



## OFFICE OF THE SAINT LOUIS COUNTY ATTORNEY

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### NEWS RELEASE

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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:**

### **Murder charge brought in death of 2-year-old girl**

A Hibbing man is accused of second-degree murder for the malicious punishment of his former girlfriend's 2-year-old daughter which resulted in the girl's death in 2012.

In a complaint filed by the St. Louis County Attorney's Office, Russell Shannon Johnson, 26, is charged with murder in the second degree for causing the death of a child while committing a felony offense, malicious punishment of a child by a parent, legal guardian or caretaker.

The murder charge was brought against Johnson in State District Court in Virginia on Friday after a more than two-year investigation into the March 22, 2012, death of Caroline Shenze Marie Medicine-Chavez.

An autopsy was performed that day by St. Louis County Medical Examiner Dr. Thomas Uncini with law enforcement officers and Assistant St. Louis County Attorneys Michelle Anderson and Leah Stauber in attendance. Anderson will prosecute the case.

Uncini opined in his autopsy report that the child died from "closed head trauma." He specifically noted the presence on the girl of skin and subcutaneous contusions, which varied in age, a subdural hematoma which occurred around the time of her collapse, and the presence of a retinal hemorrhage in her left eye. She also had pneumonia. The manner of her death remained under investigation. According to the autopsy report, Caroline Medicine-Chavez was born on Sept. 12, 2009, and died at 1:24 a.m. on March 22, 2012.

Initial police reports indicated that officers were called to a Virginia residence on a report of a 2-year-old girl who was unresponsive at 9:11 a.m. on March 21, 2012. An officer found the girl gasping for air in an upstairs bedroom. The girl was first taken to a Virginia hospital and then transported to a Duluth hospital where she was pronounced dead.

"Caroline's death is a tremendous tragedy and our condolences go out to all those who cared about her," St. Louis County Attorney Mark Rubin said. "This charge is the result of a tireless investigation by the Virginia Police Department, the Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension and the St. Louis County Medical Examiner, Dr. Thomas Uncini."

Officers initially spoke with Johnson at the hospital. The defendant claimed he was in the girl's bedroom when he asked her to bring him a diaper from the closet area just outside the bedroom. He said that as she walked back into the room she walked around a fan and appeared to lose her balance. He said she slithered down a wall resulting in her hitting the back of her head on the wall as she fell to the floor.

Johnson said he immediately picked her up and placed her face up on an air mattress. He said she was breathing, but was not responsive. He said he began rubbing her stomach and asking if she was alright. He estimated that about three minutes had passed when his brother came into the house. He said he didn't have a phone in the house so his brother ran to his nearby residence and called 911.

The girl's mother told police that her daughter needed to be taken to the Virginia Regional Medical Center by ambulance less than three weeks earlier on March 3. She said she and Johnson were doing dishes when the defendant went upstairs to get the girl for breakfast. After a few minutes, she said he came back downstairs and told her that the girl had fallen, hit her head and was unconscious. She was treated and released from the hospital. The mother told officers that there was one other occasion that December when she returned home from work and her daughter had a bump on her head. In that instance, she said that Johnson told her that the girl fell off a table.

A break in the case occurred a little more than a month ago when a woman told investigators of a conversation she said she had with Johnson. She said that the defendant told her he had stayed up late the night before the girl's death. He said he was "cranky," and the girl was a "really whiny kid." He said the girl got into his face and he pushed her and she flew into a wall and hit her head. He said she was unresponsive. The witness said Johnson cried as he related the story and told her how much it was weighing on his mind. The woman said Johnson and his brother threatened her not to tell law enforcement what she knew, but she said she had just received a nursing license and believed she was mandated to report the information.

Another witness told investigators in July that he heard the defendant and his brother talk about the girl's death and how they believed if anybody found out they were "all going down for it." Parts of that conversation were recorded by the witness and turned over to Virginia police.

The medical examiner was provided investigative reports and reviewed the interviews and transcripts provided by the witnesses. He also reviewed an opinion from a child abuse expert, who assisted in the investigation. Based on the investigative record, the medical examiner determined that the manner of death was homicide.

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