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NEWS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Duluth man pleads guilty to murdering daughter

The father of a 13-month-old girl admitted Monday that he caused his daughter's death by suffocation.

Christopher Dennis Peterson, 30, pleaded guilty in State District Court to second-degree murder with the understanding that he will receive a 40-year prison sentence -- the statutory maximum -- in connection with the July 5 death of his daughter Layna.

The child's mother found her unresponsive shortly before noon on July 6 and called 911. The child was dead when police arrived.

Peterson provided a statement to Duluth police on July 28 in which he admitted he would frequently become frustrated with his daughter's crying and to stop her from fussing he would suffocate her by placing his hand over her mouth and pinching her nostrils closed. The defendant said he did not intend for his daughter to die. He told investigators that when he did it to the girl in the past, she always resumed breathing.

"Today is all about justice for Layna," said Assistant St. Louis County Attorney Jessica Fralich, who prosecuted the case. "Mr. Peterson's plea afforded Layna's family the ability to hear from him directly about the heinous crime that he committed. The County Attorney's Office is hopeful that this will in some way allow the family to begin the long road of healing from this tragedy. It is in large part due to the tremendous work of the officers and investigators of the Duluth Police Department that this case resolved quickly and in a manner supported by Layna's family."

The police investigation revealed that the child didn't have any reported medical issues and the St. Louis County Medical Examiner's Office ruled out any natural cause of death. The death was ruled a homicide by suffocation.

Fralich called it another sad example of domestic violence and violence against children.

Sixth Judicial District Judge Eric Hylden accepted the guilty plea and ordered a pre-sentence investigation of Peterson's background. Sentencing will be on Nov. 12.

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