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DATE January 30, 2003
TIME 7:00-10:00 AM
NETWORK NBC
PROGRAM Today

ACCOUNT NUMBER 63/7667 TX
AUDIENCE 5,980,670

SOLEDAD O'BRIEN, anchor:

Two years ago five-year-old Logan Marr was found dead in the basement of her foster home in Maine. When she was just two and a half, the state took Logan from her mother, even though there was no evidence of any kind of abuse. She'd been transferred to her third foster home where she died while under the care of a former caseworker from Maine's Department of Human Services. Tonight "Frontline" begins a two-part documentary--documentary on PBS called "Failure to Protect," which chronicles the story of Logan Marr and takes an in-depth look at the workings of a child welfare system. Rachel Dretzin is the producer of the series. Robin Whitney is with Maine's Department of Human Services.

And good morning to both of you.

Ms. ROBIN WHITNEY (Maine Department of Human Services): Good morning.

Ms. RACHEL DRETZIN (Producer, "Failure to Protect"): Good morning.

O'BRIEN: The story of this little girl, Logan Marr, is heartbreaking, and that is really what led you, Rachel, to start looking into Maine's Department of Human Services. Tell me a little bit about this little girl.

Ms. DRETZIN: Well, Logan was, as you can see, a beautiful, vivacious five-year-old child when she died. She was removed from her birth mother twice. Her birth mother was a teen-age--teen-age woman named Christy, who did not abuse Logan, but had all sorts of issues that the state found to be problematic. And so the state removed her. Put her in three different foster homes and finally placed her with a woman named Sally, who was a caseworker, former caseworker for their department, and who wanted to adopt a little girl. And it was in Sally's care that Logan began to have some really uncontrollable outbursts as a result of all of the trauma she'd been through. And during a--a very severe punishment for her outbursts, she died, tragically.

O'BRIEN: At what point--at one point, and we have a tape here, we hear Logan, in the presence of her mother and a caseworker, saying that her foster mother is hurting her. And I want to listen to this tape.

(Beginning of excerpt from "Failure to Protect")

Offscreen Voice: That Sally had hurt her.

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Miss LOGAN MARR: Mommy?

CHRISTY: What?

Miss MARR: Just so you know, you know Sally, my--my birth mom?

CHRISTY: No, I'm your birth mom. You mean your foster mom?

Miss MARR: Mm-hmm.

CHRISTY: Yeah.

Miss MARR: She did this to me, and I cried, and it hurts me.

Unidentified Visit Supervisor: What did she do to you?

(Logan squeezes her cheeks together to demonstrate)

CHRISTY: Oh, I'm very sorry.

Miss MARR: And she did it to my sister, too.

(End of excerpt from "Failure to Protect")

O'BRIEN: The caseworker is there when she said, 'She did this,' she shows it. She asked again, 'What did she do?' She displays what she did. Was that ever investigated?

Ms. DRETZIN: It wasn't, and it is one of the more egregious oversights in the case. The state is required to investigate any allegations of abuse in foster care by their own policy. But in this case, they--they didn't. Logan died within weeks of--of that allegation being made.

O'BRIEN: And I don't want to give away what happened. But she died essentially by being duct taped by her foster mother in a basement.

Ms. DRETZIN: She was duct taped. She was--she was put in a high chair in her foster mother's basement, and she was bound with duct tape, and she suffocated. And it was--it was because she was--she was very upset, and she was sort of raging, and her foster mother couldn't deal with her.

O'BRIEN: Robin, you were a caseworker for three years, and now you're a supervisor. Tell me a little bit about the kind of pressure you and your colleagues face?

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Ms. WHITNEY: Well, I think one pressure is that, you know, there's some clear-cut cases, but a lot of cases, you know, the work is very challenging, and there's not a very clear-cut yes, there's child abuse and neglect, or no, it's not child abuse and neglect. So there's a balancing act of trying to know, look at safety for a child, you know, in--in many different ways, not removing a child from the home with having to remove the child from the home, but that balance is very difficult.

O'BRIEN: There have been so many stories in the news lately about children who have been abused in foster care, who have died when they were under the su--supervision of the foster care system across the nation. When you hear these stories, do you think, as a caseworker, as someone who's familiar with the business, 'These are the exceptions, they are the one in a million cases'? Or are they not? Are they highlighting a system in turmoil?

Ms. WHITNEY: Well, I think any of those--I mean, I know, for--for us in Maine, we were, as caseworkers, we were all stunned when this happened. I mean, it was a terrible tragedy. And what has come out of that has been changes in our policy and our practice. We've done a lot of restructuring to--to make sure that this doesn't happen again. But I mean I've--I've been in--I've always lived in Maine all my life, and I can't remember another tragedy like this happening in Maine. So I think it is the exception.

O'BRIEN: You actually did a two-part documentary. In the second part, you focused on the caseworkers. Did you go in with a sense of what--what you thought you were going to see? And were you surprised?

Ms. DRETZIN: No, we did not really have a sense of what we were going to see. When we reported the Logan Marr story, we weren't able to talk to any of the caseworkers directly involved in that case. And so we've never really spent time with caseworkers before. We knew they were overwhelmed, that they had huge workloads and few resources. But we didn't really know what to expect. I think we were surprised at how ambiguous these cases are. You think about child abuse, and you imagine the kind of kids that are taken from their parents. There must be a handprint on their face, there must be black and blue marks all over them. More often than not, it's a very difficult call on the part of the caseworkers about whether this child's being sufficiently neglected in their home...

O'BRIEN: Let's watch...

Ms. DRETZIN: ...to merit removal.

O'BRIEN: Let's watch a clip. And this is actually a--a client where she's on the verge, frankly, of losing her children because her boyfriend has been accused of sexually abusing her daughter. And I--I want to watch a clip.

(Beginning of excerpt from "Failure to protect")

Ms. WHITNEY: Dan cannot have any contact with the kids, come to the house or call you on the telephone when the kids are there. But other than that, as far as you having contact with Dan, that's up to you.

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SHIRLEY: Mm-hmm.

Ms. WHITNEY: OK. My point is this, Shirley, is that I'm looking to see that you're going to protect your children.

SHIRLEY: Mm-hmm.

(End of clip from "Failure to Protect")

O'BRIEN: Robin, this is you talking to a woman who agreed to be on camera.

Ms. WHITNEY: Yes.

O'BRIEN: And--and--and I know you can talk specifically about sort of that moment in her process. But even more generally than that, when you see people like that, are you sympathetic to them? Are you disgusted? This is a woman, is she protecting her child? Her child says she was sexually abused by that man on the tape. What's--what's your feeling when you go in to try to sort out what next step you should take?

Ms. WHITNEY: I think one thing that as a caseworker, we try to engage with the client. I mean, because we're really looking for them to make some changes. I mean, we don't want--we don't want compliance from--from a--from a person, they're following something because it's a court order. We're really looking for, and I think what we find a lot in parents, is that they--they do care about their children, and they want to know how they can protect their children. Sometimes they may not know what the danger is to their children. So I think it is an effort on both of our parts to work together.

O'BRIEN: Rachel, I want to give you the last word. What do you want people to get out of this documentary?

Ms. DRETZIN: Well, I hope that the documentary offers people a window into one of the most, sort of, overlooked forces in government, which is the ability to remove children from their parents. And I think when we think about the kind of people who have their kids taken away, we imagine monsters. And I hope the documentaries give people a sense of how complex this is and--and that these are human beings and that we shouldn't--we shouldn't do it lightly.

O'BRIEN: Rachel and Robin, thanks for joining us this morning. It's an incredible documentary.

Ms. DRETZIN: Thank you.

O'BRIEN: I had a chance to look at both parts. It's really amazing.

You can watch the first installment of "Frontline"'s two-part series "Failure to Protect" tonight at 9 on most PBS stations. You want to check your local listings for that.

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