direct knowledge of the matter. A few months after the adoption was finalized, the couple changed their minds, relinquished their parental rights and returned the boy to foster care.

In another case, an adoption worker could see that a pair of foster parents no longer wanted to adopt a girl. The girl had become violent and belligerent with the family and other children in the home. The worker told her supervisor that the couple's desire to adopt the girl had soured.

"And [the supervisor] kept telling [the case worker], 'Make it happen. Make it happen. Make it happen,' " the former employee said.

But persuasion wasn't the answer. The couple called it quits and sent the girl back to foster care.

Some supervisors routinely instructed case workers to withhold or spin negative aspects of a foster child's background when dealing with potential adoptive parents, several former adoption workers said. If a child had attention deficit hyperactive disorder, for example, they might be told to say that he was energetic and liked to be entertained. If a child was aggressive, they'd say he was easily upset.

"You would never post a dog [for adoption] and say, 'This dog is aggressive and bites everybody,' " a former case worker said. "Because nobody's going to want that dog."

Cities are legally required to disclose details about foster children's mental illnesses or emotional problems to adoptive parents, and while some former case workers said they eventually would, others reportedly wouldn't.

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## **Return to sender**

Withholding information about foster children can backfire. Parents eventually see the child's behavior, and some feel deceived by the city, case workers said.

Tanya Romero and her husband began fostering children in 2011 with the goal of adopting three kids. They couldn't have children of their own.

Around 2013, a Norfolk case worker contacted the Hampton couple about a young girl.

"She's beautiful," the case worker told them, according to Romero.

The Romeros brought the girl into their home and planned to adopt her. The case worker was right; the girl was adorable.

But what the case worker didn't tell the couple, according to Romero, is that the girl had a disorder that manifests itself in the inability to show affection, anger problems, and a resistance to giving and receiving love.

The girl became defiant and challenged authority. She got aggressive with the Romeros' other foster child, once kicking the younger boy in the back of the head. The couple had enough when the girl told them she was going to kill the boy, Romero said.

Romero, 47, said she alerted the city and reviewed the girl's foster care file. It said the girl had reactive attachment disorder — not uncommon among foster children coping with a lack of emotional support — and that she shouldn't be placed in a home with other children, Romero said.

"This was known. It was in her file," Romero said. "We were like, 'You lied to us.'"

The Romeros tried to make it work, but eventually returned the girl to foster care.

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## **Phantom visits**

The cornerstone of the city's oversight of foster children is monthly in-person visits. Case workers are required to conduct the visits with children once a month, with at least half of those visits occurring at the children's homes.

They check on the children's welfare. They inspect their rooms and sleeping arrangements. They make sure the children and foster parents are getting along.

"These visits are the backbone of insuring that these kids' safety and well being are being taken care of," said Glucksman Hyne, the policy analyst at Children's Rights.



According to some former case workers, it became common in recent years for workers to claim to have visited foster children when they didn't. One estimated that when she worked there, seven out of 10 case workers weren't conducting all their visits and that some supervisors either didn't care or failed to notice.

Case workers would skirt the visitation requirement by checking in with the child by phone, but reporting that it was a face-to-face visit, according to some former employees. Or, they said, the workers would copy and paste a previous visit report and maybe conduct the visit later — or maybe not.

One former employee said she took over a case from a co-worker that had no record of any in-person visits. And the child had been under that case worker for about a year. She said her supervisor shrugged it off, telling her to just move forward.

"I was shocked," she said. "How do you give me a case with nothing in it?"

The state's yearly inspections of Norfolk's foster care program cited issues with documentation of child visits. The 2017 review noted that case workers' visits were "often not updated and narratives are simply cut and pasted from one month to the next." The next year's report documented the same problem.

Because of those lapses, one former employee said she didn't trust the work in the case files her team took over from co-workers. "We could not rely on it," she said. "I'd get this case with all lies."

That's when employees could actually find the files. The foster care program's record-keeping is "atrocious," according to one former case worker. Another called it "embarrassing."

Files would be misplaced. Key documents, such as birth certificates and Social Security cards, would be missing. Documents that should have been filed would be stashed in the wrong drawer or elsewhere in the office, according to the former employees.

"It was a nightmare," one of the workers said.

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### **Oversight not in sight**

Norfolk's foster care program has operated for years with no real oversight from the state.

If a state inspector found something amiss during a review of a city's foster care program, the Virginia Department of Social Services has long contended that it has no power to make cities follow the rules.

"I don't have any authority to tell them otherwise," said Carl Ayers, director of DSS's family services division.

In a second interview, Ayers acknowledged that the state could remove the top person in charge of a city's social services department, if necessary.

However, the state actually has much more power than that, according to a state commission that recently released a scathing report about DSS's oversight of foster care in Virginia. Department officials just have not used it.

According to state law, the social services department can remove "any such employee" who doesn't meet the state standards — not just the director.

The state also has the authority to direct local agencies to remove children from unsafe situations and to intervene if the locality fails to provide foster care services, according to two other state laws.

Asked for comment on the laws, Ayers declined to do so, citing his busy schedule. He said in an email that "interpretations vary" on what authority his department has but declined to elaborate.

DSS, however, appears more willing to embrace its oversight role lately, in part through an emergency regulation obtained by the governor in December and a bill that passed the legislature last month.

Even if the state had taken more responsibility in years past, its process for reviewing cities' child welfare programs had been lacking, according to Ayers. Until 2017, state inspections weren't even documented. Without records to draw from, Ayers said he couldn't say how often the visits in previous years occurred — or what was found.

State inspectors, called "regional consultants," now document the yearly reviews they conduct at each city. But the state commission's report, released in December, described the reviews as inadequate.

"(T)hey are not as structured, comprehensive or reliable as they need to be," the report states. On top of that, the state has not used the findings from those annual reviews to identify systemic problems and needs a better process to correct problems that are uncovered, the report noted.

The two reviews of Norfolk's program since 2017 offered some positive feedback — such as the city enlisting more foster parents with the help of a nonprofit organization — but they also noted that some foster children had a revolving door of case workers and foster parents, among other issues.

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### **"Mean Girls"**

The third floor of the building in downtown Norfolk that houses the foster care program has long been the butt of jokes, former case workers said. For years, city employees who work in the building have known — and joked — that it's the worst floor to work on.

"Everybody knew, 'Don't go to the third floor,' " a former case worker said. "People are very unhappy on the third floor because of all the stress that you deal with. And it's not from the clients. It's from your supervisors."

The root of the program's failings lie here: some supervisors running amok, a department head who looks the other way, a failure to train employees properly and case workers who cut corners, according to numerous former employees.

One case worker likened it to the 2004 teenage comedy "Mean Girls," which centered on a clique of rude high school girls.

Former employees said that they saw some supervisors cursing at one another or belittling subordinates. One even made an intern cry for sitting at a lunch table the supervisor wanted. In supervisor meetings, some managers openly talked about which subordinates they were targeting by making their jobs more difficult.

"The supervisors would laugh about it," said a former supervisor who attended those meetings. "It's a joke to them."

Stress from the job in Norfolk was so intense that a handful of case workers suffered from anxiety. Some of them took medical leave to deal with it. One former employee lost large amounts of her hair. Another kept getting sick.

"It would manifest into not wanting to do anything," a former employee said. "You just go in and don't want to do anything because you're just going to get berated for it."

Numerous former employees singled out a particular supervisor for what they described as egregious behavior. They say she targets case workers she doesn't like and makes their jobs unbearable by giving them more cases, nitpicking their work and appearance, and making snide remarks — all while extending preferential treatment to employees who treat her to lunches and coffee.

"Most of us got into social work to help abused children," a former employee said, "but we ended up getting abused, too."

The supervisor declined to comment for this story.

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### **"Get them home"**

Former case workers identified several supervisors who have contributed to the culture of intimidation, favoritism and retribution within Norfolk's foster care program.

But several of those workers said the department's assistant director, Denise Gallop, is the driving force behind the intense pressure to reduce Norfolk's foster care numbers.

On the surface, it's good for child welfare agencies to work to get children out of foster care. But case workers allege that certain supervisors pressured them to send children home into unsafe conditions or before the children were ready.

The year after Gallop arrived in Norfolk in 2015 saw the biggest drop in foster care numbers — and largest increase in adoptions — in nearly a decade, city statistics show.

Social workers, however, say the better-looking statistics stemmed from doing their jobs worse, not better.

"With them, it was just always, 'Get them home, get them home, get them home,' " a former case worker said. "We were all looking like, 'Now we see why your numbers are so low.' You can't just keep sending kids home when they shouldn't be."

Gallop previously worked as the deputy director of Hampton's Department of Human Services. She was promoted to that position in January 2011. But Gallop's time there didn't end well, according to several former Hampton social services workers.

She was relocated within the department in January 2015, six months after a manager under Gallop complained that she created a hostile work environment, according to records obtained by The Pilot.

"I feel threatened and intimidated by Ms. Gallop," supervisor Lisa Gray wrote, according to her June 2014 complaint to human resources staff, obtained by The Pilot. "There are boundaries in the workplace and clearly Ms. Gallop doesn't know them. In her position she must feel she can say and treat people any way she wants. As a supervisor if I treated a co-worker, employee, or customer as Ms Gallop treated me, I would me [sic] removed from my position."

Hampton spokeswoman Robin McCormick said in an email that Gallop's move was "temporary" and her official position did not change. Asked if the move stemmed from Gray's complaint, McCormick said it's city policy not to comment on personnel matters.

Regardless, Gallop left for Norfolk four months later. She declined to comment for this story.

Her hiring looked good on paper, former case workers say, because Hampton's foster care program has a better reputation than Norfolk's. Hampton's foster children spent less time in care than any city in South Hampton Roads between 2013 and 2017, according to state data.

Gallop's new subordinates said it quickly became clear that she had an urgency to move children out of foster care — and a willingness to push boundaries with policy — that made them uncomfortable.

Around 2016, Gallop directed supervisors to delay the internal reporting of runaway foster children until they'd been gone for 30 days, former staffers said. The delay allowed the city to collect money from the state that it shouldn't have, the staffers said.

Hawks has been the department's director since July 2011 and makes \$137,842 a year. But former case workers said he has taken a back seat to Gallop's strong personality and has not done enough to address employee complaints.

"In Norfolk, the director believed that everybody was just complaining," a former case worker said. "It was like, 'Why even talk to Steve? Because he doesn't want to hear it.' I think that's the bigger picture."

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## **Nowhere to turn**

Case workers didn't feel like they could go to the department's human resources division for help, either. When they or co-workers reported problems, their complaints went nowhere, they said.

"It makes you feel like, 'Where can I go if I'm having a problem?' " a former case worker said.

In April 2016, a then-case worker filed a hostile work environment complaint, alleging that a male co-worker had harassed her, including cursing and yelling at her while driving a foster child somewhere, according to a copy of the complaint, obtained by The Pilot.

The human resources division looked into it and didn't support the case worker's allegations, records show.

"Human resources determined the work environment as not hostile," stated a May 2016 memo detailing the results of the complaint.

A letter from Hawks, the department's director, repeated that sentiment. "As a result, the allegation you presented will receive no further processing at this time," he wrote.

However, three other former employees said they witnessed the male colleague harassing the woman on other occasions. Two of them said they saw the man walk past her desk with intimidating stares and that he once sat on a file cabinet across from her cubicle and stared her down. The case worker once yelled at him to go away.

In at least one instance, reporting a problem to human resources made matters worse. One case worker reported a verbal confrontation on an elevator with a co-worker to the HR division.

Within a day or two, she was called into an office with the co-worker in question and their respective supervisors.

The supervisors allowed the conversation between the two subordinates to get ugly, with raised voices and finger-pointing. In the end, the matter did not get resolved, according to two sources with direct knowledge of it.

"It was out of control, and nothing was handled," one source said

The situation was never addressed again.

With nowhere to turn, the case workers often do the only thing they think possible: They leave.

The city had 25 "family services workers" in the foster care program as of September 2018, according to a chart provided by the city. Nineteen of the positions have turned over since the start of 2015.

"People were just falling off like flies — quitting left and right," a former case worker said. "We were done. We were tired of it."

The case workers who weren't afraid to advocate for the children or challenge supervisors didn't last long, according to former employees and foster parents.

"Basically, they wanted robots," one former case worker said

The constant churn of case workers added another layer of chaos to the lives of children who often used trash bags to move their belongings from one foster home to the next.

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### **Children as punishment or reward**

This isn't just petty office politics. The culture of favoritism and retribution has had real consequences for the people who are at the mercy of this program: foster children, foster parents and biological parents.

Some supervisors and case workers have let personal grudges or friendships impact the life-altering decisions they make, according to several former employees.

"It is so bad and it is so horrific," one former case worker said.

About five years ago, a well-liked couple had been fostering a pair of twin girls for two or three years and were close to adopting them. But the girls' father showed up unexpectedly and wanted custody, said a case worker with direct knowledge of the situation.

He got the girls.

The city then took a boy from another pair of foster parents and placed him with the couple that had lost the twins. The case worker described the boy as a concession for the couple and said there was no logical reason to take the boy from the other couple, who had been planning to adopt him.

"That was the motive," the case worker said. "I knew that at the time — that this family needed a free baby."

The boy was eventually adopted by his new foster parents. The foster mother who lost the boy was "distraught," the case worker said.

"She was really hurt," she said. "She didn't understand."

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### **A missed childhood**

It's impossible to know how foster children's lives would have turned out if Norfolk's child welfare program had been operating better. They already come from bad beginnings.

Doucette, the former foster child who claims the city tricked her to Florida, has never stayed in one place for too long.

"I feel like I always gotta move around, just because of my past," she said. "I can never feel comfortable in one place."

Doucette's plans for the future are as fleeting as her home addresses while she was in foster care.

In her first jailhouse interview, Doucette said she was considering going to community college to study phlebotomy. She heard that drawing people's blood pays \$15 an hour.

"I've watched people do it, and it's not that hard," she said.

Less than two weeks later, she was no longer interested in that line of work. "Because someone told me you get paid \$12 an hour," she said. "I'm like, 'That's Wal-Mart pay.' "

Instead, Doucette said she wanted to go to school for welding. She met an inmate who is a welder and it sounded like a good gig.

Doucette, however, changed her mind before the end of the interview, saying she really wanted to become a pediatric nurse.

She would later get her two felony charges reduced to misdemeanors and plead guilty to trespassing and failure to appear. Until her release in October, Doucette passed the time by reading, writing poetry and watching television. She said she had written four poems during her time behind bars.

"I'm really good at it," she offers. "One line is, 'They hear but they don't listen. All they see is my eyes glisten. But they don't know what lies under these hazel eyes.' "

And she tries not to think about her childhood — or whatever you would call it.

"Because I feel like I never had a childhood to remember," Doucette said. "Foster care kind of ruined my childhood."

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### **Norfolk and Hampton foster care programs have steered work to company with personal ties to city officials**

<https://www.pilotonline.com/government/local/vp-nw-foster-care-20191220-ixbzrszjrasnkdrncnbalzimoa-story.html>

Supervisors in Norfolk's and Hampton's foster care programs have helped steer millions of taxpayer dollars to a company owned by a woman with whom they have personal connections, a Virginian-Pilot investigation has found.

Former employees from both cities said certain supervisors funneled work to Together Lives Change, known as TLC, despite concerns and complaints about the quality of the company's work and how its employees treated children. Some also said they had direct knowledge of colleagues accepting gifts or things of value from the company's founder and CEO, Tiffany Hassell-Gregory.

TLC's employees were sometimes too aggressive, verbally or physically, with children, and they sometimes didn't show up or were late for assignments, according to numerous former city workers. Some TLC workers often didn't submit written reports on time, or at all, and the ones they did turn in were sometimes poorly done, they said.

"Virginians need to have confidence that their public officials are working for what's in the best interest of the public," said Daniel Stevens, executive director of Campaign for Accountability, a nonpartisan government watchdog organization based in Washington, D.C. "These situations should be investigated, and the city governments should put in place procedures to ensure that the work is awarded to the most qualified candidates, not the candidates with the best connections."

Hassell-Gregory, a former social worker for Hampton's foster care program, started TLC more than a decade ago.

Her company, which provides services to foster children, has made more than \$13 million off the two cities' child-welfare systems. Most of that money came from Hampton, where Hassell-Gregory has had a stronger foothold. But Norfolk started giving a sizeable chunk of work to the company in 2016, after two of Hassell-Gregory's former colleagues began working there.

"All of a sudden, they're getting hired for all of these cases," said one former Norfolk foster care worker of TLC. "They just came out of nowhere."

The former employees spoke on condition of anonymity because most are still in the field of social work and fear they could lose their jobs — and struggle to find work elsewhere — if they went public.

Several supervisors in Norfolk and Hampton who have ties to Hassell-Gregory declined to comment for the article.

The directors of both cities' Department of Human Services — Stephen Hawks in Norfolk and Wanda Rogers in Hampton — also declined interview requests. Those departments oversee the cities' foster care programs.

Hassell-Gregory declined to comment.

This story comes as the city of Norfolk is conducting an external review of the safety of children in its foster care program, following a *Virginian-Pilot* article in March that exposed a years-long pattern of mismanagement, retribution and poor performance. The company hired to perform the assessment, Public Consulting Group, of Boston, is expected to have its findings by early 2020.

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### **“I don’t like TLC. Period.”**

Whatever the assessment yields will be too late for Andjee Phillips. She’s one of the children who was failed by Norfolk’s foster care system, according to former city employees.

Phillips was a difficult child — a handful for even experienced social workers and foster parents. But she didn’t deserve the way she was treated by the city — or TLC — social workers said.

Phillips had at least three physical altercations with TLC employees. In at least two of them, the TLC employee handled Phillips with a startling amount of force, according to people with direct knowledge of the incidents.

“I don’t like TLC. Period,” Phillips said.

One incident occurred several years ago. Phillips, about age 14, was supposed to be in TLC’s care that day but didn’t want to go, so she locked herself in her bedroom. She broke a television and a door and threw her foster mother’s cellphone.

Phillips’ city caseworker was trying to calm her down. A female TLC employee, working on behalf of the city, was ready to get physical.

“Instead of let’s talk her down, it was more so like, ‘Let’s do this. Let’s get this on. You want to fight? Let’s fight,’” said a former Norfolk caseworker with direct knowledge of the incident.

The company worker roughly took Phillips to the ground, then restrained the teenager while putting her weight on top of her, according to Phillips and the caseworker.

Reached by phone in a jail in western Virginia, Phillips, now 19 years old and out of foster care, said she remembered the woman physically overwhelming her.

“She slammed my face in the ground,” Phillips said. “It was just too much. She had her body on my face, where I lost a lot of air.”

City spokeswoman Lori Crouch, not addressing a specific incident, said in an email that there are some situations in which vendors are allowed to have physical contact with children. Asked to describe them, she referred a Pilot reporter to the state agencies that regulate those vendors.

Former Norfolk caseworkers, however, said they weren’t allowed to aggressively put their hands on children. But they said TLC workers did — and supervisors in Norfolk knew about it.

“They were rough,” one former supervisor said of TLC employees.

A Norfolk caseworker, who has since left the job, documented other concerns about TLC in a July 2016 letter she provided to management.

“I expressed to [her supervisor] that I had concerns with this vendor,” the foster care worker wrote. “The worker and the agency did not respond to crisis when needed, emails, phone calls and there had been several concerns over lack of supervision on at least three occasions with my client.”

One former supervisor in Hampton said TLC’s services started out strong but declined as the company expanded.

“They did stellar work in the beginning,” the supervisor said. “As they grew into what they are now, the [city] workers would come and complain about the services TLC would be providing.”

Numerous current and former TLC employees declined to comment for this story.

One former employee, however, speaking on condition of anonymity, said that TLC’s services worsened due to a negative and hostile work environment, which led to low morale and high turnover.

“We couldn’t work effectively,” she said.

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### **TLC’s million dollar baby: Hampton**

When Hassell-Gregory started her company is murky, according to public records

One document states that she created TLC in March 2005, before she began a two-year stint as a Hampton social worker. Another states it was in 2006, while working for Hampton.

Hassell-Gregory worked for Hampton between September 2005 and October 2007, employment records show.

TLC first obtained a business license from Hampton in February 2008. The company started getting paid for work from the city two months later, according to payment data obtained by The Pilot.

In 2008, TLC earned almost \$200,000 from Hampton. The year after that, the figure doubled. By 2010, it grew to around \$500,000.

Yearly revenue from Hampton reached more than \$1.8 million in 2014. At that time, the money from Hampton accounted for most of the company’s income, according to financial statements submitted to the city of Virginia Beach.

As TLC got more and more work from Hampton, established companies that offered the same services got less, former social workers said.

“Eventually, you started seeing those other agencies dwindle away, but TLC never went anywhere,” a former Hampton employee said. “So, whatever you needed, it was always said, ‘Send them to TLC.’”

TLC hasn’t gotten as much work in Norfolk, but its revenue from the city has grown exponentially.

After bringing in less than \$4,000 a year from Norfolk from 2010 to 2015 — and nothing in two of those years — TLC collected about \$250,000 from the city in 2016. The next year, it earned nearly \$340,000. The company is on pace to double that amount this year.

TLC has done little to no work for the other cities in South Hampton Roads, though it has sought work from all of them. It gets some work from Virginia Beach, doesn't work for Suffolk and has worked only sparingly for Portsmouth and Chesapeake.

Hassell-Gregory developed a reputation for living a lavish lifestyle, driving luxury vehicles and throwing extravagant parties, which sometimes included celebrities. She had made \$33,830 a year as a Hampton social worker.

In one Facebook post from July 2016, reality television celebrity Phaedra Parks wrote that she and Glenda Hatchett of "The Judge Hatchett Show" attended a retreat in Hampton for Hassell-Gregory's charity organization. Hatchett gave a speech, and Parks introduced her.

"Thank you Desmond and Tiffany Hassell Gregory for your work in the community and family advocacy," Parks wrote.

Hassell-Gregory invited employees from Hampton and Norfolk's child welfare programs to her gatherings. One former Norfolk caseworker said a supervisor once asked her to be a designated driver for a TLC end-of-year holiday party in Suffolk. She declined.

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### **The shaded path to taxpayer money**

TLC has historically made much of its money through a program that cities in Virginia operate largely out of the public's view. The meetings where vendors are identified and selected to provide services to children are closed to the public because personal information about children is discussed.

The program, often called Children's Services Act or CSA, after the 1993 law that created it, pays for services for at-risk and troubled children and is run by cities' human services departments.

The work that cities give out through CSA programs doesn't have to be opened to a public bid or advertised; they can hire whomever they choose.

"That is not the way most Americans want to see their taxpayer dollars spent," said Leslie Paige, vice president of policy and communications for Citizens Against Government Waste, a nonpartisan taxpayer watchdog organization. "That's why we have Freedom of Information (laws), that's why we have open records (laws). We want to see what you're doing."

Cities use CSA money for a variety of services: summer camps, psychological counseling, anger management and independent living training, to name a few.

Each city has a team that decides behind closed doors how to spend the money. It is generally called the FAP team, short for Family Assessment and Planning.

In the case of foster children, for example, a city caseworker would go before the FAP team to request a service for a child on their caseload.

Norfolk and Hampton said that the city's foster care workers usually suggest which vendor to hire, though Norfolk said its caseworkers also consult with their supervisors.

But former employees from both cities said the process unfolded differently when it involved certain city officials who had connections to Hassell-Gregory.

Denise Gallop became the assistant director of Norfolk's Department of Human Services in May 2015, essentially the same position she held in Hampton from 2011 to 2015.

In a meeting not long after she arrived in Norfolk, Gallop directed supervisors to hire TLC to provide services to children, according to two former employees with direct knowledge of the matter.

"We had never had anybody to tell us to use a vendor," one of the employees said. "I'm like, 'Oh my gosh, you're not supposed to do that.'"

Lisa Roseboro, a supervisor in Norfolk's foster care unit, also came from Hampton and worked with Hassell-Gregory and Gallop there.

Roseboro, too, instructed social workers under her to request TLC as a vendor for their foster children's cases when they went into FAP team meetings, according to several former employees.

"Lisa began to make it very clear that when we went into the FAP meetings that we were to ask for TLC specifically, even though we had other vendors who could provide the same services that we had been using for them," said one former Norfolk caseworker. "And if you didn't, when you came back out, it was, 'You're sabotaging the case. You're undermining my authority.'"

Roseboro declined to comment for this story.

TLC's path to getting business from Hampton was somewhat different. Gallop and others with ties to Hassell-Gregory actually served on the FAP team, and they took the lead in referring cases to TLC, the former employees said.

"When we would go to FAP, it was like, 'We're going to refer her to Tiffany's program,'" one former worker said. "It really wasn't up for debate. And a lot of times, the worker didn't agree with it. Or the worker just sits there and doesn't say anything because we all knew that whatever they said was going to go anyway. It wasn't even worth the argument."

Between 2005 and 2011, Gallop managed Hampton's CSA program and was a non-voting member of the FAT team, according to the city.

The city, in an email, stated that Gallop "did not have the authority to unilaterally engage vendors."



Gallop and Roseboro weren't close in Hampton, former colleagues said, but they shared a mutual connection in Hassell-Gregory.

One ex-colleague in Hampton said Roseboro told her about two parties at restaurants that Hassell-Gregory paid for — a birthday party for Roseboro and a going-away party when Roseboro got the Norfolk job. One of the parties was at the Green Turtle restaurant in Hampton.

Sherrika Fulgham, now the second in command of Hampton's Department of Human Services, rented a home in Suffolk from Hassell-Gregory several years ago, according to a former Hampton social worker. The social worker said that Hassell-Gregory told her that Fulgham was her tenant.

A paid background check on Fulgham lists a house owned by Hassell-Gregory as one of Fulgham's former residences.

Hassell-Gregory's company listed Fulgham as a reference when it sought work from at least two local cities, Norfolk and Virginia Beach, according to records obtained by The Pilot.

Fulgham, too, served on Hampton's FAP team, between 2009 and April 2012

Fulgham declined to grant an interview for the story through a city spokeswoman.

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### **Cities mum on complaints involving TLC**

Former employees from both cities said staffers would talk about how much work TLC received and their discomfort with some city officials' relationships with Hassell-Gregory.

"I think there's people that were saying, 'Wow, she gets a lot of work. It's kind of weird that she used to work for us and now she's making all this money with her company,'" said a former Hampton foster care worker.

But few city workers took their concerns to supervisors. The former caseworker in Norfolk complained about TLC — and its ties to Roseboro — but it didn't make a difference.

"I have asked Ms. Roseboro several times to bring (TLC) in to address these concerns; however, she has failed to do so," she wrote in a 2016 letter. "I stopped voicing my concerns when I noticed Ms. Roseboro immediately siding with the vendor (and after observing that she had a personal relationship that appeared to make her unable to be objective)."

Several said they didn't speak up because they feared retribution.

"If you stood up and said it was wrong, it could cost you your job," a former Hampton employee said.

However, one former Hampton supervisor said she had direct knowledge that staffers complained about Gallop accepting gifts from TLC during a probe into employee complaints in 2014. But she said nothing came of it after the review, called a "climate study," was completed.

The city refused to turn over the findings of the climate study, citing attorney-client privilege.

Asked if the city had been informed of Gallop accepting gifts, an attorney for Hampton said in an email that if the city had, it would be a personnel matter “and the city does not comment on personnel matters.”

The Pilot posed a similar question to Norfolk, asking if the city ever looked into the claims about TLC raised in the 2016 letter from the then-foster care worker.

Crouch, the city spokeswoman, said the city did investigate but that because it involved a personnel matter, “I cannot discuss it any further.”

TLC, meanwhile, continues to get work from both cities — plenty of it. Through early December, the company earned about \$600,000 from Norfolk and \$700,000 from Hampton this year.