


PORTLAND

State cleared Gresham dad with violent past to care for boy he's now accused of abusing

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 Police say a Gresham boy's abuse was uncovered after an alert bus driver noticed the boy was in pain and reported the signs to school officials. The boy's dad was arrested in March, six months after state officials recommended placing the boy in his care. (The Oregonian/file photo)

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By [Molly Young | The Oregonian/OregonLive](#)

A Gresham man ordered in 2016 to stay away from his two young sons gained custody of an older third son at the recommendation of Oregon's child welfare agency last fall and quickly made the 7-year-old his "sparring partner," court records show.

The boy limped onto his school bus in such visible pain one February morning that the driver alerted school officials.

Eventually, the boy disclosed that his father slapped his head, smacked his hands, whipped his back and legs with a belt and forced him to run in his pajamas through their snowy backyard, police records say. He fell. Every time he tried to get up, the boy said, his dad pushed him back to the ground.



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The father, Robert A. Lamb, is facing six felony charges: three counts of first-degree criminal mistreatment and three counts of third-degree assault.

The Department of Human Services is facing a \$1.5 million lawsuit brought on the boy's behalf.

The lawsuit, filed in August, contends the agency should never have sent the boy to live with his father. Background checks should have turned up the man's his violent past, which includes a 2016 restraining order involving his other children and a 2008 conviction for strangling his girlfriend.

Child welfare workers never place children in homes before checking into a caregiver's Oregon criminal history, Department of Human Services spokeswoman Christine Stone said.

The agency processes huge numbers of background checks, and its handling of them came up at [a Senate hearing Wednesday](#).

Fariborz Pakseresht, the agency's top official, told lawmakers that his agency has made progress in processing background checks more quickly as part of a massive turnaround campaign launched at the agency last year.

The average time for the agency's background check unit to complete a check is now one month, down from a month and a half at the start of 2018. Agency officials expect to fully clear out a "queue" of 15,000 unprocessed requests by the end of the year, he said. They have hired 24 additional workers to help with the task and will hire six more soon.



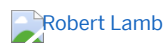
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After workers in the agency's background check unit look into criminal histories, case workers "make the final fitness determination" regarding the placement of children with caregivers who have been vetted, according to a handout the agency provided to The Oregonian/OregonLive.



Robert
Lamb

The Gresham father's history of domestic violence dates back at least 17 years in Oregon and Washington. Two former partners said Lamb threatened to kill them and obtained restraining orders against him. Court filings from those cases say the man struggled with substance abuse and mental health.

Oregon administrative rules prohibit the agency from approving a foster caregiver who has ever been convicted of abuse against a child or spouse. Overriding the rules requires sign off from a high-ranking official.

The Gresham father was convicted of strangling his girlfriend, and it's unclear whether the rules intend for all intimate partners to be covered under the term "spouse." It's also unclear whether he would have been subjected to such a stringent disqualification standard since he was the boy's biological parent.

A criminal history that might disqualify a foster caregiver "must be assessed prior to placing a child," Stone said in an email to The Oregonian/OregonLive.

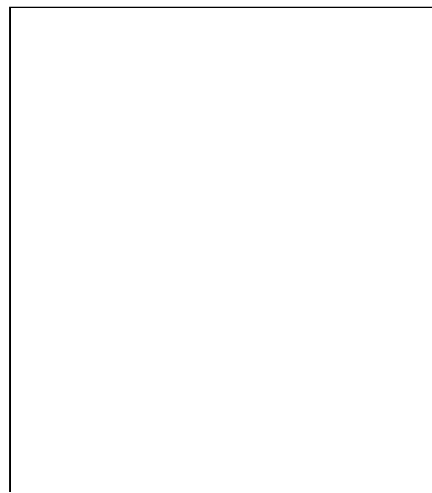


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She said requests for background checks for foster care placements are bumped to the top of the request list. If a child is placed after business hours, the agency can still check the person's history in the state law enforcement database.

Stone did not answer questions regarding how the agency weighs abuse convictions of an intimate partner or abuse allegations in restraining orders.

When children are removed from one parent's custody and another parent or parents want to be part of the children's lives, caseworkers must scrutinize their criminal backgrounds, child welfare history, living situations and behaviors for any red flags that could place children at risk. They must weigh what they find to decide whether the child would be safe in that parent's home.

Lamb did not have a relationship with his son before the state placed the boy in his care in September 2017, the lawsuit says. The boy lived with his 44-year-old dad for five months before the bus driver noticed his injuries.

The boy told his principal later at school that the bruises from his father's blows made it hurt to sit. He also said that he couldn't make his pinky finger point straight since his father smashed it with a spatula.



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His father was arrested 10 days later.

A message left at a phone number provided by Lamb to court officials was not returned Wednesday.

Lamb told court officials that he had four children with three different women. He does not share the same last name with the son that the state placed in his home. The first allegations of abuse surfaced when his oldest child was 1 ½.

He had lived with the mother of the girl in Vancouver, Washington. She said in court filings that he had abused her for two years and berated her two older children who had a different father.

"What scares me the most is that my kids see it," she wrote in her 2002 request for a restraining order.

Lamb was convicted of assault in Washington the same year, according to Oregon court records, but details of the case are not available.

He pleaded no contest in 2008 to strangling and assaulting a different girlfriend in Portland. She wrote in her restraining order petition that he had punched and kicked her and her dogs. When police arrested him, he said he would return to kill them all, she wrote.

The mother of his younger sons obtained a restraining order against him in June 2016 and filed for divorce that September.

In her petition for a restraining order, she described multiple episodes of violence that



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November 2012. One year later, he pushed her and caused her to fall over their son's car seat, knocking their son to the floor.

In spring 2016, he became angry as the couple argued in a car, she wrote. "He said, 'That's it. I'm making the call. You're dead.'"

She said he abused alcohol and prescription pills. "He has repeatedly hurt me physically during our relationship, as well as our sons and my daughter, and has threatened to hurt me or my kids repeatedly as well," she wrote.

She also told the divorce judge that she was afraid of him. She filed a motion that said he had abused her and the three children in the home, including her daughter from a previous relationship who was disabled.

"I am responsibly fearful for the safety of our children."

Lamb never appeared to object to any restraining order or divorce filings. He also never took part in parenting classes that divorcing parents are required to complete, court records say.

But during the divorce, his wife asked to drop the restraining order, because she said he had made strides by attending therapy. A judge granted her request in October 2016.

His ex-wife told The Oregonian/OregonLive that she soon regretted the request and has not allowed her ex-husband to see their children since early 2017. She said no one from the Department of Human Services ever called to ask whether she believed her sons' brother would be safe in the care of their father



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Lamb had moved in with a roommate after the couple separated, according to the court files. His 7-year-old was placed with him in September 2017 after the boy's mother was arrested on charges of theft and meth possession.

"Chip off the old block!!" Lamb wrote in October alongside a photo of the two of them posted on a public Facebook profile with his same name.

The boy later told police that his father spanked him with a belt for not brushing his teeth and hit his hands with a spatula when he did jumping jacks incorrectly.

The lawsuit contends child welfare workers didn't make sure the boy was safe in his father's care. The boy allegedly suffered serious injuries and emotional trauma as a result of what happened.

It was the boy's principal who ultimately tipped case workers off to his abuse, according to court files. He was immediately taken from his father's custody.

His father told police that he was a "third-degree black belt" with a 26-4 record, the court records say. He said he was trying to "toughen" the boy up with taekwondo and jiu jitsu punches, kicks and strikes.

"He demonstrated his moves for the detective, to include one move that was a kick to the lower body of his opponent," Deputy District Attorney Amber Kinney wrote in the probable cause affidavit.



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"The defendant said he knew he injured (his son), but that (his son) had injured him, as well," Kinney wrote.

Court records say Lamb is 5'10" and 230 pounds.

He was arrested March 5 and released the next day. A warrant is now out for his arrest because he never showed up for a May 20 court hearing.

The boy is still in foster care.

-- Molly Young

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