

Child Protective Services

State joins infant probe

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FELTON — The death of an 11-day-old infant who died after being left in its foster parent's van has triggered a second state investigation of Child Protective Services in as many months.

The state Department of Social Services will send an investigator to Santa Cruz on Wednesday to review the case and evaluate whether social workers used proper judgment in placing Cedric Blan in the Felton emergency foster care home of Winona and Jim Sherrick, according to Kathleen Norris, spokeswoman for the state Department of Social Services.

The state investigation is rare — fewer than a dozen are done statewide each year — and

closely follows the probe of the agency's handling of the Ruby Pointer child neglect case, the results of which were released last week.

The Santa Cruz County Citizen's Grand Jury is investigating CPS, and a state audit of the department, originally to be done in November, will be mounted later this summer.

The county Board of Supervisors today will consider a request from Chairman Fred Keeley directing CPS to look into a child-advocate program operating in Santa Clara County. Keeley has also asked that results of investigations under way be given to the board by Oct. 8, when the supervisors are to consider recommendations for improvements in CPS operations.

"This tragic situation may well provide an

opportunity for improvements which will result in better child protection services," said Keeley.

Meanwhile, placement of foster children in the Sherricks' home was suspended Monday, and actions were initiated to temporarily suspend the Sherricks' foster care license, according to Janet Reed, director of the Child Protective Services.

Three other foster care children were removed from the Felton home Friday.

Sheriff's detectives pursued their investigation regarding the circumstances of the infant Blan's death.

Still unknown is why and how long the baby was left in the van.



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Please see INFANT — A16

The foster care home along Highway 9.

Infant death probe continues

Continued from Page A1

A key in whether to pursue criminal charges in the case will be how long the infant was in the van, said investigators.

Investigators said the baby and seven other children in the home may have been left in the care of the Sherricks' adult daughter, whose license to operate a foster care home separate from her parents is pending.

The baby was found dead Friday evening, after being left in the van for about 1½ hours, according to initial reports.

It appears the baby died after becoming overheated, according to Will Lightbourne, director of the county's Human Resource Agency which oversees CPS. An autopsy has been completed, but the coroner's report has not been released.

Reed said the baby was taken into protective custody shortly after birth. The mother and father both have histories of drug-related arrests, and both had recently been in jail. The mother, in custody on

parole violations, also has a record of prostitution, according to those involved in the case. Two of her other children are in foster care, said Reed.

"The baby was taken into care shortly after birth. It never went home. It never went with the mother," said Reed.

Ironically, infant Blan was to be placed in a foster home with an older sister, 8. Because the foster family was on vacation when the baby was born, the infant was placed temporarily in the Sherricks' home instead, Reed confirmed.

Tests were done at the baby's birth to determine whether it had been exposed to drugs, such as crack cocaine or heroin, as a fetus. Results of those tests are not yet available, said Reed.

The baby was placed in foster care because of the parents' incarceration rather than because of possible drug addiction, said Reed. The full-term, seven-plus pound baby was not considered medically fragile, she added.

According to Reed, the Sherricks are one of 10 families under contract with the county for emergency shelter care. For their service, they are paid a \$415 flat rate for each child placed in the home between 12 hours and 30 days, said Reed.

Winona Sherrick has been trained to care for medically-fragile children and is licensed to care for four foster children, Reed said. The family, with extra help, also is licensed as a family day care home for up to 12 children.

In addition to the four foster children, Reed said there were four other kids at the home at the time of Cedric's death — the Sherricks' teen-age son, two adopted children and a child under guardianship. There were no day care children there at the time.

Reed lauded the Sherricks' nine-year record as foster care providers who have taken care of difficult-to-place children, such as crack-addicted babies.

"They are true heroes," said Reed. "All of the foster parents are

the volunteer heroes of this community."

"She's really wonderful with children and loves all of them like they're her own," Bonnie LaVere, another foster parent, said of Winona Sherrick. "Everyone admires her. I just can't believe there weren't extenuating circumstances," said LaVere.

CPS has been under fire since June 19, when Santa Cruz police removed the three Pointer children, ages 2, 4, and 6, from their Santa Cruz townhouse, filthy and unable to speak. Neighbors charged they had repeatedly called social workers, but CPS took no action, despite Pointer's past history of child abuse and mental illness.

The case triggered a scathing indictment of CPS by the state Department of Social Services which charged the local agency failed to conduct mandated in-person evaluations and missed deadlines for assigning the case for follow-up work.