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By Quincy C. Collins

There's help for hiring baby sitters

PASCAGOULA - With the arrest last week of a Jackson County woman charged with killing a 2-month-old infant, South Mississippi parents may be wondering how to pick a safe and reliable baby sitter.

Experts say finding a good baby sitter can be difficult without a wide network of family and friends to provide leads and references. And in an area like South Mississippi, where many families relocate because of careers in the military, gambling or shipbuilding industries, hiring good baby sitters may take professional help.

On Wednesday, Amy Wilkerson, a 29-year-old baby sitter from the St. Martin/Latimer community, was charged with the capital murder of an infant. The baby, Tristan Michael Chinn, allegedly died of shaken baby syndrome. Wilkerson is being held in the Jackson County Adult Detention Center without bond.

Besides word-of-mouth references, parents can turn to the Internet and local law enforcement to help learn the background of a potential sitter.

In Harrison County, for instance, the Sheriff's Department will run a background check on a potential baby sitter, although the service is not offered by all law enforcement agencies.

What parents need to do is send the person to the Sheriff's Department with a note saying they are being considered for employment.

Harrison County Sheriff's Capt. Ron Pullen said the note should include the potential sitter's name, date of birth and social security number. The potential sitter must have proper I.D. for the background check. Once the check is completed, the record clerk stamps the form to indicate if a criminal record was found within their department. Privacy laws prevent law enforcement agencies from disclosing the type of criminal offense.

"It would be up to the employee to tell the employer what it was all about," said Harrison County Sheriff's Capt. Ron Pullen.

Pullen also recommends parents ask for references and check the sex offenders' registration lists on the Harrison County Sheriff's Department and the Mississippi Department of Public Safety's Web sites.

"We don't see a lot (of background checks) for baby sitters, but we do a lot of checks and fingerprinting for daycare centers," Pullen said.

In Gulfport and Pascagoula, the U.S. Navy through Fleet and Family Services has developed a program to train daycare providers to care for children at home.

And Internet baby-sitting matching services such as Sittercity.com are attempting to meet the demands of parents.

Sittercity.com, a Chicago-based company, was launched in 2001 with 50,000 baby sitters in its network in 20 major U.S. cities. Today, the company includes 100,000 baby sitters and is on the cusp of going national, said Becca Keaty, marketing director for the company.

For a registration fee and monthly maintenance fee, parents can click and scroll through online catalogs of baby sitters in their zip codes and beyond. Though Sittercity.com offers links parents to other companies that provide background checks, parents and babysitters are responsible for screening and background checks.

"Be prepared," Keaty said. "Don't be afraid to ask a lot questions and always ask for references. If a baby sitter does not have references, that's a bad sign."

Background statistics

Temporary childcare providers cause less than 1 percent of the nation's incidents of child abuse.

The majority of child-abuse perpetrators are parents, according to U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Children's Bureau's 2003 report on child maltreatment.

According to the study, 79.7 percent of child-abuse perpetrators were parents and .8 percent of perpetrators were child daycare providers, including daycare center staff member, a family daycare provider, or a babysitter.

Tips for screening

- Take the time to check all references. If a sitter doesn't have references, that's a bad sign.
- Conduct an interview.
- Observe each candidate interacting with your child.
- If you contract with an agency, determine if they check criminal records.
- Heed your instincts.

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