

## Office of Juvenile System Oversight

# REVIEW OF THE DEATH OF ELIJAH NEWSOM STEPHENS COUNTY, OKLAHOMA

Report Release Date: April 3, 2024

## OVERVIEW

The Office of Juvenile System Oversight (OJSO) received a request to conduct a case review regarding the death of Elijah (Eli) Newsom. On September 22, 2022, one felony count of Child Abuse and one felony count of First-Degree Murder – Child Abuse was filed by the Stephens County District Attorney against the child’s biological mother’s boyfriend, Ryan Towell. On October 13, 2023, Ryan Towell pled guilty and was sentenced to a life sentence without the possibility of parole.

## IDENTIFIERS

Child’s Name:	Date of Birth:	Date of Death:
Elijah (Eli) Newsom	January 4, 2019	September 20, 2022
Person Responsible for Child (PRFC):	Additional Identifiers:	
Ryan Towell	Sibling One, Six Years Old Sibling Two, Four Years Old	

## ACTIONS

The release of the following summary of the actions taken by the Oklahoma Department of Human Services (OKDHS) and the proceedings in the district court is authorized by Title 10A O.S. § 1-6-105H.

The OJSO did not become aware of this case until after the death of Eli Newsom.

## DEATH INCIDENT

On September 19, 2022, the OKDHS office in Stephens County received a report of the death of three-year-old Eli Newsom. Per documentation provided by OKDHS, on September 19, 2022, Ryan Towell called 911 after he noticed that Eli was having difficulty breathing.

OKDHS documented that Emergency Medical Services (EMS) arrived and found Eli without a pulse and was in cardiac arrest. EMS transported Eli to a hospital where multiple bruises were discovered, including a large hematoma over Eli’s frontal scalp, a subdural hematoma, and a subarachnoid bleed.

OKDHS further documented that upon further evaluation, it was determined that Eli should be flown by medical helicopter to a metropolitan hospital. The metropolitan hospital discovered brain and retinal injuries on Eli and that he had developed diabetes insipidus (a rare form of diabetes that occurs when the body can’t regulate how it handles fluids).

Additional documentation from OKDHS stated that Eli's clinical condition worsened, and due to lack of brain activity, life support was withdrawn from Eli on September 20, 2022. Eli passed away shortly after that.

- On September 19, 2022, OKDHS accepted the report as a Priority I investigation and initiated contact with the family on the same date.

## INVESTIGATION

The persons interviewed during the investigation included Eli's biological parents, Eli's mother's boyfriend, law enforcement, medical professionals, and friends and relatives of the family.

Documentation from the OKDHS investigation stated the siblings were taken into custody by their biological father, and supervised visitation was allowed for their mother. Relatives had observed bruising on Eli the days before his death, and they alerted the mother of their concerns. The mother acknowledged the injuries but did not take the child to a doctor.

During an interview with law enforcement, OKDHS documented that Ryan Towell admitted to physically disciplining Eli and his siblings on multiple occasions. OKDHS stated that Sibling One and Sibling Two were forensically interviewed, and disclosures of abuse at the hands of Mr. Towell were made.

On September 19, 2022, the Chief Child Abuse Examiner conducted a Pediatric Maltreatment Consult and concluded that Eli was the victim of physical abuse, child neglect, and medical neglect. OKDHS documented that upon Eli's death, the medical examiner stated Eli died due to blunt force trauma and ruled the manner of death a homicide.

On September 22, 2022, the Stephens County District Attorney's office filed two felony counts against Ryan Towell.

- OKDHS made a Substantiated Finding of Abuse-Death of Eli Newsom by Ryan Towell.
- OKDHS made a Substantiated Finding of Neglect-Failure to Protect and Failure to Obtain Medical Attention for Eli against the biological mother.
- OKDHS made a Substantiated Finding of Neglect-Failure to Protect Sibling One and Sibling Two as to the biological mother.
- OKDHS made a Substantiated finding of Neglect-Failure to Obtain Medical Attention for Eli against Ryan Towell.
- OKDHS requested the immediate termination of the biological mother's parental rights as the abuse and neglect were viewed as shocking and heinous. No further recommendations were made regarding the siblings, as they were deemed safe with their biological father.

## PRIOR INVOLVEMENT OF THE PRFC WITH OKLAHOMA DEPT. OF HUMAN SERVICES

### Pertinent Investigation 1:

On March 29, 2019, OKDHS received a report that Eli, Sibling One, and Sibling Two were being locked in a back bedroom while the biological parents had parties. It was reported that the parents' parties included drinking and marijuana use. It was further reported that the children have access to firearms and that their diapers are not changed as often as they should be due to the biological mother's laziness.

On April 2, 2019, OKDHS accepted the report as a Priority II investigation and initiated contact on the same date.

OKDHS documented that the parents were living with a relative. The relative told OKDHS that no parties were held

at the residence. The relative and the parents denied any substance abuse by adults in the home.

OKDHS further documented that the children were interviewed and did not disclose anything of concern. OKDHS stated no evidence was found indicating the children are/were being confined, neglected, or abused.

OKDHS ruled out the allegation of abuse confinement of Eli, Sibling One, and Sibling Two as to both parents. No recommendations were made.

### **Pertinent Investigation 2:**

On September 17, 2019, OKDHS received a report that Eli, Sibling One, and Sibling Two were home and that no adults could be seen. The report stated the children's grandparents live in the home, as well as the children's biological mother and the children's biological father.

The report continued to state that when the adults were present, all adults appeared to be under the influence of some substance. It was further alleged that the children were seen trying to open the windows, crying, and scratching at them. However, there were child locks on them.

On September 17, 2019, OKDHS accepted the report as a Priority I Investigation, and contact was initiated on the same date.

During the investigation, OKDHS documented that adults in the home did not display behaviors consistent with drug abuse. There were no marks or bruises seen on the children. All adults accounted for everyone's whereabouts, indicating the children were not left unsupervised. OKDHS documented that the children seemed happy in the home and that all adults denied drug use.

- OKDHS made an unsubstantiated finding of Neglect-Lack of Supervision, and Threat of Harm to Eli, Sibling One, and Sibling Two as to the biological mother, biological father, and grandparents.

OKDHS did not recommend services.

### **Pertinent Investigation 3:**

On August 18, 2022, OKDHS received a report that Eli, Sibling One and Sibling Two were being neglected by their biological mother and her boyfriend, Ryan Towell. It was reported that the children appear dirty, smell like marijuana smoke, and look like they have nicotine in their hair. It was further reported that one of the adults in the home was using methamphetamine. It was further reported that Mr. Towell has been threatening the biological father.

On August 18, 2022, OKDHS accepted the report as a Priority II Investigation to be initiated by August 22, 2022. OKDHS documented numerous attempts to meet with the family, which began on August 19, 2022, and were successful on August 24, 2022.

During the investigation, OKDHS documented that the children made no disclosures that caused concern for their safety. Interviews with third parties indicated no concerns about the children being unsupervised or exposed to substance abuse in the home. OKDHS documented that an unannounced visit to the home was performed and that the worker noted no concerns.

- OKDHS made an unsubstantiated finding of Neglect-Threat of Harm to Eli, Sibling One, and Sibling Two as to the biological mother and Ryan Towell.
- OKDHS made an unsubstantiated finding of Neglect-Lack of Supervision of Eli, Sibling One, and Sibling Two as to the biological mother and Ryan Towell.
- OKDHS made an unsubstantiated finding of Neglect-Inadequate Physical Care of Eli, Sibling One, and Sibling Two as to the biological mother and Ryan Towell.

No recommendations were made during the investigation.

## **JUDICIAL PROCEEDINGS PRIOR TO THE CHILD'S DEATH**

The OJSO identified no relevant judicial proceedings that occurred before the death incident.