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## DCF whistle-blower awarded \$1 million by Palm Beach County jury regarding testimony in child abuse case

By **JASON SCHULTZ**  
*Palm Beach Post Staff Writer*

Thursday, September 03, 2009

WEST PALM BEACH — A former state Department of Children and Families investigator was awarded \$1 million Thursday by a jury that agreed she was fired in retaliation for testimony she gave in a high-profile child abuse case.

The jury found that Gerolyn Shapiro was let go in 2006 because of Palm Beach County grand jury testimony she gave in 2001 about how DCF handled a Lake Worth child abuse case. Two children died and Marissa Amora, formerly known as Moesha Sylencieux, was left with severe brain damage from the abuse she incurred when she was 2 years old, according to Shapiro's attorney.

### Marissa Amora case



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"She is hoping that this lawsuit and the verdict will clear her name," said Isidro Garcia of Shapiro's reaction to the \$1.01 million verdict. "She is happy with it because she has had difficulty finding employment."

The whistle-blower lawsuit was filed in 2007 in Palm Beach County Circuit Court.

Shapiro, who worked for the agency for 10 years, said that she was the victim of retaliation by DCF worker Eleanor Parker who resented testimony she had given to the grand jury. She also testified that Parker was negligent and mishandled Moesha's case.

Social workers in early 2000 let Moesha return to her mother's Lake Worth home despite previous reports about possible abuse.

In January of 2001, Moesha wound up in pediatric trauma unit at Delray Medical Center. Doctors at the time said they believed she had been swung by her legs and smashed into a wall or floor leaving her with permanent brain damage. She was left with the developmental ability of a 3-year-old child.

Ric and Dawn Amora later adopted her and changed her name to Marissa. The adoptive parents, who have since moved to northern Florida, sued the state and won a \$26.8 million settlement in 2005 to pay part of the lifetime costs of her care.

Dawn Amora said she was not familiar with Shapiro's lawsuit and had no comment on it, but she said Marissa, who will turn 11 next month, is doing good.

"Marissa's growing up," Dawn Amora said. "She's a big girl."

Parker lost her job partly because of the grand jury's report on how Marissa's case was handled but was rehired in 2001. Four years later, Parker was assigned to work under Shapiro.

Shapiro claimed in the lawsuit that Parker, who is black, and other black DCF employees created a hostile work environment for Shapiro, who is white and Jewish. Shapiro also alleged that Parker convinced other employees to falsely claim that Shapiro was encouraging employees to overstate the amount of time they spent on Medicaid-related cases so the state agency could get more money.

Regional DCF Director Perry Borman released a statement Friday saying: "DCF was represented by the Office of Attorney General on this case. There was an Inspector General's report that concluded that there was evidence that Ms. Shapiro misrepresented data and encouraged others to do so. We took those supported conclusions very seriously. We are in the process of reviewing our options at this point."

Garcia on Thursday said the verdict allows his client to ask to be reinstated at her job with DCF. He did not know if she would do that because of how she was fired, but said she has not been able to find any other work.

"She may not have any other options," Garcia said.

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