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Dispute on Treatment of Children After Raid

By [KIRK JOHNSON](#) and GRETTEL C. KOVACH

SAN ANGELO, Tex. — [Texas](#) child welfare officials and parents of many of the more than 400 children seized in a raid on a [polygamist](#) religious compound in West Texas differ sharply on how the children are faring after two weeks in state custody.

Hearings begin on Thursday in what could be one of the largest child custody proceedings in United States history.

A spokesman for the State Department of Family and Protective Services said Wednesday that the children, most of whom are now at the San Angelo Coliseum, a midsize multipurpose arena, were doing well, eating good food and happily playing ball on a local football field under adult supervision.

Some mothers, however, painted a different picture. Separated from their offspring on Monday so that the older children could be questioned about abuse that may have occurred at the compound, the mothers said their children, who had previously been held inside an old military facility called Fort Concho, had wanted only to go home. Colds and a wave of chickenpox had swept through the fort's close quarters, they said.

"Life at Fort Concho was very much like a concentration camp," said one mother, a woman who gave only a first name, Amy, in speaking with a reporter.

The question asked by both sides in the tempestuous, complicated aftermath of the raid this month in Eldorado, about 45 miles from here, is what is best for the children who have already been subjected to the trauma of the removal from their homes.

But answers to that question are tied up in emotion, politics and religion, all set against what legal experts say is Texas's underfinanced and overextended state child welfare system.

Dozens of lawyers from around the state have arrived here to represent the various sides — some being trained in child welfare law only upon arrival. Details of how the hearings will work were still being ironed out late Wednesday, but the rhetoric on both sides is already honed.

The Department of Family and Protective Services spokesman, Darrell Azar, said the state would argue that all the children should remain in state custody for the time being.

“We have evidence that some children have been sexually abused and that all would be at risk if we returned them to the compound at this time,” Mr. Azar said.

“We intend to show that there has been a practice of grooming or conditioning young girls to be the spiritual wives of older men and to have sex with them,” he added. “The male children are at risk because they’re being trained to grow up to be sexual predators, so it’s the potential for abuse.”

One lawyer who is representing some family members said the state was trying to tarnish all the cases and the families, who belong to the [Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints](#), with broad-brush attacks that will fail in any fair court process that looks at the children individually, as the process requires. The F.L.D.S. broke off from the Mormon Church over polygamy after the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, based in Salt Lake City, disavowed the practice in 1890.

“As long as they continue to look at them en masse, and judge a society, a culture and a religion, it’s hard to believe they will be dealt with fairly,” said the lawyer, Jim Bradshaw, of Salt Lake City. “So the attempt is going to be to individually examine each of the families — I am very confident if that happens the children will all be returned.”

Experts in child welfare said the burden of having to detach about 500 state workers to deal with the Eldorado cases was already rippling through a system whose caseload is among the nation’s highest and per-child spending levels among its lowest.

“Right this minute, the kids in San Angelo are getting the very best that the state has to offer in terms of attention and energy,” said Scott McCown, director of the Center for Public Policy Priorities, a research group in Austin that focuses on low-income families. “But in the long run, it is going to be difficult to serve those children, and in the short run, those services come at the cost of children in places like Dallas and Houston.”

A 2004 study by the Urban Institute, a nonpartisan economic and social policy research group, ranked Texas 47th in the nation in child welfare spending, measured against its population. Spending increases by the Legislature in 2005 and 2007 have helped, Mr. McCown and several other experts said, but not enough rebuild an overextended system.

An equally important issue, other child welfare experts said, is that the children from the raid have been thrown into what for them is an alien culture.

“They don’t depend on the outside world; they are very self-contained,” Shannon Price, director of Diversity Foundation, a group that helps boys who have been pushed out of the F.L.D.S. communities in Hildale, Utah, and Colorado City, Ariz. Ms. Price spent several days in Eldorado advising Texas officials. She said she told them that the children would be comfortable with “fundamental toys, very hands-on, involving lots of dexterity.”

“Rag dolls might be fine, if dressed modestly,” she said, “but no Barbie dolls.”

Kirk Johnson reported from Denver, and Gretel C. Kovach from San Angelo and Eldorado, Tex.

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