

Child Neglect Death Nets Parents 20, 26 Years

By Scott E. Williams

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TEXAS CITY - The parents whose neglect killed their child, crippled by cerebral palsy, have agreed to guilty pleas that will send both to prison.

A grand jury in June 2006 indicted Veronica Vasquez, 39, and husband Jorge Vasquez, 42, in the death of their daughter the previous month.

Under the plea agreement, both pleaded guilty to injury to a child. Veronica Vasquez agreed to a 26-year prison term, while Jorge Vasquez accepted a 20-year term.

Bethany Vasquez, 11, died in the family's apartment on May 23, 2006. Veronica Vasquez called 911, saying her daughter had stopped breathing.

Officials charged that neglect by Bethany's parents ensured the child's death.

At the time of her death, the girl weighed 32 pounds. The average weight of an 11-year-old child is about 85 pounds, according to a report from the U.S. Department of Health.

The child suffered from cerebral palsy, brought on by complications during her birth.

As part of a legal settlement between her parents and the University of Texas Medical Branch hospital where she was born, Bethany would receive free health care for life.

The hospital system even offered free transportation between her house and the hospital.

However, Bethany did not visit a doctor in the last two years of her life.

Attorney Roberto Torres, who represented Veronica Vasquez, said his client

could not handle the pressure of having a child who was so ill.

"She got overwhelmed emotionally," Torres said. "It just wore on her."

Defense attorney Greg Russell represented Jorge Vasquez.

He and Torres both said the evidence of neglect was so horrific that they could not, in good conscience, advise their respective clients to take the cases to trial.

"They had a duty to take care of that child, and they didn't," Russell said. "That's really the bottom line."

Because their conduct caused Bethany's death, the charges against the couple carried possible prison terms of five to 99 years.

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