

The Star-Ledger

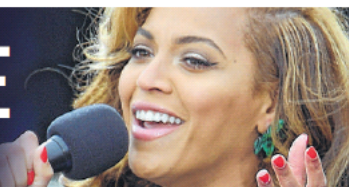
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FINAL EDITION

NJ.COM

BEYONCÉ'S BIG SURPRISE

Artist's new album, released without warning, is a winner. In Today



North N.J. likely will bear brunt of snow

Forecasters predict 6 to 8 inches, and ice

By Stephen Stirling
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

A potent winter storm, New Jersey's third in a week, is expected to blanket northern and central parts of the state with more than a half-foot of snow today, prompting a statewide activation of the Department of Transportation's 2,400 snow-removal vehicles.

Winter storm warnings are in effect until tomorrow morning in the northern half of the state, where forecasters say 6 to 8 inches of snow and a quarter-inch of ice could fall. Localized areas could see more.

"It could make for some pretty miserable conditions."

David Robinson, climatologist

"Looks like a real North Jersey special," said Ken Elliott, a meteorologist with the Hackensack-based firm WeatherWorks. "You're looking at a line basically from Piscataway to Princeton on north, that's where the meat of the storm is going to be."

While precipitation should remain frozen north of that line, a changeover to rain is expected farther south, leading to a sharp cutoff in overall accumulations. Precipitation is expected to begin as all snow across the state, with light snow moving in as early as daybreak and increasing in intensity throughout the day.

"I'd say after 3 or 4 o'clock, that's when things are going to start to get really dicey (on the roads)," Elliott said.

Tim Greeley, a spokesman for the New Jersey Department of Transportation, said the agency is anticipating a statewide activation of its snow removal units and had already started pretreating roads.

"We're always planning for the worst-case scenario," he said. SEE WEATHER, PAGE 2

Jury awards what could be the largest verdict against the state, finding DYFS failed to protect child, now 4, from his father in 2009 attack that left him blind and with brain damage

N.J. ORDERED TO PAY BEATEN BOY \$166M



ARTIST IDE ECONOMOPoulos/STAR-LEDGER

Jadriel Velesquez, center, is now cared for by his grandmother, Neomi Escobar, and her husband, Jose Betances. Doctors say the 4-year-old boy will need around-the-clock care for the rest of his life.

By Thomas Zambito / STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Four-year-old Jadriel Velesquez, the Hillside boy left brain damaged from a brutal beating by his father while he was just an infant, was awarded \$166 million yesterday in what's believed to be the largest jury verdict ever against the state of New Jersey.

The jury in state Superior Court deliberated two hours before finding the state's Division of Youth and Family Services failed to protect Jadriel from a father with a history of violent outbursts and explosive behavior and should have removed him from his custody.

"For Jadriel, I thank God," said Neomi Escobar, the boy's grandmother who waged a months-long battle to

get DYFS to remove the boy from the Jersey City home where Jadriel was beaten on July 16, 2009.

"The jury did a great thing," she added, her eyes welling with tears. "They did justice for Jadi. I was screaming for them to take the baby away from them every single day. I did everything possible."

Jadriel's father, Joshua Velesquez, 26, is serving six years in prison for aggravated assault. Escobar's daughter, Vanessa Merchan, no longer has custody of the child. Escobar and her husband have adopted him and care for him in their home.

"I love him so much," Escobar said. "I'm his mother now."

Jadriel is blind and will need around-the-clock care the rest of his life, according to doctors. During the trial,

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Christie's top man at the PA resigns

Baroni came under fire for lane closures

By Jenna Portnoy
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Gov. Chris Christie's top appointee to the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey resigned yesterday amid questions over whether he ordered a traffic jam at the world's busiest bridge as political payback.

The Republican governor accepted the resignation of Bill Baroni, the agency's deputy executive director, effective immediately, and praised the former state senator's four-year stint at the bi-state agency.

"Bill Baroni is a friend of mine, has been an outstanding public servant both in his time in the Legislature and his time at the Port Authority and I have no reason not to believe him," Christie said at a State-house news conference, noting their 20-year relationship dating back to the governor's days as a Morris County freeholder.

Late last month, Baroni testified before a state Assembly committee that three lanes to the George Washington Bridge in Fort Lee were closed Sept. 9 to 13 to conduct a traffic study.

"I've never said that a mistake wasn't made, but what I've said is all of the other politics swirling around it was created, was manufactured," said Christie, who took questions for nearly an hour. State and national Democrats believe officials loyal to Christie ordered the lane closures to punish the town's Democratic mayor for failing to endorse Christie's re-election bid. The controversy led to two public hearings and the subpoena of documents and correspondence from seven agency officials.



BARONI

SEE BARONI, PAGE 5

Verdict

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the curly-haired youngster was wheeled into the courtroom so his lawyers could offer jurors a brief glimpse at a life in which wheelchairs and hospital beds are his constant companions. The boy's eyes appeared unfocused as he sat in front of the jury for about a minute, incapable of speaking.

Jurors interviewed after the verdict said that during the course of the two-week trial, Jadel's lawyers — Beth Baldinger and David Mazie — presented a convincing case against DYFS by cataloguing the agency's repeated missteps and system breakdowns in the weeks leading up to the beating.

"Even as you're crying your eyes out we knew we were going to judge it by the evidence, not this adorable, damaged little boy," one female juror who declined to be named said yesterday, recalling the scene.

Indeed, the jury of four men and four women said they fashioned the \$57 million award for pain and suffering by calculating \$2,000-a-day for the rest of his life.

"And that was woefully inadequate," said juror Chris Isidore. "(DYFS) dropped the ball. There were many ways they could have found the information they needed so the kid was removed."

Another \$105 million was awarded to cover Jadel's future medical needs. The remainder was to cover the loss of future earnings and other expenses.

A DYFS spokesman declined to comment.

However, in an e-mail obtained by The Star-Ledger, Allison Blake, the commissioner of the state Department of Children and Families, told agency personnel yesterday that DYFS' lawyers are reviewing the verdict "to determine if further action is appropriate."

"The needless suffering of any child is deeply troubling, and I share the hurt and anger we all feel when a tragedy like this occurs," Blake said in the e-mail. "This feeling is especially present among the men and women of this department

"I was screaming for them to take the baby away from them ..."

Neomi Escobar, Jadel Velesquez's grandmother

and our provider community partners who have dedicated their careers to the safety and well-being of children."

The lawsuit was filed against DYFS before its name was changed to the Division of Child Protection and Permanency.

On May 28, 2009, Jadel was taken to Newark Beth Israel after Escobar called a DYFS hotline to report her suspicion that her daughter's boyfriend had beaten the child. Jadel had bruises on his cheeks and blood in both eyes, according to testimony. He was released by doctors with a finding of suspected abuse.

The following week, Escobar said she found a crack pipe in the child's diaper bag after her daughter dropped the boy off so Escobar could baby-sit.

And the week after that caseworkers came up with a plan — agreed to by the entire family — that prevented Joshua Velesquez from caring for the child by himself.

By then, DYFS caseworkers had run a criminal background check for Joshua Velesquez in New Jersey that came up clear, according to testimony. However, DYFS failed to discover some 20 arrests on charges that included assaults in Florida, where Velesquez lived previously, Mazie said.

Isidore said DYFS should have known such a measure would not protect the child. "No one would have thought the case plan was a good idea," he said.

"What he (Velesquez) did here was unthinkable," Mazie told jurors yesterday. "He's an animal. He's a maniac. But they knew that and they didn't act. Their responsibility was to remove the baby from the home."

The initial jury verdict found both DYFS and Joshua Velesquez liable for the full jury award. But when asked to decide the percentage due from each party, the jury went back to the jury room and, after just five minutes, found DYFS 100 percent responsible.

DYFS' attorney, John North, suggested to jurors that Joshua Velesquez should be tagged for at least a portion of the award.

"Joshua obviously was very troubled and had a lot of problems but it is not like he is some kind of wild animal who acts on instinct," North told jurors. "Joshua was responsible for his own actions."

Jadel's family has already settled its lawsuits against Newark Beth Israel for \$4.5 million, according to court papers. Another \$3 million came from settlements with two radiological firms, two of Jadel's treating physicians and Overlook Hospital.

The \$7.5 million would be deducted from the current jury award should it stand.

In 2005, four boys who were found starving in a foster home in Camden County settled their case against DYFS for \$12.5 million before the case went to trial.

In that case, DYFS was accused of failing to properly monitor the Jackson boys while they went without proper nourishment and medical care for several years.

In her note to colleagues, Blake noted the reforms the department have undertaken since July 2009, which include reducing the workloads of caseworkers and improving training.

"No less important, we changed the culture so that our collective and individual focus is on serving the needs and ensuring the safety of New Jersey's children and families," Blake said.

North told jurors during the trial that caseworkers were cautious when wielding the "extraordinary power" of removing a child from his parents' home.

Neither Merchan, nor Joshua Velesquez, will be able to share in any of the jury award, according to Jadel's lawyers.

The jury did not find Merchan liable. Trial testimony revealed that she, too, had been abused by Velesquez.