

Foster families worried by deaths

Authorities ‘deeply concerned’ how birth mother located child

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Authorities say they are “deeply concerned” that a birth mother located her 4-year-old daughter’s foster home in Northfield Township, where police say she and two others killed the foster mother, the woman’s father, and kidnapped two children.

It’s a case that’s left many foster families across the state frightened, although experts say it’s not uncommon for parents whose rights have been terminated to locate their whereabouts.

Police say on New Year’s Day, Shuvonne Vinson, 42, and two others — Gregory Callahan, 37, and Keith Findley, 60 — broke into Jennifer Lyn Bernhard’s home, shot and killed the 48-year-old foster mom and her father, Stevie Ray Smith, 74. Also injured severely was Jeffery Bernhard, the foster father, who is now recovering at the hospital.

Vinson also is accused of kidnapping her biological daughter and the 9-year-old biological daughter of the Bernhards, who were both found by police in Ypsilanti. The children were recovered that evening along with the suspects.

In Vinson’s first court appearance, she said the victims “deserved to die” during an expletive-laden tirade because she alleged her daughter was abused. Authorities haven’t commented on the allegation.

Michigan Department of Health and Human Services spokesperson said it can’t discuss specific cases due to state and federal law. But an official with Samaritas, an organization contracted by the state agency to provide foster care services and who placed Vinson’s child with the Bernhards, say they don’t know how Vinson was able to locate the foster family.

CEO Dave Morin said the organization is working with authorities to figure that out.

“We are deeply concerned,” Morin wrote in a statement to the Free Press.

“To our knowledge, nothing like this has ever happened before and we are committed ... to the care and safety of foster children (and) to take any necessary steps to ensure that it will not happen again.”



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The Bernhards’ local reverend told the Free Press that the tragedy-stricken family also doesn’t know how Vinson or her alleged co-conspirators found the address to their home.

“I don’t think they knew that she had it,” the Rev. Bradley Trask, of Brighton Assembly of God, said.

“They, and the system, (were) under the impression that they wouldn’t have it.”

There are a few ways the location and identities of foster homes might be known to birth parents, said Lara Bouse, president of Fostering Forward Michigan, a nonprofit that provides support and services for foster families.

It’s a complicated issue that’s come up several times in the 35 years Bouse has been working in the foster care realm.

Because foster parents are licensed through the state, their identities can be public record, Bouse said. Homes and identities can be revealed in court documents from hearings on a foster child’s case. And information on foster parents and homes are subject to the Freedom of Information Act, Bouse said.

“The expectation of some anonymity for foster parents is kind of misguided,” Bouse said. “It’s kind of unrealistic to believe that all foster homes in the state of Michigan are going to be a secret somehow.”

In the aftermath of the Northfield Township tragedy, Bouse said she’s been working with the state to workshop solutions and hold virtual support groups for foster parents who are now fearful for their safety or might have questions.

MDHHS is holding a statewide listening session Thursday for foster parents to ask questions and communicate their concerns in the wake of the tragedy, Bouse said.

Some potential solutions include changes to policies that would better protect the privacy of foster parents, like keeping addresses of foster parents out of the public record during court hearings or prohibiting hospitals from giving out addresses of foster parents to biological parents who haven’t had the

rights of their children terminated, according to Bouse.

There is a consistent shortage of families willing to foster children.

“We can’t afford to have every foster parent get scared. There’s 10,000 kids in foster care in Michigan. We don’t have 10,000 more homes,” Bouse said.

Bouse said fostering isn’t necessarily dangerous, but there are risks. It’s not unheard of for foster parents to report harassment or other uncomfortable interactions, and even sometimes violence — “but not to the extent of murder.”

That’s something Bouse has never heard of or encountered before.

MDHHS said the state agency is “committed to ensuring the health and safety of all children and families including foster families and caregivers.”

Authorities haven’t revealed a motive, but Vinson may have

Washtenaw County deputies recovered the children and apprehended Vinson and the others in an alleged stolen vehicle outside the Ypsilanti home, where court records indicate Vinson’s child’s grandmother lives.

Vinson, Callahan and Findley were each charged with 12 crimes in the tragedy, including: two counts of homicide in the slaying of Jennifer Lyn Bernhard and Smith, along with two counts of child kidnapping, home invasion, assault with intent to murder, conspiracy and felon possession of a weapon charges.

Vinson racked up additional charges during her apprehension, including four counts of assaulting, resisting, or obstructing a police officers and additional weapons charges.

Authorities haven’t publicly discussed the trio’s motive in the tragedy, but during Vinson’s first court appearance on Jan. 3, she went off on an expletive-laden tirade about how the victims “deserved to die.”

“They assaulted my mother f-----g child, b---h,” she shouted.

An attorney listed for Vinson couldn’t immediately be reached for comment.

Vinson’s previous criminal history includes a 2017 drug possession charge, which she pleaded guilty to, and a February 2024 case where she faced 13 charges, the majority of them weapons charges.

Detroit police officers testified during her preliminary examination that she was a suspect in an armed robbery involving a stolen vehicle. When police located Vinson entering a vehicle at a Detroit gas station, a gun was found in the vehicle and another one in her back

pocket.

She ultimately pleaded guilty in June that year to carrying a concealed weapon. All other charges were dismissed, court records show.

Also in February 2024, Suzette Hampton petitioned for guardianship over Vinson’s 4-year-old daughter in Washtenaw County. Hampton identified herself as the child’s grandmother.

The Free Press left messages by phone for Hampton at her home but they were not returned.

Vinson’s parental rights over her daughter had been terminated, according to Hampton’s petition, but it’s unclear when and why.

The court dismissed Hampton’s request. Someone had scrawled a note on the document under the court’s findings: “CPS is filing neglect case.”

Vinson lost the parental rights over another child, born in 2018, who was placed in foster care in Wayne County that same year, according to court records.

Bernhard has a long road to recovery, reverend says

Bernhard, 52, had survived the New Year’s Day attack and managed to call 911 from a neighbor’s house, but his injuries and the trauma he’s suffered from the tragedy will likely be lifelong, Trask said.

Trask said Bernhard was shot in the head and the chest. There’s a lump on his head and eye damage near where one of the suspects hit Bernhard with a gun. He may never see with that eye again, Trask said.

“It’s literally a miracle of God that he’s alive. I look at him ... and it’s literally a living miracle that this guy, he’s conscious,” Trask said.

Trask said Bernhard is recovering remarkably, but his journey ahead is long. But Trask has hope. Bernhard has been able to sit up straight, Trask said. On Monday, he walked around a bit.

And Bernhard can communicate. Trask was in the hospital with him on Sunday when, for the first time since the tragedy, the now single father spoke to his 9-year-old daughter over the phone.

Bernhard told her that her dad was recovering, Trask said of the phone call. They both said they love each other very much, and that they hope to see each other soon.

“It moved me to tears,” Trask said.

The father and daughter reunited in the hospital on Monday.

Andrea Sahouri covers criminal justice for the Detroit Free Press. Contact her at asahouri@freepress.com or on X: @andreamsahouri.

EATON COUNTY RESTAURANT INSPECTIONS

CHARLOTTE — When county health inspectors visit local restaurants, they document problems that need addressing to meet standards set by Michigan food codes and law.

The most serious problems are considered priority violations, which present potential health hazards and should be corrected immediately. Priority foundation violations do not present immediate health hazards but should be corrected in a timely manner. Consequently, follow-up inspections and reports may be generated.

In most cases, violations are corrected, and this information isn’t an indication that violations at any establishment are an ongoing issue.

Here are the most serious violations found in Eaton County restaurants and eating establishments for December:

Two priority violations and one priority foundation violation were found at: Nourish@Alive, 800 W. Lawrence Ave–

.,Charlotte

“A large box of rotting green peppers” was found in the cooler. The sanitizer solution in the dish machine was 0 ppm (parts per million) instead of 50-100 ppm. There were no date marks for an open container of pico de gallo and several containers of cut fruit.

One priority violation and two priority foundation violations were found at: The Tangy Crab, 7433 W. Saginaw Hwy., Lansing

Used gloves were sitting in a cooler and in the flour on the breeding station. New gloves are required when returning to food prepping tasks. The person in charge was seen dumping drinks into a handwashing sink. A handwashing sink in the bar did not have disposable paper towels.

One priority violation was found at: Buffalo Wild Wings, 718 Delta Commerce Drive, Lansing

A blue cheese dressing container at a

server station and a container of sliced tomatoes in a cooler were over the cold standard of 41 degrees Fahrenheit or below. An inspector said both containers were “overfilled,” preventing proper circulation of cold temperatures.

Cracker Barrel Old Country Store, 608 Commercial Drive, Lansing

Sanitizer solution had the wrong concentration level.

Joe’s Gizzard City, 120 W. Main St., Potterville

A dish machine needed repair, prompting the person in charge to agree to using a three-compartment sink until it was fixed. A follow-up inspection was planned.

Panera Bread, 5212 W. Saginaw Hwy., Lansing

Both of the soda fountains had drain lines routed to floor drains where they extended below the flood level rim. “Except as specified ..., a direct connection may not exist between the sewage system and a drain originating from equipment in which food, portable equipment or utensils are placed.”

Starbucks, 609 N. Canal Road, Lansing

Drain lines for both espresso machines extended below the flood level rim of the floor drains that they discharge into. A small copper discharge tube connected to the water supply line for equipment was found to be extending below the rim of a floor drain as well. “Except as specified ..., a direct connection may not exist between the sewage system and a drain originating from equipment in which food, portable equipment or utensils are placed.”

University of Michigan Health - Sparrow Eaton, 321 E. Harris St., Charlotte

A bowl of cut lettuce was out on the salad bar at 50 degrees Fahrenheit, warmer than the cold standard. It had been prepared two hours prior to inspection and would have been soon discarded, as all salad bar items are when the service ends. The facility

was asked to submit a policy to maintain and use during salad bar service to include what items can be held at room temperature for four hours and how they can be marked to indicate their appropriate discard times.

Two priority foundation violations were found at: Acapulco Mexican Grill, 112 S. Cochran Ave., Charlotte

An employee was seen using a handwashing sink as a dump sink. The person in charge could not provide a chlorine test kit.

Bamboo Gardens, 520 S. Clinton St., Grand Ledge

A mandolin slicer and rubber gloves were seen stored in a handwashing sink, an accessibility issue, and food items did not have prep or discard dates.

Biggby, 504 Lansing St., Charlotte

A kitchen sink didn’t have any soap and there were sink access issues.

One priority foundation violation was found at: Char-Lanes, 1780 Lansing Road, Charlotte

There were no test strips for sanitizing solutions.

EagleMonk Pub & Brewery, 4906 W. Mt. Hope Hwy., Lansing

Five cans of artichoke quarters had dents.


First Congregational Church, 106 Bostwick St., Charlotte

There was an unmarked container of pickled beets in a kitchen cooler that had been pickled in September for a yearly bazaar. The inspector planned a follow-up inspection because of the engagement in a canning process without an approved plan and variance for a “reduced oxygen packaging method.”

Taco Bell, 4347 W. Saginaw Hwy., Lansing

A mop bucket was being stored in a handwashing sink, which was considered an accessibility issue.

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EPA Begins Five-Year Review of Adam's Plating Superfund Site

Lansing, Michigan

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is conducting its sixth five-year review of the Adam's Plating Superfund Site. The Superfund law requires regular checkups of sites that have been cleaned up - with waste managed on-site - to make sure the cleanup continues to protect people and the environment. A summary of the cleanup activities and an evaluation of the protectiveness of the implemented cleanup remedies will be included in the five-year review report.

Cleanup actions at the site included:

- removing contaminated soil and installing vertical barriers against clean filled soil to reduce recontamination.
- Monitoring groundwater to see any potential movement of contaminated groundwater off-site.
- Restricting site use.

During the five-year review EPA will be conducting a site inspection, reviewing the status of the cleanup, and conducting a review of the current data.

Other planned cleanup actions for remaining contaminated vapors at the site include:

- installing a vapor intrusion mitigation system in the basement of an affected residential property to passively carry the contaminated vapors from underneath the building to the outside.
- updating deed restrictions to require a vapor mitigation system be installed if a building were to be constructed on the Adams Plating site property.

The review is expected to be completed in June 2025.

Site information is available at www.epa.gov/superfund/adams-plating.

You may comment on the site conditions and any concerns you have. Submit comments by March 31, 2025 to: Celine Wygsalla, EPA Remedial Project Manager, at wysgalla.celine@epa.gov or 312-353-9529; or Diane Russell, EPA Community Involvement Coordinator, at russell.diane@epa.gov or 989-395-3493.

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