

# Adoption agencies will face scrutiny

Groups put 11 children in Huron County home with homemade cages

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State officials will investigate the adoption agencies that placed 11 children in a Huron County home over the last several years, the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services said Wednesday.

The children, who have been described by some as having special needs, were taken from their home on Friday.

Deputies with Huron County Sheriff Dick Sutherland's office found nine homemade wooden and wire-fence cages in the Clarksfield Township home of Michael and Sharen Gravelle, about 75 miles west of Akron.

Several of the children said they slept in the cages at night. The cages had alarms on the doors; some were blocked shut by heavy furniture, according to the sheriff's office.

The children have been placed in temporary foster care.

None was enrolled in a tradi-

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# Cage

## Home-school defense praises Huron father

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tional public school this year. The eight school-age children were enrolled in an online charter school. At one time, at least three of the children were home-schooled.

Scott Somerville, an attorney with the Home School Legal Defense Association in Virginia, said he talked with Michael Gravelle before the story broke in the media, and he believes this is a family trying to help special children.

When a social worker visited the house last week, there was no resistance to an inspection, said Somerville, whose organization represents home-schooling families on legal matters.

"They had nothing to hide," Somerville said. "He told me why they adopted these children and told me the problems they were trying to solve."

"I think he is a hero." No charges have been filed. According to officials in the Erie-Huron-Orava Educational Service Center and the Western Reserve School District, three of the children were registered as home-schooled in 2003-04.

Home schooling in Ohio is conducted with minimal state oversight - simple registration with the local district and, if the family decides to home-school a second year, a limited academic assessment.

### No assessment

There was no assessment in the case of the Gravelles because the three home-schooled children enrolled the following year in the Ohio Connections Academy, said Charles Hoffman, director of curriculum and instructional services at the ESC.

Ohio Connections is a publicly funded charter school that educates children via the Internet.

Ray Lambert, Ohio Connections principal, confirmed the children have been enrolled for about a year. He said his school requires teacher contact with the family every other week.

"We have already been in contact with representatives of the Ohio Department of Education to make any records available to them," Lambert said in an e-mailed response to questions.

"We did have occasion to meet with the children in person

on several occasions, and like the others who came into contact with this family, we are surprised at this story. We did not encounter anything that caused us to believe there were issues with the health and safety of the family."

Ohio Connections, based in suburban Columbus, is part of a nationwide chain with headquarters in Maryland.

The Ohio Department of Education's Web site confirms that eight children from Western Reserve - presumably the Gravelles - are enrolled in Ohio Connections, but the state records don't reflect that any of them are children with special needs.

The 11 children range in age from 1 to 14, according to the sheriff's office. Two each are 3, 7 and 8. The other children are 6, 9 and 13 years old.

All 11 were adopted. None was in foster care when removed from the home.

### State investigation

The agencies responsible for placing the children are now the subject of a state investigation to determine whether they followed proper procedures before finalizing the adoptions, said Dennis Evans, Ohio Department of Job and Family Services spokesman.

"We, as a department, will be reviewing how the placement agencies responded. We will be looking to ensure that they did what they were supposed to do," Evans said.

Evans said the agencies, which he could not name because the adoption records are

sealed and private, are required to make face-to-face visits, inspect the home and conduct background checks on the adopting parents to ensure each child will be housed in a safe, caring environment.

In foster-care situations, which are temporary, there is ongoing contact between placement agencies and the home. Adoption is different, Evans said.

"Once the adoption is finalized, there is no more follow-up. That child becomes a permanent member of the family that adopted him or her."

In other words, the adopting family is no different from any other family on the block, and social-service agencies become involved only if a complaint is made, Evans said.

Jim McCafferty, Cuyahoga County Children and Family Services director, said his agency placed a boy, less than a year old, with special needs in the Gravelle home in 2001.

He said that A Child's Waiting, a private adoption agency based in Akron, conducted the

home study. "They were in the home," McCafferty said.

But Crissy Kolarik, A Child's Waiting co-director, said her agency never had custody of the child and did not do a home study. Instead, two home studies - conducted by Huron and Stark counties - were sent to Cuyahoga County, which had custody of the child, she said.

### Already approved

Kolarik said the Gravelles already were approved for foster care and adoption when they approached her agency in 2000 to work as a facilitator in adopting the Cuyahoga County child.

"Two counties had custody of children placed in that home prior to them contacting A Child's Waiting," Kolarik said. "Our decision was based on the recommendation of Huron County's positive home study."

Kolarik said Cuyahoga County had custody and made the final decision to place the child with the Gravelles.

"After the adoption was finalized, we placed no additional

children in that home and the family transferred to another agency," Kolarik said.

She said the Gravelles adopted three or four children after her agency finished working with them.

McCafferty said caging the children was a horrendous act on the parents' part, but he added it appears from early reports the children were not abused, neglected or malnourished in other ways. He said the parents may have been overwhelmed and made a poor decision.

"When we have families adopting a lot of kids like this,

there should be more outside support, more public support. We owe the children and the parents that much," he said.

He said it is an arbitrary line to draw, but that any time a family has adopted more than six children, there should be follow-up contact to assess how the family is managing.

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