

Sex-Trafficking Couple Exploited Foster Care Loophole, Officials Say

A Bronx couple used foster care to exploit vulnerable young women, prosecutors and a woman who had been placed in their home said.



By Ashley Southall

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When Sharice Mitchell became a foster parent early in 2019, she told the officials responsible for vetting her that she was separated from her husband and had not been in contact with him for more than a year.

Caseworkers who frequently visited her apartment in the Bronx over the next two years saw no sign of her husband, Kareem Mitchell. That was because his belongings were packed away, his pictures were taken down and he was hiding out in nearby hotels when they came around, according to prosecutors and a young woman who had been placed with Ms. Mitchell.

Last month, the Mitchells were charged with sex-trafficking eight young women after the authorities discovered the couple used the foster care system as a pipeline for prostitution, the Manhattan district attorney's office said.

Their arrests came more than a year after one of the young women reported that Mr. Mitchell was in fact living in his wife's Bryant Avenue apartment. She had found him on the state sex offender registry, where he listed the address as his residence, she said in an interview.

The ease with which the Mitchells deceived the foster care system to gain access to vulnerable young women revealed a blind spot in how foster homes are vetted and monitored in New York State. And it highlights a pervasive risk for foster youth, who remain targets of sex traffickers despite government safeguards.

New York, where more than 14,000 children and young adults are in foster care, is one of more than 20 states that disqualify foster parents and applicants if anyone living in their home is listed on a sex offender registry, according to a federal survey of state statutes.

Most states, including New York, require foster-care agencies to check criminal records or sex offender registries for all adults in a household. But caseworkers in New York cannot check for foster home addresses in the sex offender registry, as they can in California, state officials said.

Foster care agencies are legally barred from conducting background checks on people who do not live with applicants, child welfare officials said, and candidates cannot be rejected simply because they know people with criminal records.

If Mrs. Mitchell had said that her husband lived with her, she would have been disqualified as a foster parent, child welfare officials said. Mr. Mitchell had served four-and-a-half years in federal prison for transporting a 17-year-old girl to engage in prostitution and registered as a sexually violent offender with a moderate risk of reoffending.

Karen Freedman, the executive director of Lawyers for Children, a nonprofit that represents children in legal matters, said in an email that the case "demonstrates the high stakes involved when foster home placements are not carefully vetted *before* children are placed, and what can go wrong when foster homes are not closely and consistently monitored *after* children are placed."

"For children in foster care to be systematically trafficked as appears to have happened here, multiple system failures had to occur," she said.



Sharice Mitchell, center, was arraigned last month on sex trafficking charges. Pool photo by Daniel William McKnight

Mr. Mitchell's lawyer declined to comment. A lawyer listed in court records as Mrs. Mitchell's representative did not return a phone call.

The State Office of Children and Family Services said in a statement that officials were "deeply troubled with the allegations" and were examining how the city's child welfare agency, the Administration for Children's Services, exercised its oversight of the foster care agency involved.

The agency, Little Flower Children and Family Services of New York, is a nonprofit that provides foster care services under a contract with the city that has totaled \$215.1 million since 2011, according to the city comptroller's office. The Administration for Children's Services, known as A.C.S., said it was working with the state to review Little Flower's handling of the Mitchell case and licensing and monitoring practices for foster homes.

Child welfare officials said the Mitchell case was an anomaly, but no agency in the state tracks how often such incidents occur.

In California, where the social services department is required to crosscheck foster home addresses in the sex offender registry, audits have uncovered hundreds of registered sex offenders living or working in foster homes. In Illinois, a boy was sexually assaulted by his foster mother's husband, a registered sex offender, after officials failed to conduct a background check on the man, according to a 2019 lawsuit.

Current and former child welfare officials said caseworkers want to make sure families are safe for foster children, but they have to be careful not to alienate the relatively small number of candidates who are qualified to become foster parents.

"Caseloads are high, you don't want to be intrusive" and risk losing potential foster parents, said Gladys Carrión, a former A.C.S. commissioner. It can also be difficult to find foster homes for older youth and youth of color, she said, "so you bend over backwards to find these homes and keep them."

Assemblyman Andrew Hevesi, the chairman of the Committee on Children and Families, said underfunding has driven the child welfare system into crisis.

"This is a systemic problem," he said. "We're looking to address it in Albany."

By law, New York is supposed to provide a cost-of-living increase for workers who provide foster care and other services on behalf of the government. But the mandate has rarely been funded, costing workers more than \$700 million in raises since 2008, according to the Human Services Council, a network of nonprofit providers.

Gov. Kathy Hochul has included a 5.4 percent cost-of-living adjustment for human services workers in her executive budget.

The state also agreed to increase foster care payments last year as part of a settlement with families who said the existing rates fell below state and federal requirements. Under the settlement terms, reimbursements would increase by up to 46 percent for families in New York City.

Foster care agencies say the funding shortfalls have contributed to high turnover among caseworkers and shrinking interest from potential foster parents.

Mary Jane Dessables, the director of information, research and accountability for the Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies, an umbrella organization, said the strain adds pressure on caseworkers to help foster parent applicants succeed. But caseworkers might miss signs of abuse for lack of experience or training, she said.

“It’s a delicate relationship,” she said. “It’s based on trust on both sides.”

In the case of the Mitchells, the trust was broken.

In March 2019, two months after taking in her first foster daughter, prosecutors said, Mrs. Mitchell lied to the state about her relationship with her husband.

Little Flower said through a public relations firm that it found out Mr. Mitchell was living with his wife in December 2020, and the agency stopped placing young people in the home and alerted the authorities.

In text messages to her caseworker and in an interview with The Times, the young woman criticized Little Flower for placing her with Mrs. Mitchell, whose previous foster daughter had been arrested and charged with prostitution. Little Flower said it could not respond because specific details about foster children are confidential.

The woman interviewed by The Times asked that her name be withheld out of concern for her safety. She said that one of Mr. Mitchell’s workers had tried to recruit her, saying that she could make a lot of money. She refused but kept their secret for months because they did not force her into prostitution, and Mrs. Mitchell allowed her to work another job at night.

The young woman said that she came forward after Mrs. Mitchell started complaining to the caseworker that she was staying out at night and on weekends — an effort she thought was meant to pressure her to work for Mr. Mitchell.

Mr. Mitchell, after his conviction in 2008, was sentenced to five years and 10 months in prison. He was released more than a year early in January 2013, federal records show.

After spending the next five years under mandatory supervision, Mr. Mitchell returned to sex trafficking, prosecutors said.

Law enforcement officials were unaware that he had done so. They said Mr. Mitchell was compliant with his sex offender registration requirements, which included filing state paperwork each year.

He was also required to provide his social media accounts, but no one was legally required to monitor them. According to prosecutors, he used them to post photos of the women working for him with boastful captions.

The New York City Police Department, which is responsible for monitoring sex offenders in the city who are not otherwise under supervision, said its sex offender monitoring unit had no way of knowing that Mr. Mitchell’s address was a foster home. The unit, which has 14 officers overseeing more than 9,600 registered offenders, does not have a

list of foster homes, and officers do not conduct home visits unless an offender fails to meet registration requirements, the police said.

At the Mitchells' apartment building in Hunts Point, a neighbor said she often saw scantily clad women who frequented the apartment peddling sex services around the block.

The woman, who asked not to be named because she said she feared Mr. Mitchell, said she was surprised, then relieved, last month when she heard the police banging on his door.

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