

The recent loss of Martonio Wilder is a reminder of the importance of child protection. Although Martonio had experienced physical abuse, the maltreatment he experienced was not considered severe enough to utilize a traditional response rather than an alternative one. Prior to his loss of life due to abuse, eight-year-old Martonio ran away on previous occasions to seek to escape his home situation.

Ohio was the last state in the nation to make police officers mandated reporters. House Bill 137, as proposed by Representative Bernadette Kennedy, was signed into law on March 20, 2019. This bill amended Section 2151.42 of the Ohio Revised Code to make municipal and county police officers mandatory reporters of abuse and neglect. Legal changes such as this one require cultural shifts as well.

A follow-up bill, House Bill 4 was proposed in March 2021, three years after House Bill 137 passed. This bill proposed taking the next step forward by requiring cross-reporting from public children services and law enforcement to prevent child abuse cases from falling through the cracks. This bill has been passed into law, with an effective date of May 30, 2022.

However, as the recent loss of Martonio Wilder demonstrates, cross-reporting and mandatory reporting do not always take place. Prior to eight-year-old Martonio's loss of life, the police were called to his residence thirteen times over an 18-month period. This includes three times for domestic violence, twice for a domestic disturbance, and once for a stabbing. The coroner reported that Martonio was severely malnourished. His autopsy photos revealed visible bruises around his eyes, nose and mouth, as well as lacerations and cuts on his face and back.

After 8-year-old Martonio Wilder's death, family members see past 'red flags' differently

Columbus Dispatch, Bethany Burner, July 1, 2024.

Martonio's body was found Friday evening in the attic of a home in the 1000 block of Olmstead Avenue. An autopsy revealed he died from "deep neck compressions," and court records say his body was found in a trash bag inside another container.

Franklin County Family Services also confirmed Monday that it has been working with Wilder and her family for at least two years.

Police release 911 calls mother makes before she's arrested, accused of son's murder

ABC-6, Kate Siefert, July 2, 2024.

ABC 6 also obtained records from the Columbus Department of Public Safety outlining the number of times officers responded to incidents at Wilder's home.

Police were called to there 13 times since January 2023, according to records.

CPD was also called to the home three times for domestic violence, twice for domestic disturbance, and for a stabbing, all within the last year and a half.

Records from @ColumbusSafety also outline a history of criminal activity at Lashanda Wilder's home. CPD was called there 13 times over an 18-month period.

Court appearances reveal new details about the death of an 8-year-old boy

NBC-4, Anna Hoffman, July 10, 2024.

COLUMBUS, Ohio (WCMH) — New details about the death of 8-year-old Martonio Wilder emerged Wednesday after the two women charged in his death appeared in court.

His mother, Lashanda Wilder, and her girlfriend, Johnna Lowe, are both facing murder charges as well as felonious assault, endangering children, tampering with evidence and abuse of a corpse. Their court hearings revealed new disturbing details about Martonio's death and the alleged abuse leading up to it. Both women entered not guilty pleas to the judge.

State prosecutor Scott Sugarman also shared allegations of abuse that go back years before the death. "Ms. Wilder admits to locking Martonio inside a small coat closet where he slept at night so he could not sneak out for food," Sugarman said.

Sugarman said according to the coroner, Martonio's cause of death was determined to be compression of the neck. They found hemorrhaging on his neck, and the Franklin County Coroner's office ruled his death a murder, but said another cause of his death was malnutrition. "When I touched him, it was like it was not there. It was just bones," Knight said.

In court Wednesday, Sugarman said both women also admitted to unusual punishments for Martonio. He claimed they admitted to beating Martonio with an extension cord two days before he was found in a trash bag in the attic.

Martonio's body was found the night of June 28, and 911 calls from that evening showed Wilder called police to say her son was missing. Police said when they got there she became uncooperative, and she and Lowe then fled with her two other sons, setting off an Amber Alert.

Family of Martonio Wilder raise concerns about his death, are looking for answers from Children Services

10 Investigates, July 11, 2024

Caption: Family services said the first contact with Martonio and his mother happened in May 2016 when the agency got a report that he tested positive for drugs at birth.

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Martonio Wilder's heartbroken family members are questioning if Franklin County Children Services did enough to protect the little boy. "Children Services failed that baby, they failed that baby," said Rachelle Knight, the great aunt of Martonio.

FCCS said they worked with LaShanda Wilder and her family in May 2022.

"LaShanda literally gave her kids away at one time. Like dropped them off, gave them up. Her mom and her sister went and got the kids out of Children Services," said Siea Glover, Martonio's cousin.

Glover said LaShanda did not have official custody of Martonio for four years. Then, she regained custody. "For us, it looked like she was doing better. She came back, she got her own house," said Glover.

Knight said a case worker visited LaShanda's home the week Martonio died, and Martonio was not there.

"I blame the case worker too because how are you going to come to the house and she got two other kids but Martonio is missing. LaShanda said, 'Oh, he's at daycare.' She said OK. My first thought is what is the name of the daycare," said Knight.

FCCS spokesperson Scott Varner wouldn't confirm the last time a caseworker checked in on Martonio. 10TV asked him if they visited the home the week that Martonio died. "Again, the state privacy laws on child welfare are so restrictive on information that we can't share case specifics," said Varner.

The family also claims Children Services was aware that Martonio had been abused and malnourished. "Why didn't you remove the baby? It was only Martonio. The other kids were OK. But all of the cases were against Martonio for abuse, malnutrition," said Knight.

Again, Varner said he couldn't comment because of state privacy laws. But he did share information about past reports about Martonio Wilder.

Family services said the first contact with Martonio and his mother happened in May 2016. The agency got a report that he tested positive for drugs at birth, which they found was true. Children Services didn't have contact with Martonio again until June 2022.

That's when they got a report of physical abuse. The investigation ended in what the agency called an **alternative response resolution**. Varner said that happens when a threat to a child's safety or neglect can be resolved without significant intrusion by FCCS.

Children Services sustained another investigation involving Martonio in February 2024, this time finding educational neglect.

Knight said she wants LaShanda and Johnna to be held responsible for Martonio's death. But, she believes other agencies should also be responsible.

"I blame the court system and everybody else that kept giving them back. Y'all had a track record," said Knight. "Your job is to make sure she did that, comply with that. But, if she didn't then y'all should have removed them babies from that home."

Varner said that he could not get into specifics of Martonio's case, so 10TV asked him broader questions about protocols for removing children from homes. He said Children Services cannot remove a child from a home, saying that it is up to law enforcement and courts.