

✓ Child Protective Services Foster infant's death probed

By KATHY KREIGER
Sentinel staff writer

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SANTA CRUZ — The circumstances surrounding the death of an 11-day-old foster child Friday are still unclear as Sheriff's investigators try to determine how the child was left in a van parked outside a Felton foster home.

The baby, identified Saturday as Cedric Blan, died after being in a

van for about 1½ hours, according to sheriff's reports. He was taken to Dominican Hospital where he was pronounced dead.

Cause of death is not official, pending the results of an autopsy, but it appears the baby died after becoming overheated, according to Will Lightbourne, head of the county's Human Resources Agency.

Lightbourne said the death has

stunned Child Protective Services workers, who placed the child in the home.

"It's one of those horrible things," said Lightbourne. "Everything has been done by the books, and a terrible tragic accident happened. It's the sort of thing you live in dread of. The staff are devastated. We've never lost a kid in foster care before. People are speechless."

CPS, criticized in a state report for the way it handled the Ruby Pointer child-neglect case, may face investigation for the current case, according to Board of Supervisors Chairman Fred Keeley.

"Certainly after this most recent situation, I am interested — especially after the release of the state report — in seeing if there are ways to, number one, evaluate the performance of the department,

and number two, see if we can make improvements," Keeley said.

"I'm terribly saddened," said Keeley of Friday's events, "for the child, for the mother, for the foster parents and frankly, for CPS itself. It's a very tragic situation."

The infant had been taken from its parents either at birth or a few days after, Lightbourne said. The parents of the dead child have at least two other children in foster

care at other locations, he said. One is age 4 or 5, he said, and the other is "school age."

Citing confidentiality, Lightbourne would not release the names of the other children or the parents. He also would not say why or when the children were taken from their parents.

The baby's mother has been notified, said Sgt. Jim Gray of the

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Infant

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Sheriff's office.

Why the baby was placed in the car, and why it was left there are still unclear.

People at the scene gave conflicting stories, which Gray said is normal.

"You worry if it's too consistent," he said.

Criminal charges are a possibility, the Sheriff's Office said, but no recommendations will be made until investigations are completed.

Besides the sheriff's investigation into the death, CPS will also

investigate the foster home.

Monday, CPS will notify the state licensing agency of the death and will forward its files for review, which could take two weeks, said Lightbourne.

Foster mother Winona Sherrick declined to discuss the matter, on the advice of her attorney.

Tests on the van, and other physical evidence, were suspended Saturday because the weather turned cloudy, Gray said, interfering with efforts to reconstruct what happened.

Three other children in the foster parents' care were removed Friday night, Lightbourne said. The foster parents, Winona and Jim Sherrick, were licensed to care for up to four foster children, he said.

"It breaks your heart," said Lightbourne. "This family has been good. They've had more than a hundred children, and even adopted a couple of those."

In a 1989 Sentinel article on foster homes, Winona Sherrick cited her less-than-perfect childhood and her Christian beliefs as reasons she and her husband Jim decided to care for emergency foster children. The Sherricks had cared for more than 350 children at that time. Their household then consisted of two biological children, two adopted children, one child over whom they had guardianship, three emergency foster children

and two long-term foster children.

When the infant died, as many as seven children were living at the house, investigators said.

CPS has been under fire almost continually for the past six weeks.

On June 19, the case of Ruby Pointer ignited a firestorm of public opinion, when police removed three children, dirty and unable to speak, from Pointer. Two previous children had been taken from her when one was found nearly starved 10 years ago.

Child-neglect charges against Pointer were filed in June, amidst charges by neighbors and others that they had called CPS repeatedly to have the children removed.

Last week, Pointer was declared mentally incompetent to stand trial and will be sent to a state hospital for treatment.

The case triggered an investigation of the CPS department by the state Department of Social Services.

The report, released Thursday, was a scathing indictment of CPS.

The state Department of Social Services has contested CPS' claims that it was hampered by too large of a case load. The state agency said the local agency had a smaller case load compared to other areas.

A normal audit of the department by the state, scheduled for November, has been moved up as a result of the Pointer case.

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