

State pays \$14 million to foster children in abuse case

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TALLAHASSEE, Fla. -- State officials agreed Friday to pay \$14 million to victims of a woman convicted of beating, starving and threatening foster children in her care.

Nellie Jasper Johnson was sentenced to 60 years in prison four years ago. Although complaints of abuse poured into the Department of Children & Families beginning in the early 1990s, it took nearly a decade before authorities finally did something, records show.

Seven times in 1997 investigators visited Johnson's Gainesville home after school officials warned the agency about suspected abuse, but each time they found proof of abuse.

"The case was a tale of woeful oversight by DCF investigators," said Howard Talenfeld, a Fort Lauderdale attorney who handled the case for the victims.

Not until one case worker - against the wishes of her supervisor - finally insisted on a more thorough investigation did the state finally remove the children and charge Johnson with abusing children in her care, Talenfeld said.

"We must acknowledge wrongdoing when it occurs," DCF Secretary Bob Butterworth said Friday.

"The facts of the case are clear - the system failed these children," Butterworth said. "These children were harmed irreparably and it is important we step forward now to do the right thing."

The \$14 million will be split between 20 of the more than 25 children, many of them brothers and sisters, who were placed with Johnson. She was being paid up to \$90,000 annually by the state to take care of them. Many were adopted. But when one child came forward with abuse allegations, officials with the DCF removed 17 children from her home in 2001.

The state sought a life sentence against Johnson, who was found guilty of 14 counts of aggravated child abuse, 12 counts of child abuse, three counts of tampering with a witness or victim and two counts of child neglect.

Now 64, Johnson is serving her sentence at Lowell Correctional Institution in Marion County.

Johnson's adopted daughter, Colony Latrisa Johnson, now 34, was sentenced to 15 years after being found guilty on three counts of aggravated child abuse and three counts of child abuse. She is at Gadsden Correctional Facility in Quincy.