



leisha Anderson, 19, who made heroic efforts to save her siblings, is shown outside Coroners Court in Toronto on Monday. KEVIN VAN PAASSEN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

## CORONER'S INQUEST

# Children died where welfare workers feared to tread



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**T**he Toronto Community Housing townhouse project where a mother and two youngsters perished in a fire three years ago was allegedly deemed "too dangerous" for city welfare workers to make home visits.

The information is contained in an unsuccessful motion by the victims' family to have a coroner's inquest expand its scope, The Globe and Mail has learned.

The motion was denied March 28 by presiding coroner David Evans.

What the ruling means is that the inquest won't explore the role of the social services agency that had the longest-standing involvement with the family and that the jurors won't hear that while five children lived in that townhouse, and countless others still live in the complex, Toronto's welfare department allegedly wrote off the address as a "waived" one where workers wouldn't venture.

It also leaves unanswered the question of how a complex could be considered too dangerous for case workers to visit for a short

was 9, and Jahziah Whittaker, 3 - died when the two littlest boys set some papers alight with their mother's lighter, accidentally starting a three-alarm blaze that within minutes engulfed the unit in toxic smoke and flames.

Ms. Anderson's elder daughter, Leisha, then just 16, made heroic efforts to save her siblings, returning to the house three times after escaping. Leisha and two of the boys survived.

The family lived in a unit that is part of 303 Grandravine Drive, the address for the townhouse complex in the Jane Street-Finch Avenue West area, a part of the city that has a high proportion of poor single mothers and high unemployment.

The inquest is a discretionary one, with its focus on the roles played by the Children's Aid Society of Toronto, Toronto Community Housing and the Toronto Fire Services.

Yet Dr. Evans also ruled earlier that the scope would include "the community services/resources available to the family" and the "sufficiency of these services."

It was under that rubric that family lawyer Roger Rowe, supported by Suzan Fraser, lawyer for the provincial advocate for children and youth, asked the coroner to expand the scope to include Toronto's Employment and Social Services Department as well

According to documents obtained by The Globe, Mr. Gourlay, who in fairness is representing the city's fire service and not its welfare arm, said if Dr. Evans granted the motion, he would need a delay of several months to bring his new client up to speed. The other lawyers agreed to the delay if necessary.

But Dr. Evans ruled that an inquest must be "a focused inquiry" and that there was no connection between the welfare department and the deaths.

Mr. Rowe and Ms. Frazer argued that because city welfare was "involved with Ms. Anderson at the time of her death," and off and on since 1993, the agency's role wasn't peripheral to the family's circumstances.

According to the policies of Ontario Works, for whom municipal welfare agencies are so-called "delivery agents," case workers may on occasion visit welfare recipients and are supposed to offer recipients job or skills training and "screening for substance abuse."

According to affidavits from Leisha Simpson, who is now in the witness box, and Ms. Anderson's elder sister Sophia, the family never received a single home visit from their welfare case worker, and were told that welfare "had listed her residence address as one that was too dangerous to visit."

Ms. Simpson, just 19, is now a single mom herself, with an eight-month-old daughter she has named Tayjah after the sister who died in the fire.

In her affidavit, Ms. Simpson said she is now receiving social assistance too, yet has received no help with "housing, upgrading, life skills or employment."

It appears the sad cycle of grinding poverty and hopelessness that in the end defeated her mother may have begun to repeat itself.

Now in its fourth day, the inquest has heard a plethora of evidence about Ms. Anderson's personal failings - depressed and grief-stricken when within days her fiancé was shot to death in the summer of 2005 (he was an innocent or mistaken target, Toronto Police said at the time) and she lost the baby she was carrying, she began drinking heavily and using drugs.

Yet lawyers for the various agencies, with narrow questioning of witnesses designed to put the best shine on things for their respective clients, have collectively managed to create an impression that each agency tried its best to help the family. The inference that is the elephant in the room is that but for Ms. Anderson herself, who sometimes was too proud or stubborn to accept help, all would have been tickety-boo for the family.