

New York: Behind the tragic death of a social worker

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Counselor Renee C. Greco, working for New Directions Youth & Family Services, was bludgeoned to death at Avenue House, a youth boarding home in Lockport, New York, on June 8. Anthony J. Allen, 18, and Robert J. Thousand, 17, both of Rochester, New York, were arrested for the killing. They have been charged with second-degree murder.

The suspects are accused of plotting to slay Greco in order to cover up the theft of \$160 from a New Directions lockbox at the home the previous weekend. While authorities portray Allen as the “ringleader” in some elaborate conspiracy, the resort to such a brutal and senseless act indicates a psychology of panic, desperation and hopelessness. The suspects stole the house van and were apprehended emerging from some bushes near the Buffalo bus terminal.

Greco, 24, had worked at the home for two years and is described by friends and co-workers as a dedicated and caring individual. According to family and friends, she had planned to quit her job because of escalating problems with some of the home’s residents.

She kept the position, however, in order to maintain her health coverage, despite growing difficulties managing five teenagers alone.

The ratio of one staff member to five teenage boys on the night she was killed did not violate state mandates, which allow one person to supervise six youths in a residence. Staffing regulations are now being subjected to a review.

The Office of Family and Children’s Services is reviewing its policies, “But there clearly is going to be a lot more on this,” said Republican State Senator George D. Maziarz of Newfane.

The office had closed several secure facilities upstate, including two in Cattaraugus County, he said, and now has fewer choices in where to place “clearly potentially violent offenders.”

State authorities have suspended the New Directions Youth & Family Services’ operating license for the Avenue House.

The tragic killing has fostered a rash of news reports on other past problems at two other New Directions facilities.

A 17-year-old resident of Wyndham Lawn Home for

Children, also in Lockport, was arrested and accused of threatening to kill a youth-care worker and kicking the front bumper of her vehicle. Deputies charged Shanna M. Martinez with criminal mischief, a felony, and menacing, a misdemeanor. On the night of May 31, a dozen youths fled from Randolph Children’s Home in Cattaraugus County. After being brought back, they allegedly fought with police and staff. Cops used pepper spray to quell the melee.

A 17-year-old resident of a Community Missions residential facility (Lockport) was charged with harassment after a staff member reported fearing for her safety. The youth had been told he could not go outside and became verbally abusive, warning the staffer he could beat her up and steal her car, or the facility’s van. The staff member said she called in the police because of the recent killing at Avenue House.

Social workers have described the youth now coming into such facilities as more troubled and violent, many of them having previous associations with gangs.

A week earlier, a local 11-year-old sixth grade pupil was arrested and charged under the Homeland Security statutes with “making a terrorist threat” for naming students and teachers on a “hit list” using the library computer. The case is now in Family Court. Even local media has called this a serious over-reaction to a troubled youth.

What the law-and-order hysteria generated by the politicians and the media over youth violence consistently ignores are the material conditions that have given rise to a growing number of homeless youth confronting serious social and emotional problems.

In a recently announced youth jobs initiative, New York state published a mission statement that included developing a “worker identity” early on and focusing studies on the subjects young people “need in order to succeed in the job market when they leave school.” This begs the question: how have so many youth lost their “worker identity” in the first place?

The Buffalo Niagara region has 13,800 fewer jobs than it did in May 2008. Jobless rates are at their highest levels since the mid-1980s.

Manufacturing jobs also continued to vanish at a rapid pace, with the region shedding 2,900 factory jobs, or 5 percent of the industry's total employment. The region's unemployment rate improved to 8.3 percent in May, even though the pace of job losses here accelerated to its fastest rate since late 2001. The regional unemployment rate of 8.3 percent is less than the seasonally unadjusted national rate of 9 percent, but higher than the statewide jobless rate of 8 percent. Based on New York State Labor data, the youth unemployment rate across the state has soared over the past 12 months. The unemployment rate among youth between the ages of 16 and 19 was 20.1 percent. The teenagers accused in the recent killing are from Rochester, where unemployment rates among youth aged 16 to 19 stands at 21 percent. These estimates include only young adults actively seeking employment. Federal and state jobs programs have slated only \$96 million for the entire youth population of state of New York, a token sum that fails to begin to address a massive unemployment crisis.

The federal government has allotted \$5.91 million to create more than 2,600 jobs for lower income/at-risk youth in the Finger Lakes Region. Across the state, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) will provide \$61 million in funding, and an additional \$35 million will be provided through the federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant program, creating 50,000 jobs for New York's lower-income youth statewide.

A recent Buffalo Poverty Reduction Blueprint commissioned by the city's Democratic Mayor Bryon W. Brown notes that research from the 2007 American Community Survey shows that 42 percent of children under the age of 17 in Buffalo live in poverty and concludes that this is a regional problem. Recent data from the US Census Bureau places Buffalo as the nation's third poorest city. The number of poor residents in the surrounding Erie County increased from 115,613 in 1990 to 123,888 in 2007—before the onset of the present crisis—or from 12 percent to 14 percent.

The mayor applauded himself for the token increase in the number of youth placed by the Summer Youth Program from 1,200 to 3,173 since 2006. While providing no viable plan to address poverty, Mayor Brown wants city lawmakers to approve plans to add more than 50 new street surveillance cameras to Buffalo's existing 70-camera network for "public safety." The cost of the new cameras will range from \$2.2 million to \$3.7 million.

Due to 30 years of de-industrialization, which has especially devastated the western New York area, once a major auto, steel

and rubber center, a generation of families has suffered chronic unemployment and underemployment. Far from fighting this trend, the AFL-CIO unions in the area have collaborated for 30 years with management in imposing plant closures and slashing wages and benefits for new hires.

The closing of the longstanding youth services home in Buffalo has been accompanied by a cry from right-wing state politicians to replace such "failed" facilities with youth detention centers, falling back on the repressive law-and-order policies that have already incarcerated millions in the US.

The reality is that youth facilities and services require a massive increase in funding to provide safe staffing levels and genuine assistance and education for young people, who have suffered the worst effects of the protracted deepening of unemployment and poverty in the region. Instead, these facilities have been neglected and scapegoated and now face the threat of closure.

Without addressing the underlying issues of unemployment and poverty, even such an increase could have only a palliative effect.

No such funding increase is being proposed by any of the big business politicians in New York state, much less a comprehensive anti-poverty program, which could only be advanced through a direct challenge to the monopolization of social wealth by a narrow financial oligarchy. Instead, their only answer is more police repression and incarceration, especially for young people and young workers whose futures are most in jeopardy.



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