

EDITORIAL

# Why couldn't DCF save A'zella Ortiz's life?

In a new report, the state child advocate says that the agency needs to improve services to children remaining with their families.

By [The Editorial Board](#) Updated December 16, 2025, 4:00 a.m.



Child Advocate Maria Mossaides makes clear in her report that the Massachusetts Department of Children and Families didn't do enough to look at A'zella Ortiz's family's trajectory and adjust its interventions accordingly. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

Other than her love for the show “Cocomelon” and her strong bond with her siblings, the public doesn’t know much about A’zella Ortiz. We don’t know her favorite color or food. Tragically, we will never know who she could have become or what she could have contributed to this world. At age 4, A’zella was killed, allegedly by her father.

Compounding the tragedy is the fact that the Massachusetts Department of Children and Families knew of A’zella and her two siblings — one older and one younger — and were involved with the family for a total of three years and eight months. DCF closed the family’s case upon a mistaken belief that the family moved to New York.

A year later, on Oct. 15, 2024, Ortiz called 911 for medical assistance, and emergency responders transported A’zella from a Worcester apartment to a hospital, where she was pronounced dead, according to the Child Advocate’s report. A’zella’s two siblings were found malnourished, dehydrated, and injured, with drug paraphernalia and a firearm within reach, according to the report. The siblings are now in the custody of the Department of Children and Families.

It’s tempting to learn from the case that the child welfare system should be quicker to remove children from their family. That would be the wrong response. Children generally, if not in this particular case, have [better outcomes](#) when left with a biological parent.

But, according to [a report released Wednesday](#) by the Office of the Child Advocate — which provided the scant few details we have about A’zella’s short life — the child welfare system can and must do a better job supporting the families it works with where children remain in the home and properly evaluating the risks to those children.

In this case, social workers were actively involved with the family from the time of A’zella’s birth in September 2020 until October 2023 when they closed the case. Social workers made recommendations that the parents refused to follow. But Child Advocate Maria Mossaides makes clear in her report that the agency didn’t do enough to look at the family’s trajectory and adjust its interventions accordingly.

Problems were identified and not resolved for three years — and nothing changed; the children continued suffering from chronic neglect.

Mossaides said when a child is in state custody, there is oversight by the courts and an internal unit within the Department of Children and Families. When a child remains with their family, though, there is no “quality assurance” system, no checks and balances to make sure the family is progressing toward a goal.

Ensuring proper treatment of cases like A’zella’s is vital because they comprise the bulk of cases the agency handles. According to [state statistics](#), 78 percent of families involved with the child welfare agency at the end of fiscal 2025 had custody of their child, and 86 percent of cases involved neglect allegations.

A’zella’s parents, Francisco Ortiz and Krystal Romero, first came to DCF’s attention in October 2018 because A’zella’s older sister, referred to by the pseudonym Luna, was born exposed to drugs due to her parents’ marijuana use. The case was closed when Luna appeared to be on track developmentally.

In September 2020, the department was notified that A’zella was born exposed to drugs, and the agency found Luna was behind on medical care.

Over the coming years, DCF workers would repeatedly find that the parents’ marijuana use was affecting their parenting ability, and the siblings were not getting proper medical care. The girls rarely left home. Luna and A’zella were nonverbal. Child welfare workers referred the family to child-care and early intervention services, which the parents ignored. Visits by DCF workers and reports made to DCF by others found that the home was dirty and the parents were routinely using drugs and ignoring the children. For a time, Romero was absent. Romero had a son in October 2022.

Child welfare workers repeatedly had difficulty getting the family to respond, and all three children missed medical appointments.

By July 2023, when someone reported to DCF that the parents, on the verge of eviction, would use drugs, pass out, and leave the children soiled in urine and feces, the family had moved. DCF ultimately reached Romero by phone, and she said they were with relatives in New York. The agency closed the case after providing minimal information to New York child protective services. No social worker had seen the children for 114 days.

Mossaides' report finds that while social workers met with the family 36 times in three years and developed six action plans, visits were repetitive, with the same questions asked, and involved minimal engagement with the children. The parents failed to make progress, and a risk assessment tool used by social workers showed increasingly high levels of risk of maltreatment. But the department didn't change its strategy.

Mossaides told the editorial board that at some point, social workers could have consulted legal experts to consider court involvement, required the parents to address their substance use, investigated why two children were nonverbal and why the children never left the house, or asked other family members if they were providing child-care help. The problem, she said, is a lack of protocols and independent oversight to help social workers accurately assess risk and decide when to try a new strategy or intervention.

A spokesperson for the Department of Children and Families said the agency "is committed to doing everything we can to enhance safety for children" and "will address the concerns raised by the OCA." The department is reviewing its policies regarding closing cases and will take steps to allow for more review of high-risk cases and to improve assessments of families' needs and of the risks to children. The department is developing a new quality assurance framework.

Mossaides warned in a press conference that improving oversight will take money to hire new staff. That won't be easy in a tight state budget year. But if money is needed to protect vulnerable children's lives, it's worth spending.

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