D.C. police launch criminal investigation into death of 2-year-old

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Washington Post Staff Writers
Friday, March 12, 2010; B06

D.C. police have opened a criminal investigation into the death of a 2-year-old girl who was not immediately taken to the hospital by emergency responders.

The investigation will be handled by the homicide division's special victims unit, which looks into the death of any child younger than 13.

Police Chief Cathy L. Lanier said investigators would "determine if there's any potential criminal conduct, criminal negligence or anything else that may have resulted in the death of the child."

Lanier spoke at a news conference at police headquarters Thursday, along with Mayor Adrian M. Fenty (D) and D.C. Fire Chief Dennis L. Rubin.

Emergency responders went to the 800 block of Southern Avenue SE shortly before 5 a.m. Feb 10 after a report of a child who was having difficulty breathing. A paramedic firefighter unit was first at the scene, and an ambulance arrived two minutes later. The child was evaluated but not taken to a hospital.

About nine hours later, after a 911 call from the same address, the child was taken to Children's National Medical Center. She died the next day. A social worker who learned about the earlier visit to the house alerted the fire department, which conducted an internal review. The department placed one emergency medical technician and one paramedic on "non-contact" duty, said spokesman Pete Piringer.

"We have pretty strict guidelines and protocols" for the handling of distress calls, Piringer said, "and it appears as if they were not followed."

After the review, he said, the EMT was returned to duty. But the paramedic is being kept on non-contact duty, and her conduct in the incident is being referred to the police department. As a paramedic, with more emergency medical training than the EMT, she was "the lead"
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responder in the incident, Piringer said.

D.C. Attorney General Peter Nickles said, "The questions surrounding the decision not to transport that little girl have become more serious."

But Kenneth Lyons, president of AFGE Local 3721, which represents about 130 civilian paramedics, including the woman who remains on leave, said it is unclear why officials are referring the case to the police.

"The agency is not held to a standard of accountability, and so they will continue to find scapegoats to somehow have the public believe that they've either done a good job or a credible job," Lyons said.