

Editorial: Fresno County hides the truth about Seth Ireland's death

By The Bee Editorial Board

After 10-year-old Seth Ireland died in 2009 following a savage beating by his mother's boyfriend, Fresno County officials promised that the public would learn the truth about what happened.

The fact is, Seth should not have died.

He should be with us now, a bright and popular teenager. Just as he was a bright and popular fifth-grader who had many friends at Columbia Elementary School in Fresno before LeBaron Vaughn repeatedly punched, kicked and stomped him while his mother stood by and did nothing to save him.

Warning signs abounded that there was something evil in Seth's house. Social workers had received reports four months earlier that Seth was being abused. But Seth remained in the home, as did three younger boys.

An angry public demanded to know why Child Protective Services had not removed Seth and the other children from the home. And even the then-director of Fresno County Children and Family Services said that she had questions about why Seth and the others were left to fend for themselves in such a dangerous situation.

Nearly seven years later, Fresno County officials continue to break the promise of transparency made in the hours immediately after Seth's homicide. The people responsible for this continued veil of secrecy serve on the Fresno County Board of Supervisors. The supervisors are ultimately responsible for blocking the public's right to know.

Despite being ordered by two courts to do so, the county repeatedly has refused to turn over to Seth's father, Joe Hudson, an investigative report about his son's death written by its Child Welfare Quality Assurance Division.

Hudson's attorney, Warren Paboojian, sought the report for Hudson's lawsuit against the county, which resulted in a jury deciding in 2013 that the county was 65% responsible for Seth's death and that Hudson should receive \$5.5 million from Child Protective Services.

That verdict was overturned earlier this year by the 5th District Court of Appeal, which ordered a new trial.

On Sept. 30, the appellate court ordered the county to release the report to Hudson's attorney for the new trial. The county refused, saying that it might challenge the appellate court's opinion in the state Supreme Court. But the deadline for the challenge has passed, and the county still hasn't turned over the report.

This newspaper has requested the county's report on Seth's death three times since September of this year, and has yet to receive it.

We believe the county has an obligation to keep its word on letting the public know what went wrong in the months and days leading to Seth's killing. We also believe that the public has a legal right to know the facts of this tragedy.

In regard to The Bee's request for the Child Welfare Quality Assurance report, the county's legal counsel says that "the disclosure of the QA report would inhibit the agency from thoroughly and critically reviewing and deliberating its procedures and policies. The release of this internal QA report would have a chilling effect on the candid investigation necessary to address changes needed to improve its ability to provide child welfare services to the public."

This is the kind of obfuscatory nonsense spoken by representatives of a government bureaucracy that doesn't want

the public to know the whole truth about the county's lapses leading to Seth's killing.

According to court documents, this is the only county investigation into Seth's death. The public has a right to see it. We quote the appellate court's opinion that the county must turn the report over to Hudson:

"On May 30, 2012, Hudson's attorney deposed Catherine Huerta, the director of CPS at the time Seth died. Huerta testified that, to her knowledge, the QA report was the only investigative report done in connection with the death. In her capacity as director, Huerta did no investigation beyond reviewing and analyzing the QA report."

Sunshine is needed here. The best way to stop future tragedies is to know exactly how the county failed to fulfill its duty of protecting Seth Ireland from a man who was described by then-Judge Wayne Ellison at sentencing as "an evil parasite."