

State may join drowning inquiry

Preliminary findings point to an accident

By Angela Franzer and Erica Solvig

The Desert Sun

DESERT HOT SPRINGS - At least two state agencies said Friday they are reviewing their records to determine if they have the authority to investigate the death of a 5-year-old physically disabled girl who died a day after she was found submerged in a pool where she'd been undergoing therapy.

The girl, who died Thursday night, was found Wednesday afternoon at the bottom of an indoor hydrotherapy pool at Angel View Crippled Children's Foundation in Desert Hot Springs.

Officials believe she was submerged for about a minute.

She was revived and hospitalized in critical condition at Loma Linda University Medical Center's Children's Hospital until her death, as reported on mydesert.com.

A criminal investigation is under way, according to Desert Hot Springs police.

Preliminary results point to an accident that did not involve Angel View employees, police said.

The girl, whose name is being withheld at her family's request, was a client with the United Cerebral Palsy Dennis James Center in Cathedral City for more than a year, Executive Director Jeff Snyder said.

"This is a horrible accident," Snyder said Friday. "Nothing like this has ever happened before. I've worked with disabilities for 19 years - not always in the desert - and I've never seen anything like this.

"Our organization is absolutely devastated and heartbroken."

Officials with the state's Developmental Services and Public Health departments are aware and checking their records to see if there are any ties to either agency or the child that would give them authority here, public health spokesman Ken August said.

Initial research shows that United Cerebral Palsy is a private group not licensed through the state's public health department.

Angel View's Desert Hot Springs center and its pool used to be licensed with the public health department. But that license ended about 10 years ago, when clients stopped living there, August said.

"We do regulate intermediate care facilities for the developmentally disabled," August said. "This child who drowned is not, as far as we know, a client or resident at a developmentally disabled facility. She lives with her parents."

Officials are conducting more research, August said. If a connection is made, the state could step in and investigate.

Supervisors on paid leave

Three children and three supervisors were present in the pool when the near-drowning happened Wednesday, Snyder said.

The staff members have been placed on paid administrative leave.

Emergency personnel were called to the Angel View facility, 12-379 Miracle Hill Road, about 4:37 p.m. They arrived three minutes later, Desert Hot Springs police Cmdr. Ed Smith said at the time of the incident.

Upon entering, they found that adults had already gotten the girl out of the pool and were trying to revive her. Police took over, administering CPR until paramedics arrived.

The girl, in critical but stable condition, was taken to Desert Regional Medical Center and later transferred to Loma Linda.

The pool inside the Miracle Hill facility is often used for therapy sessions.

Officials from United Cerebral Palsy in Washington D.C. - the parent organization that provides funding for the Cathedral City branch and nearly 100 offices in the United States, Australia and Canada - said the incident was accidental.

"In our field we're known for our integrity and safety, so this is a very large exception," said Elizabeth Reitz, communications specialist for the organization.

"Across the board our No. 1 priority is safety. Our heartfelt apologies go out to the family."

"We're in the initial stages of conducting our own investigation," Snyder said. "We want to find out exactly what happened and we are doing everything in our power to figure that out."

All three staff members had up-to-date training in first aid, CPR and water rescue, and the girl was wearing a flotation device, Snyder said.

The organization is also reviewing its safety protocols, as a result of this incident.

San Diego aquatic specialist Alison Osinski said that if a pool has proper supervision, a drowning should not occur.

"Any 5-year-old that's a non-swimmer needs additional supervision," Osinski said. "Having trained staff and emergency action plans - that should be in any pool."

Snyder said a memorial will be planned.

"This little girl was very precious to us," he said. "It will be very important we find some way to remember her."

