

Highland Park couple loses custody of girl

BY MARK BROWN
COOK COUNTY REPORTER

The state's child welfare agency reported Wednesday that it found no evidence that a 10-year-old Russian immigrant girl had been abused or neglected by her mother and recommended they be reunited.

After hearing the recommendation, Circuit Court Judge Francis Barth gave temporary custody of the girl to a Jewish social service agency, removing her from the home of a Highland Park couple who had sought to adopt her against the mother's wishes.

The girl will be placed in a foster home for the next three months while she and her mother, Tamara Leyzerovich, undergo counseling aimed at bringing them back together.

Bowing to the girl's desires, Barth delayed the custody transfer until Sunday so that she could spend the Rosh Hashanah holiday weekend with the couple trying to adopt her, Carey and Michelle Portman.

Afterward, Leyzerovich said she was happy that her daughter was being taken from the Portmans' custody but sad that it would be delayed.

"This family has poisoned my daughter's mind, every minute, every hour," Leyzerovich said.

The Portmans said they were pleased with the day's court proceedings, too, contending that the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services report confirmed their allegations that the

girl had been a victim of medical neglect and physical abuse in Leyzerovich's care.

DCFS officials contradicted the Portmans, saying they found neither abuse or neglect.

Jeanette Tamayo, a DCFS lawyer, said the only negative finding by the agency investigator was that the girl was at "risk of harm," a much less serious accusation that would not have caused the agency to remove her from her mother's care.

Tamayo would not specify the circumstances behind the "risk of harm" finding, but said it related to accusations made by the girl.

Lawyers for the mother and the social service agency, Jewish Children's Bureau, had warned against allowing the girl to remain under the Portmans' influence.

"We think there will be more attempts to sabotage the situation by the Portmans," said Brooke Whitted, a lawyer for Jewish Children's Bureau.

But lawyers for the girl said she should be allowed to spend the Jewish holidays with the Portmans, where she has said she wants to live.

"I'm going to take the risk of being judged a sentimental softie here," Barth said of his compromise decision to allow the girl to stay put during Rosh Hashanah but be moved before Yom Kippur.

The Portmans indicated that the case is far from over.

"We're going to proceed on the adoption until the child is happy or the child doesn't want to proceed with the adoption," Carey Portman said.

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