

PAULA ZAHN NOW

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Reference to DHS underlined on page 3.*

Parents accused after their four boys are found nearly starved to death. We're going to find out why some in the community are actually rallying around them saying, There's a rush to judgment, that they're actually very good parents.

And the nursing crisis. Are long hours, mountains of paperwork and lack of training killing people?

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

ZAHN: A Congressional committee today took up the case of four adopted boys in New Jersey discovered on the verge of starving to death. It is a story that shocked the nation. But the Congressional attention comes as some of the community stand by the boys' parents.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: We love you guys.

ZAHN (voice-over): A New Jersey church is rallying around Raymond and Vanessa Jackson, despite the horrifying allegations against them -- that they starved their four boys, ages 9 to 19. State officials say child welfare workers had visited the Jackson home at least 38 times in the last four years. But the Jacksons were only arrested last month, after their oldest son, Bruce, was found sifting through a neighbor's garbage for food. Authorities say none of the boys weighed more than 45 pounds.

Still, some in the community insists the Jacksons are good parents.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Ray looked at me, and he said he said -- he said, Pastor, there is no truth to this. He said, I love my kids. My kids eat three meals a day.

ZAHN: Parishioners at the Come Alive New Testament Church helped pay the \$200,000 bail to free the Jacksons.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: The children have not been abused. The Jacksons are being abused.

ZAHN: And there's even a "Save the Jacksons" Web site.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

ZAHN: So are the parents to blame, or is the state acting too quickly?

To discuss that, we are joined from our Washington bureau by a man who says he has seen many cases where innocent parents were wrongly labeled guilty. Richard Wexler is the director of the National Coalition for Child Protection

Here in New York studio, Kevin Ryan, a Jersey child public advocate who testified today in Congress on the Jackson case. Welcome to both of you.

Mr. Wexler, I would like to start with you and get your reaction to something Reverend Harry Thomas said. We were just introduced to him in that setup piece, where he makes it very clear that he sides with Mr. and Mrs. Jackson. Let's listen together.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

PASTOR HARRY THOMAS, COME ALIVE NEW TEST, CHURCH: I respectfully would like to suggest that the reason no abuse was noticed was that there was no abuse going on. Ray and Vanessa Jackson have a real love for children. Their children were always clean happy, and well dressed.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

ZAHN: Mr. Wexler, you have four kids, all weighing less than 50 pounds. One of those children is 19 years old.

How do you not blame the parents?

RICHARD WEXLER, COAL. FOR CHILD PROT. REFORM: I don't know whether or not the parents ultimately should be blamed for this or not. The primary issue here is whether it was the parents' fault or whether it was some other fault, somebody else's fault. These children were in serious trouble, and nobody noticed. So the real issue is, why didn't that happen, after so many visits. And I think the answer to that is this. Whatever the circumstances may be in this case, there are many, many cases where children are reported to DIFIS (ph) and are needlessly removed solely because the family's poverty has been confuse the with neglect. Those cases overload the caseworkers, so they have time to do little more than what's called drive-by social work, and they don't have any time to check out any case carefully. So children in real danger then are missed.

ZAHN: Mr. Ryan, 38 visits, in four years.

Wouldn't you think the signs would have been pretty obvious in the third or fourth year?

KEVIN RYAN, N.J. PUBLIC CHILD ADVOCATE: Absolutely, Paula. The key here is...

ZAHN: How do you miss that?

RYAN: I have no idea. My investigators right now are combing through 20,000 pages of documents that we demanded from the Department of Human Services. We're subpoenaing up to 20 witnesses to figure out how the public agency, over 38 times, visited that family in four years and didn't realize there was no electricity, and the children were obviously starving. Let me make a quick point about The reverend's advocacy for the parents. I don't begrudge him or supporters of the Jackson family. Their commitment to the Jacksons. Frankly, it's friends standing by friends in a dark time. But it goes way beyond what's decent when the reverend called these children liars, and described them in a dehumanizing way as projects rather than as children. That's despicable, and that's got to stop.

ZAHN: Mr. Wexler, what about that?

Let's listen to the reverend's exact words. When he actually blamed the children at one point for their ill health.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

THOMAS: It is my understanding that the three younger boys have fetal alcohol syndrome. The oldest, Bruce, has developed an eating disorder, at age of three. He also had been hospitalized because of abuse at the hands of his birth father.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

ZAHN: What are the chances that their medical history did play a role in this?

WEXLER: Again, I am not a doctor. I don't know that situation. As far as the things the reverend has been saying, there are plenty of things he said that have appalled me, too. He has been throwing slime not only at the birth parents in this case, but at all birth parents in general. Stereotyping them all as brutally abusive or hopelessly addicted. That simply isn't true. As I said, there are many cases, not necessarily this one by any means, in which children are taken simply because a family's poverty is confused with neglect. There is a DIFUS (ph) caseworker, an ex-caseworker suing DIFUS right now because he refused to take away children under those circumstances and was fired.

ZAHN: But, Mr. Ryan, your argument tonight is that the children are the ones getting used.

RYAN: They are. It's no mystery to me why child abuse is rampant in the United States. When today before the United States Congress these lies were told about these children, which perpetuates that abuse. Here's the bottom line, there were four boys found on October 10. None of them weighed more than 45 pounds. The oldest, 19 years old, weighed 49 pounds when he was adopted in 1995. He weighed 45 pounds eight years later, a month ago. Today he's 64 pounds. When we represented to the Congress today that those boys had grown, the reverend suggested that perhaps they were wearing sneakers on the scale. Or perhaps there was something special put in their water. This is ludicrous. This isn't about little boys telling lies. This is about children who were tortured and starved.

ZAHN: Mr. Wexler, you have the last word but it has to be a brief one.

WEXLER: To fix the problems are the safe, proven programs to keep families together. They've slashed foster care populations. They're getting better safety outcomes. If I was Mr. Ryan, the first thing I would do is get on a plane and take look at Pittsburgh in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania. Or better yet screen the tape that "NEWS NIGHT" with Aaron Brown did show what a model system they've become by emphasizing family preservation.

ZAHN: Mr. Ryan, I guess you don't want to be preached to this evening, but you heard what...

RYAN: It wouldn't be the first time.

ZAHN: All right. Thank you, gentlemen, both. Mr. Wexler for your point of view and Mr. Ryan yours as well.