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17 children left parentless after recent domestic-violence slayings

Ruth Owino was found bludgeoned to death by a hand weight, according to Orlando police; fiancé was charged with slaying

By [Bianca Prieto](#), Orlando Sentinel

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An Orange County judge on Tuesday will determine who should care for four children who are in limbo after a woman was bludgeoned to death by her fiancé last weekend.

It's likely that the children — products of a blended family — will remain with a close family friend who has been caring for them since 36-year-old Ruth Owino was killed early Sunday inside her home at the Island Club apartments on Kirkman Road. Nestor Habarugira is being held at the Orange County Jail on a first-degree murder charge.

The couple's children join a growing list of child survivors who have lost one or both parents to deadly domestic violence in Central Florida since March 1.

A total of 17 children have been affected by the recent spate of violence in Orange and Osceola counties. Of those, 12 were orphaned when both parents were killed in murder-suicides. The mothers of the remaining five children were killed and the father or step-father jailed, according to law enforcement records.

"It's unbelievable," said Carrie Hoepfner, Department of Children and Families spokeswoman. "When you hear a number like 17, and you think of what that means, that they may have forever lost their mom and their dad, it weighs pretty heavy on the heart."

On Monday, Judge Donald Grincewicz placed a no contact order between Habarugira and the children. He was not able to attend the short hearing because he was on suicide watch at the jail.

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Another hearing is scheduled for Tuesday morning.

"Four children are at the heart of this tragedy," Hoeppner said. "The most important thing is that the children are safe."

Owino, a native of Kenya, and Habarugira, of Burundi, joined their families a few years ago and were to be married. They argued about breaking up prior to her death, police said.

The combined family was made up of children from prior relationships and also from their union. Case workers are now trying to find the mother of Habarugira's 15-year-old son, and the father of two of Owino's children, ages 10 and 6. Both of those parents are believed to be living in Africa, according to DCF.

The youngest child, 2, belonged to both Owino and Habarugira.

The department is providing counseling to the children in the aftermath of the slaying, Hoeppner said.

Experts say giving children and caregivers counseling and other services is key to the healing process.

"It's unimaginable pain and confusion, and uncertainty about what is going to happen to them," said child trauma expert, Victoria Hummer of the University of South Florida. "There is also shame and guilt. They think, 'Is there something I could have done to stop this?' or 'Did my behavior cause this?'"

In the early stages it's important to get the children with people who they trust and feel safe with, Hummer said.

Through long-term group, family and individual therapy, the children will learn to deal with the emotions and overcome the trauma, experts said.

Often, when someone is killed in a domestic violence incident, it's usually not the first time violence has erupted, said Tara Hormell, of the Children's Home Society, in Winter Park. In those cases, children might be dealing with years of prior trauma from abuse and that compounds the trauma of the death, she said.

"Anytime that you have a death of a significant family member or someone important in your life, that is traumatic in and of itself," Hormell said. "Having people around them [afterward] is critical, but also seeking treatment. But it does take more than love and support."

bprieto@tribune.com or 407-420-5620.

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