

Dead Girl Abused, School Told State

By Martha Shirk
Of the Post-Dispatch Staff

St. Louis school officials told state child abuse investigators within the last year that they suspected that Palestina Isa was a victim of child abuse, police and school officials said Wednesday.

The 16-year-old girl, known as Tina, was stabbed to death early Monday. Her father, Zein Hassan Isa, 58, who admits stabbing her, has been arrested and charged with her death.

Officials of the Missouri Division of Family Services, which investigates child abuse allegations, refused Wednesday to confirm whether they had received complaints about Tina. Because of concerns about confidentiality, the division never reveals whether it has investigated a particular case, even when the child is dead.

But Charles Burgess, a spokesman for the St. Louis schools, said Wednesday that officials at Roosevelt High School had told him that they had notified the child abuse hot line that they suspected that Tina was being abused.

And Lt. Harry Hegger, a homicide detective who is investigating the girl's death, said that police conferred Wednesday with state abuse investigators about their investigation of the allegations.

Hegger said, "I know there were calls, but I don't know to what degree the state got involved."

Tina was an honor student at Roosevelt High School. Her principal, William Purdy, described her Wednesday as "a girl you'd be proud to have as your daughter."

Purdy refused to discuss what actions school officials had taken in Tina's case, except to say: "When we

see signs of physical or educational neglect, we call the hot line. We make frequent calls to the hot line. It is the policy of our school to report suspicions."

Tina's friends paint a portrait of a girl who was afraid of her parents and who felt caught between two cultures — her father's Moslem traditions and the American culture in which she had been reared.

Tina O'Malley and Jeff Kelley, who rented an apartment from the Isa family until four months ago, said that Tina Isa had spoken to them frequently about problems with her father.

"She said he was always beating on her," said O'Malley. "She frequently had bruises on her face. . . ."

Kelley said that the dead girl had told him that her father was upset with her because she had a black boyfriend and that he had arranged for her to marry a relative of her brother-in-law.

"She said her father told her she had disgraced the family," Kelley said. "She was 16, and she was chasing after her dreams. She didn't want an arranged marriage."

Kelley said that he had seen Tina's father beat her several times in the store the family operated below Kelley's apartment, at 4200 Shaw Boulevard. On one occasion last month, Kelley said police had been called to the store while Isa was beating his daughter.

Hegger said he could not discuss whether the police department had investigated previous reports of abuse.

Allegations from Tina's friends and schoolmates of prior abuse by her father led police to pursue their investigation of Isa. Isa was released Monday after the circuit attorney's office took warrants under advisement. A warrant charging him with first-degree murder was issued Tuesday, and he was rearrested. He was being held Wednesday on \$1 million bond.

Isa claims that he killed his daughter in self-defense after quarreling with her over money.

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