

Mark Dover Interview Transcript

Reviewer: Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to talk with us today, Mr. Dover. I understand your wife is home taking care of the kids and that's why she can't be with us. Also, I know your worker talked with you about this when she set up the interview, but we just wanted to reiterate that we're here doing a review of the overall functioning of the state's child welfare program. We're doing a review of Javier Diaz's case, and we're also talking with key people involved in his case. We'd like to find out what kind of experiences you had when Javier was in your home and how you and your wife felt about those experiences. We want to hear both the good and the bad, if any. We can't remedy anything you might have concerns about from when Javier was with you, but telling us your experiences means the state can learn from things it did well and the things it needs to improve on. Then it'll be able to serve families and children better in the future and ensure that they have more positive outcomes. And we want to assure you that the information you share with us will be confidential and won't be shared with the caseworker. We're going to be taking notes while we talk, so I hope that's okay. Let us know if you have any questions anytime during the interview.

To start with, can you verify for us the dates that Javier was in your home?

Mark Dover: We got Javier at the end of November last year; I believe it was the 28th. He was with us until January 6th, when he moved to Gateway Group Home. So actually, it was a pretty short placement—about 6 weeks.

Reviewer: Can you tell us how Javier did in your home?

Mark Dover: He was really quiet and kept to himself. He had meals with us, but that was pretty much it as far as any interaction with us. He didn't seem to want to talk to us about anything, but we thought he'd get past that. We really hadn't gotten much information from his caseworker, Vanessa Thomas, before he was placed with us, so we asked her for more information so we could understand him better. She really never provided what we needed, so we felt we were kind of left in the dark about what his issues might be. We knew he was taking medication, but we weren't sure at first what it was for. We found out later that Javier had been diagnosed with depression. We'd never had a child with depression before and really didn't know how to deal with it.

Reviewer: Can you tell us how Javier adjusted after he'd been with you a few days longer?

Mark Dover: Actually, he didn't seem to adjust; he became even more withdrawn. We felt like he just didn't like our home, but we didn't know what to do about it. We tried talking to him a few times about what was bothering him, but he wouldn't say much. Then, after he'd been there just about a week, he ran away. This was pretty devastating to my wife and me. We were really concerned about him and wondered what we might have done to cause this. The police found him at the mall about 4 days later, and Vanessa brought him back to us. We talked to Javier, and all he would say is, "You don't accept me for who I am." And I guess he was right. We learned that Javier was coming out as gay, and having him with us was making us uncomfortable. I guess we thought he might be a bad influence on the other kids in our home. Vanessa came back again after a few days, and we sat down with Javier and talked about it. My wife and I are kind of old-fashioned, I guess, but I think it would have helped if someone had just pointed out to us that we were part of the problem. Instead, we all just talked to Javier about not

acting gay around the other kids and that he was making us all uncomfortable. I can just imagine now how that must have made him feel. We've had training since then on acceptance of LGBTQ kids, and, if we'd known then what we know now, I think this would have turned out differently.

Reviewer: So, you feel like you could have benefited from a different type of support in knowing how to make Javier feel more at ease and comfortable in your home?

Mark Dover: Definitely. We don't want to knock Vanessa—she's young—but it really would have been beneficial if she could have arranged for us to talk to someone who could have helped us see how we were making Javier feel. We needed some pointers on how to talk to him about his sexuality and how to deal with things as they came up. Anyway, we got through the holidays okay, then Javier ran away again in late December. Probably it was really hard for him not to be with his family during the holidays. Anyway, we didn't want to go through that with him again, so we asked for him to be moved. And at that point, it was obvious he was very unhappy living with us. He stayed with us just a few days longer, until they found a place for him at Gateway Group Home. We've asked Vanessa about him from time to time since then, and she says he's doing really well there. I just wish we could have worked it out so he could have stayed with us. He's a neat kid, and I'm sorry we didn't get to know him better.

Reviewer: Was the worker responsive when you needed concrete things, like clothing vouchers or other things for Javier?

Mark Dover: Yes, Vanessa was very responsive when we needed anything for Javier. He didn't need clothing while he was with us, but she brought us a voucher to use for Christmas gifts for him. We got that well ahead of time, so that was appreciated because he had requested a couple of things that weren't easy to find.

Reviewer: Did Javier's caseworker visit with him when he was in your home, and did she spend time with him alone?

Mark Dover: She saw him 2-3 times in the time that he was placed with us, and, yes, she always spent some time talking with him alone, sometimes for an hour or more. I think they had good visits. He seemed a little happier after she'd been there, and he talked to her a lot more than he did us.

Reviewer: Did Javier visit with his guardians and his sister while he was with you?

Mark Dover: Yes, I remember that he went to his aunt and uncle's house for a holiday party with other relatives to exchange gifts. When he came back, he said he had a really good time, and he was sad that he couldn't stay there.

Reviewer: While Javier was with you, do you feel like his needs were being provided for?

Mark Dover: Vanessa was pretty attentive to Javier—she made sure he had clothes and gifts and things—but I wonder if she was really helping him deal with his struggles around his sexual orientation. When we had our talk after he had run away the first time, he told her she helped him with everything except making sure he was accepted for who he was. Otherwise, they seemed to have a good relationship, and he relied on her a lot.

Reviewer: Is there anything else you'd like to share that we haven't asked about?

Mark Dover: I'd just like to say that I hope our experience with Javier, and what we've learned since then, will help the Department know how to deal with situations like this better in the future. I think it's great that they're offering training now on being sensitive to and dealing with LGBTQ kids; it just came a little too late for us to help Javier. Next time, though, we'll be a lot better prepared and will hopefully know what we're doing.

Reviewer: We really appreciate your candor in everything you've told us today. Again, we appreciate so much that you took the time to come in and talk with us. It's been very helpful.