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INVESTIGATED**



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Toddler dies after being left in vehicle

Autopsy being conducted to
determine if heat caused death

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Tribune-Herald staff writers

A 9-month-old girl died in a Waco hospital Tuesday after her mother left her in a minivan with the baby's 11-year-old sister for about 30 minutes while purchasing parts to fix the family's vehicle.

The baby had a congenital health problem, and medical examiners are performing an autopsy to determine if heat caused her death.

Justice of the Peace Kristi DeCluitt, who pronounced the girl dead at 1:44 p.m. Tuesday, said the infant had a core temperature of 107 degrees.

The mother left the children in the car about 12:20 p.m. Tuesday.

According to the National Weather Service, the temperature during the noon hour was 97 degrees.

"Whether the heat exacerbated a pre-existing condition, we don't know," DeCluitt said.

She said no one has been charged in the death. A spokesman for the Bellmead Police Department, which is investigating the incident, said the agency is waiting on the results of the autopsy before determining if any charges are appropriate.

Police Detective Haywood Sawyer said the mother has a Garland address. Investigators think she was in the Waco area to visit family members.

DeCluitt said the mother left the baby in the van with her 11-year-old sister for 20 to 30 minutes, while she shopped for car parts.

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BABY

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Upon returning, the mother drove the van to the parking lot of the Delta Inn on Interstate 35 in Bellmead, where she was meeting someone to help fix her vehicle.

Sawyer said the mother realized at that point her baby needed medical attention because the child was gasping for breath and someone dialed 9-1-1 just before 1 p.m.

Bellmead police, fire personnel and emergency medical technicians responded to the call. According to a police news release, the baby was unresponsive when they arrived.

An ambulance took the baby to Hillcrest Baptist Medical Center, where she was pronounced dead, Sawyer said.

DeCluitt said she doesn't know the exact nature of the baby's congenital health problem. Sawyer declined to elaborate on the girl's medical issues, except to say she had a heart condition, citing patient privacy laws.

"It's a baby, so they'll run every possible test they can, so it could be up to two months for the whole report," DeCluitt said.

Child Protective Services was called into the situation, but it was unclear late Wednesday if any actions were taken. Sawyer was unsure if the baby's sister was still in her mother's care.

Intentionally leaving a child younger than 7 years old in a vehicle for more

than five minutes is a Class C misdemeanor in Texas if the child is not accompanied by someone who is at least 14 years old.

Texas leads the nation in hyperthermia deaths of children in vehicles this year, according to a researcher at the department of geosciences at San Francisco State University who tracks the statistic.

Of the 18 children who have died in 2011, five have been in Texas.

"If it's just 86 degrees outside it can get up to 136 degrees inside a car within minutes," said Rachel Bettinger-Cooney, coordinator of Hillcrest Trauma Center's KidSafe program. "Even if it's not what we would consider really hot outside, it does get very hot in the car."

"With current temperatures around 100 degrees, it can get up around 200 degrees in the vehicle."

A young child's core temperature increases about three to five times faster than an adult's, which is why severe damage or death in children is more easily triggered by heat, Bettinger-Cooney said. If anyone sees a child unattended in a car, they should call 9-1-1 immediately, she said.

"You don't know how long a child has been left; you don't know if they're even really sleeping," said Bettinger-Cooney, who called 9-1-1 after seeing a toddler sleeping unattended in a car in Mexia last week.

"It is so important that people understand that this can happen in minutes," she said.