

Pleas for a dying child go unheeded

WITHIN days of his election to Congress, Rep. Jerrold Nadler, the Manhattan Democrat, stood up in the Sheraton Hotel on Seventh Avenue Friday and served deadly notice on the state, the city, a bunch of social agencies, courts, judges and others.

"If this child dies," he said, "you will all be guilty of accessory to murder. None of you can claim you have not been placed on notice. I predict the strong likelihood that this child will die within a couple of years, and let it not be said you have not received ample warning, that we did not cry to the heavens.



Are you going to continue willfully to ignore this child and bring about her death?"

Nadler was referring to Sherry Neustein-Orbach, the emaciated 12-year-old girl at the center of one of the most bizarre child-abuse cases on record. The latest chapter in her tragedy was fea-

ture in The Post two weeks ago, when it was disclosed she had lost 11 pounds over the summer. Dr. Herbert Strauss, a renowned pediatrician, determined Sherry was in "grave peril of death."

No one knows the story better than Nadler. As an assemblyman, he held public hearings on child abuse, highlighting the extraordinary fate of Sherry. Although alleged to have been abused sexually by her father, Sherry was removed from the custody of her mother, Dr. Amy Neustein, by the courts, placed in foster care for 16 months, then

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transferred to the custody of her father. Almost immediately, her physical and mental condition deteriorated drastically. When her mother rushed her to Kings County Hospital, a physician, Dr. Jeffrey Birnbaum, described her as the "most emaciated" child he had ever seen. Since then, the child has continued to decline alarmingly.

Yet the most astonishing aspect of this case is that, despite the intervention of politicians, legal experts, child-advocacy groups and the hot glare of publicity, no official in government, the social agencies or the courts has lifted a finger to help Sherry. This case defies all experience in the field. It has triggered unprecedented frustration, anger and fear among those familiar with it.

That's why Nadler was so blunt when he addressed a press conference at the Sheraton. He said he believed Sherry was in imminent danger of death, that neither the courts nor the agencies had offered "credible answers" to all the questions that haunt the case.

Nadler had lots of support. Rep. Major Owens, the Brooklyn Democrat, also conducted an investigation of the case and ran into "disturbing stonewalling." He said, "Never have so many people in public life been rendered so helpless as in this case. An immediate physical examination of Sherry should be made by a panel of reputable pediatricians with no ties to the city's Human Resources Administration." City Council member Susan Alter and State Assemblywoman Helen Weinstein sounded similar appeals.

State Sen. David Paterson has worked on the case for four years and compares it to Lisa Steinberg's in terms of government default. He said: "This is about as serious an indictment of government as I can think of in all the time I've been in office.



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We've written letters, held hearings, tried to get court administrators to look at the facts. Nothing." Paterson said a "heinous crime" had been committed here and it was being covered up. He concluded, "Sherry's death may further the purposes of those behind it."

Strong words. But nothing happens. City Council President Andrew Stein told how the Child Welfare Administration had assured him it would arrange an independent examination of Sherry. "Nothing happened," said Stein. "I'm deeply distressed that CWA has not acted to safeguard the life and health of Sherry. I believe her life is at stake."

This is how bad it is. Children's Rights of America Inc., the child-advocacy group that sponsored Friday's press conference, sent a delegation to Gov. Cuomo for an emergency meeting. They didn't even get in the door. "This is the first time any governor has treated us like that," said its founder, Kathy Rosenthal.

In her 10 years as head of Children's Rights, Rosenthal has never seen anything like Sherry's case. "This is the first time we cannot find anyone willing to stand up and rescue a child who is dying," she said. "It leaves me speechless. What has happened here is criminal. We will not stop our efforts to secure Sherry's freedom and have our allegations investigated. If, God forbid, she dies, her blood will be on their hands."

One day, the Sherry Neustein-Orbach case is going to explode over this city. It may take time, but it's coming.