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# Fire inquest reveals grinding, humiliating, crippling grip of poverty

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With the evidence in the Diane Anderson inquest completed a week ago, and the jurors soon to hear closing submissions from lawyers, the time is right to ask what was learned as, throughout most of the last month, nearly three dozen witnesses came to Ontario coroner's court to testify and almost 50 exhibits were stamped.

This was a discretionary inquest, meaning its purpose was to shed light on issues of public concern so that the five-member jury can make recommendations aimed at preventing similar tragedies.

Well, you know the sum of what was learned?

What was learned was the grinding, humiliating, crippling grip of poverty, the stark isolation wrought by it and that, although there are 1,500 social services agencies in Toronto, this 35-year-old single mother was most helped by her own kith and kin and by Susan McCoy, a police-officer-turned-counsellor who worked for free and who came to Ms. Anderson's tired townhouse instead of making her pack up her brood and come to her.

Ms. Anderson and two of her five children, nine-year-old Tayjah Simpson and three-year-old Jahziah Whittaker, perished on Dec. 22, 2007, in a fire accidentally set by the two youngest boys as they played with their mum's lighter.

With shocking speed, the fire consumed the family's small townhouse in the Jane Street-Finch Avenue West part of Toronto.

Because the Children's Aid Society of Toronto had been in the family's life, because Ms. Anderson lived in subsidized housing owned by Toronto Community Housing Corp., and because the smoke alarms had been disabled or weren't working at the time of the fire, these were the three areas of concern identified by presiding coroner Dr. David Evans.

But the scope of inquests, like those of home renovations, tend to spread like a stain.

Dr. Evans tried to contain it, ruling that the inquest wouldn't explore the role of the agency with the longest-standing involvement with the family – Toronto's Employment and Social Services Department (ESSD), commonly known as welfare.

He told Roger Rowe, the family's lawyer, and Suzan Fraser, who represented the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, there was no nexus between city welfare and the deaths.

On May 16, the lawyers will try again, arguing that since a report now in evidence finds that children from poor neighbourhoods are "at much higher risk of fire deaths," Dr. Evans now has his connection.

In documents for the first motion, the subsidized complex where Ms. Anderson lived was identified by welfare as a "waived" address. There were few details.

But The Globe and Mail has confirmed that ESSD has a city-wide list of addresses with so-called "safety tags."

Irwin Stanley, a director with the department, said in a phone interview last month that the "tag" can be the result of an unsafe neighbourhood, rickety buildings or a dangerous resident. He noted that welfare recipients can come to local offices if their address is waived, and said, "We still provide services." He said the list of waived addresses is reviewed every year.

The two lawyers also want to recall some witnesses as well as add a few new ones, including the welfare officials who can pronounce a building too dangerous for them to visit, yet still perfectly fine for the residents and their children who live there.

As the facts stood at the end of last week, it was clear, as Provincial Advocate Irwin Elman told The Globe, that "Institution after institution missed opportunities to make a real difference in the lives of this mother and her children.

"They hovered; they referred the family to others, but they failed to engage."

If no single agency dropped the ball at a particularly crucial time, only one individual, Toronto District School Board social worker Jill Elliott-Brennan, the woman who found Ms. McCoy for the family, really distinguished herself by going the extra mile.

Mr. Elman, who often attended the inquest himself, hopes the jurors will agree with him "that the solutions are local and not delivered through big institutions" or agencies.

Ms. Anderson had managed a difficult life admirably and been a good mother to her youngsters for years, but after Leroy Whittaker, her fiancé and the repository of so many of her hopes, was murdered in the summer of 2005, the slaying witnessed by her then 10-year-old son, her downward spiral began.

At the time of Mr. Whittaker's death, Ms. Anderson was pregnant with a girl they had named Beautiful. The day of his funeral, the baby was stillborn.

Within days, she had lost her lover and their baby and now also had a badly traumatized child on her hands.

Over the next two years-plus, as she began drinking more and was unable to shake her sadness, Ms. Anderson nonetheless recognized what was happening to her, and in her dignified manner, tried to get help for her kids and herself.

Only her daughter Ieisha, who helped out her mum in life and on the night of the fire tried heroically to save her siblings; her neighbour Dale Bowerbank, who roared into that blaze and saved two of the boys; and Ms. McCoy, who volunteered her time, really “did anything of substance,” Mr. Elman says: A tough assessment, but fair.

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