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THE DISTRICT

Fenty Proposes Looser Privacy Restrictions

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After Banita Jacks was arrested last year and charged with killing her four children, the District government concluded that its agencies had failed to follow up on warning signs at the family's troubled home in Southeast Washington.

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Now Mayor Adrian M. Fenty wants to relax the privacy restrictions he says have hindered efforts to help children such as the ones found slain in Jacks's home. Jacks's murder trial is to begin next week in D.C. Superior Court.

At a news conference yesterday in Anacostia, Fenty (D) proposed a law he said would be an important step toward stabilizing the Child and Family Services Agency. "While we're not all the way there, we're making some really solid progress," Fenty said outside an office of the city's welfare agency on Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue SE.

Sharing information has long been a problem for social service agencies. Fenty's predecessor, Anthony Williams, sought to address the issue with the Safe Passages program, which created a database to collect and organize information.

But the Fenty administration said the law it has proposed would go notably further by removing legal barriers and creating mechanisms to foster cooperation among departments that address the needs of children, such as CFSA, Mental Health, Human Services, Youth Rehabilitation Services and the D.C. Public Schools.

Judith Sandalow, executive director of the Children's Law Center, urged the mayor and the D.C. Council, already facing a budget crisis, to proceed slowly with any effort to relax privacy safeguards. "The confidentiality laws were passed over a long period of time after careful reflection," Sandalow said. "They shouldn't be taken away without a similar level of reflection."