

Woman Faces Charge In Baby-Dumping Case - Sheriff: 'This Office Has Done All It Can'

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HARRISONBURG - Moments after the phone rang on a cold evening in late January, Capt. Barry Wittig of the Rockingham County Sheriff's Office knew he was in for a long night.

The report the sheriff's office had just received sounded awful, he said during a news conference on Friday.

Four days earlier a 19-year-old Bridgewater College student had given birth in a dorm bathroom and thrown the baby away in a trash bin, police allege.

The long night turned into a months-long effort to determine whether the baby had been born alive, authorities said Friday. And, what charges, if any, the mother should face.

On Friday, Sheriff Don Farley announced that Sarah Elisabeth Wolf, 20, of Baltimore, Md., will be charged with improperly disposing of a body, a misdemeanor.

Although she has not been arrested, Farley said he expects she will turn herself in to police next week.

The charge carries up to one year in jail and a maximum of \$2,500 fine. It doesn't preclude a more serious charge from being filed should investigators find new information, Farley said.

"We followed it to the very end... You have to go with what you have," Farley said of the case's resolution. "I assure you, from my point of view, this office has done all it can."

The Crime

The investigation began after Wolf's acquaintances went to RMH, anticipating that she'd made an appointment to deliver a baby. But they didn't find her there, police have said.

Police have not said exactly how the incident was reported to them but have said that their involvement started when friends realized something was wrong.

Since four winter days had passed, investigators had no hope of finding the child alive.

They searched the Rockingham County Landfill for two days but never found a body. This meant police couldn't perform an autopsy, so they focused on learning whether the baby was born dead or alive.

Wittig along with lead investigator Tim Spittler worked the case for months, police say.

"Did that child take one breath?" Farley said Friday. "If it did, that changes the entire complexity of the case... That was the question facing us the whole time."

The Investigation

Wittig said the investigation evolved into one of the most in-depth, difficult and frustrating tasks of his career.

An interview with Wolf at RMH, yielded "limited information," he said.

Police searched a trash bin at Bridgewater College and shut down the incinerator on James Madison University's campus, where some county trash is taken.

But soon, Wittig said, investigators learned that the trash bin's contents went to the landfill.

A request for cadaver dogs was denied, Wittig said, because nosing through a dump isn't safe for the animals. So for two days, police searched through trash.

Wittig said he's confident they looked in the right place, but that the trash was so destroyed by moving equipment that finding the infant's body wasn't possible.

He also said police conducted numerous searches and interviewed people who knew about Wolf's pregnancy, Wittig said.

Farley confirmed that the multi-jurisdictional grand jury, which has the power to subpoena witnesses and compel them to testify, also investigated the case.

"Every tool we had afforded to us, we used," he said.

In the end, the evidence gathered supported the misdemeanor charge, police say.

Investigators did learn who fathered the child, Farley said, but he would not release the name.

An "Unfortunate Situation"

Bridgewater College released a statement Friday calling the case "a very serious and unfortunate situation" that upset students and faculty. The school did not release a statement before Friday because campus officials did not want to interfere with an ongoing investigation, the statement said. It went on to say that college officials cooperated fully with investigators.

The statement also refers to Wolf as a "former student."

"Our thoughts and prayers continue to go out to this young woman and her family during this stressful time," the statement says.

John Holloran, a Harrisonburg defense attorney, said Friday that he is representing Wolf. But he added that he has not yet gone over the evidence with her, and therefore does not know how the defense will proceed.

"She's been back with her parents and [is] working through the emotional trauma that comes out of a situation like this," Holloran said. She's "trying to get her life back on track."

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