

Haylee's grandma busted for drug dealing

BY MARK CAUDILL
News Journal

MANSFIELD — Haylee Donathan's grandmother was arrested Tuesday for drug trafficking, a little more than a week before the 4-year-old's custody trial.

Mary Watson, 47, whose last known address was 479 W. Fourth St., was arrested at her place of employment by METRICH Enforcement Unit Detectives Perry Wheeler and Steve Blust.

"She didn't say anything," Wheeler said. "She asked if she could smoke a cigarette, that's it."

Haylee has been in foster care since late July, when she returned to Ohio from San Diego. She, her mother and her mother's sex offender boyfriend were the subjects of a month-long manhunt that drew national headlines.

Richland County Juvenile Court Judge Ron Spon, who granted custody to Children Services, has set a trial for Sept. 10. The judge must decide if Haylee is dependent, neglected or abused, as Children Services alleges. If the county agency prevails, Spon will decide whether or not Haylee remains in foster care.

Watson, Haylee's mother Candace Watson and at least one other relative have submitted claims seeking custody.

In June, Mary Watson was granted temporary emergency custody in domestic relations court. Spon awarded custody of Haylee to Children Services in July, saying juvenile court supersedes domestic relations court.

The Richland County agency had conferred with its San Diego counterparts.

Children Services filed a complaint against Haylee's mother, father and grandmother. Attorneys for Candace Watson, James Donathan and Mary Watson denied the claims.

When Children Services took custody of Haylee, officials requested there be no contact between Haylee and her grandmother. The two had been talking three or four times a day by phone. Spon did order supervised visits for Mary Watson.

"The concerns of the (San Diego) agency have basis in fact," Spon said at a July 23 hearing.

METRICH handled the investigation of Mary Watson. Commander Lt. Dino Sgambellone declined to say what type of drug the grandmother was allegedly selling and deferred further comment to Sheriff Steve Sheldon.

"We knew that there were issues," Sheldon said. "They (METRICH officials) thought it was something that should be brought out before (the custody trial), just to give the court the advantage of full knowledge of it."

Haylee's welfare has been a concern since late May when her mother allegedly ran off with convicted sex offender Robbi Potter. Potter, with convictions for two counts of sexual battery involving 7- and 9-year-old victims, reportedly walked away from the local Volunteers of America halfway house.

Candace Watson, 25, who has no listed address but lived in Crestline before the incident, is accused of complicity to escape. Authorities believe she provided Potter with transportation.

The manhunt ended June 23 with the couple's arrest in San Diego. Watson also was charged with harboring a federal fugitive.

Potter, 27, faces even more serious charges. Last month, he was indicted through the Adam Walsh Act on the recommendation of U.S. Marshals. The federal government can intervene when a sex offender crosses state lines.

In addition, Potter faces charges of escape and failure to notify of change of address, as well as probation and parole violations.

Donathan, 27, of 270 N. Main St., Apt. 14, also was charged with complicity to escape. Haylee's father is accused of procuring a telephone for Potter and acting as a lookout for the vehicle that was to help him escape.

Sheldon said he felt for Haylee's grandmother — to a degree.

"It's an unfortunate thing for Mary Watson, but obviously we still want what's best for Haylee," the sheriff said.

Originally published in the News Journal on September 2, 2009.