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## Children need real legal protection in court

“Remember, I love you always.”

Isn't that what we all want our children to know? If you were never going to see your child again and could only say one more thing to them, wouldn't that be it?

Those words form the letters of the name of a little girl whom none of us will probably ever see again — Rilya Wilson. The woman with whom the state Department of Children & Families placed her is on trial for her murder right now. Someday, the adoptive parents accused of murdering Nubia Barahona, whose body was found in a plastic garbage bag in the back of a pickup truck, will stand trial, too, as did the murderers of Kayla McKean and A.J. Schwartz before them.

You know who won't stand trial? The state of Florida.

Even though our state leads the nation in the rate of child-abuse deaths for the years 2001 to 2010. Even though between 2005 and 2011, 41 percent of all children who died as a result of abuse or neglect had a prior abuse report with DCF, compared to the national average of 12 percent.

Even though our child-welfare failings have made international headlines. There will be no trial.

If there were such a trial, I cannot help but think that one of the most glaring conclusions would be this: Rilya, like all foster children, was the subject of a complex and often confounding juvenile-court case. In this case, her parents were represented by attorneys paid for by the state. Florida, too, was represented by attorneys paid for by the state. Rilya was represented by a volunteer who had a couple of weeks of training. That volunteer even had a lawyer paid for by the state. But no one had the direct responsibility to protect Rilya and her interests.

Florida is the largest state in the country that does not give foster children attorneys.

If we don't do something besides put the murderers on trial, or constantly rearrange the deck chairs on the Titanic known as DCF, then A.J., Kayla, Nubia and Rilya's names will mean nothing.

John Walsh,

The Foster Children's Project,

West Palm Beach

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