

Abused Girl Improves After Court Authorizes Feeding Tube Removal

BY Liz Townsend

Just one day after the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court gave government officials the authority to take an abused 11-year-old girl off life support, Haleigh Poutre began to show signs of consciousness. The Department of Social Services (DSS), which had asked the court to be allowed to stop feeding Haleigh, announced that the January 17 court order has been stayed while Haleigh continues to improve, according to the Boston Herald.

Haleigh was weaned off her ventilator, and can now breathe on her own. She was transferred January 26 to Franciscan Hospital for Children in Boston, which is the largest rehabilitation facility for children in New England, the Associated Press reported.

DSS Commissioner Harry Spence visited Haleigh for the first time January 24, one week after his department received authorization to remove her feeding tube. He told the Boston Globe that doctors, who previously diagnosed Haleigh as “virtually brain dead,” said, in effect, “Oops, we’re seeing something.”

During his visit, Haleigh had toys on her lap, the Globe reported. A social worker asked her, “Give him the yellow duck,” and Haleigh picked up the duck. The social worker then said, “Where’s Curious George?” and Haleigh picked up the stuffed monkey.

“It’s an astounding case,” said Spence, according to the Globe. “It’s her incredible will to live.”

Haleigh suffered a severe head injury September 11, allegedly at the hands of her adoptive mother and stepfather. She was brought to the hospital with severe injuries: broken teeth, swollen face, burns on her chest, sunken abdomen, cuts and sores, and a temperature of 81 degrees, according to the New York Times. The most brutal injury was to her brain stem, which was partly sheared.

“It was the sort of injury, [doctors] testified, that they see after a high-speed car accident, where the brain inside the skull is subjected to tremendous acceleration and deceleration forces,” prosecutor Laurel H. Brandt said at a court hearing, according to the Washington Post.

Haleigh’s doctors at Baystate Medical Center in Springfield said she was in a “permanent vegetative state” and should be removed from life support, according to the Boston Globe. The DSS asked the court to grant the department custody of Haleigh and allow it to withdraw both her ventilator and feeding tube.

Haleigh was removed from her birth mother’s custody at four years old because of “substantiated allegations of abuse” by her mother’s boyfriend, the Times reported. She was adopted in 2001 by her birth mother’s sister, Holli Strickland, who later married Jason Strickland. Haleigh was never officially adopted by Jason Strickland.

Both Holli and Jason Strickland were charged with assault and battery after Haleigh was brought to the hospital. However, Holli Strickland was found dead September 22 with her grandmother in an apparent

murder-suicide, the Post reported. With her death, Haleigh had no legal guardian. The court needed to determine who had the legal right to make decisions on her treatment.

Jason Strickland asked the courts to be granted custody, saying that he did not want to remove her life support. His request was denied January 17 by the Supreme Judicial Court, which cited the assault charges pending against him and the conflict of interest involved, since if Haleigh died he could be charged with murder.

Gov. Mitt Romney announced January 23 that a three-person panel will investigate DSS's handling of Haleigh's case, which included many home visits that failed to find evidence of abuse, the Herald reported. Social workers had characterized injuries suffered by Haleigh over the years as "self-abusive" or "accidents," according to the Herald.

"Now I ask the question, what could have been done better to help her and to protect her," Romney said in a statement. "She was not someone who fell through the cracks. Doctors and social workers were watching, but errors in judgment were made."