

a Cruz/Monterey

CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES

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Baby's death adds to agency's woes

By Paul Rogers
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As sheriff's deputies continued to search for answers surrounding the death of an 11-day-old boy at a Felton foster home, state officials announced Monday they have opened yet another investigation into Santa Cruz County's beleaguered child welfare system.

Auditor Bo Correa of the Department of Social Services will arrive from Sacramento on Wednesday.

Correa will open files and interview social workers familiar with the case of Cedric Blan, a baby taken from his parents at birth two weeks ago, given to "award-winning foster parents" and found dead, apparently of heat exhaustion, Friday night after being left unattended in a 1987 Ford van.

Correa is the investigator whose review of the Ruby Pointer child neglect case last

month led to a report sharply critical of Santa Cruz's Child Protective Services agency.

"The two cases could be purely coincidental," Social Services spokeswoman Kathleen Norris said. "But we'll be looking into that."

Friday's tragedy — the first accidental death of a foster care infant in Santa Cruz since the early '70s — occurred at a disastrous time for local social workers. Already under intense scrutiny in the wake of the highly publicized Pointer case, the group is reportedly suffering from dismal morale.

"They are fragile. They are really hurting bad," said Will Lightbourne, administrator of the Santa Cruz County Human Resources Agency.

Lightbourne held a meeting Monday morning with the entire Child Protective Services staff, allowing social workers to air their grief over the infant's death and prom-

ising to schedule sessions for them with professional counselors.

Unlike the Pointer case, however, Child Protective Services has borne little criticism so far for the decision to place the boy with Jim and Winona Sherrick.

The couple, described by friends as devastated, have been licensed foster parents since 1982, having cared for more than 350 children without incident at their home along Highway 9. Winona Sherrick had served in recent years as president of the Santa Cruz chapter of the California Foster Parents Association.

District Attorney Art Danner said Monday he has not decided whether to file charges in the case. No arrests have been made.

According to Danner, the Sherricks' 25-year-old daughter, Laura, was returning from running errands in Felton on Friday afternoon with the infant in her van.

She parked the vehicle, ran inside to answer the telephone and become preoccupied. When her mother returned home about 90 minutes later and suggested they feed the baby, they discovered he had been left in the van.

The temperature in Felton on Friday was 76 degrees. Police who impounded the family van have been unable to do temperature tests because Santa Cruz has been cool and foggy since the incident.

But, said sheriff's Lt. Dennis Smith: "The heat was a significant contributor." Coroner's deputies have not issued a death certificate.

Danner and Smith are reviewing medical records to see whether the boy might have died from some other ailment.

"Leaving the child in the van — that's clearly not good judgment," Danner said. "But whether it's criminal negligence, we're not sure yet."