

Teen who abandoned baby avoids jail time

An Orange County judge sent her to a group home for leaving her newborn inside a hotel parking garage.

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A 15-year-old girl who abandoned her newborn baby in an Orlando hotel parking garage was sent to a group home for girls on Wednesday.

In July, the baby spent about 19 hours inside a laundry bag in the garage of the Sheraton's Four Point hotel before construction workers found him unharmed, sandwiched between two paint buckets.

The girl, who was visiting from Texas, later was arrested because it appeared she might have left the baby to die, prosecutors said. She told police, that she thought the baby would be found quickly because of all the workers around the area, said Orlando police Detective Jonathan O'Hern.

She is sorry her poor judgment put the child at risk and has signed papers allowing her son to be adopted, said her lawyer, Assistant Public Defender Mercedes Leon-Durham.

Leon-Durham said the girl, who had concealed her pregnancy from her mother, panicked upon giving birth in her hotel bathroom. The mother was out of the room during the birth and apparently didn't know what had taken place, authorities said. Police said the girl was heavysset and had worn loose clothing.

The girl's lawyer described her as an honors student in a special Texas school, someone who had not been in trouble before. She felt under pressure to please her mother because her brother had caused trouble, Leon-Durham said.

"Now that she comprehends what she did, she can't believe she did something like that," the lawyer said. "We are all adults and mature, rational, educated people. We have to put ourselves in her position. How would a 15-year-old sheltered girl respond to a traumatic event? I don't think she was thinking. She just reacted."

The girl pleaded no contest to attempted manslaughter and child neglect.

Orange County Circuit Judge Bob Evans also put the girl on probation until she is 19 and ordered her to speak to five school classes about her experience. At the group home, she will get schooling and counseling. The program usually lasts between four and six months.

Prosecutor Royellen Wehrle insisted the girl serve some time in a rehabilitation program to learn some consequences for her decision.

Just days before the baby was found, a state law went into effect allowing mothers to drop off newborns within three days after birth at a hospital or fire station. The law was enacted earlier this year.

But Leon-Durham said her client didn't know about the law and would not have had transportation to a station or hospital anyway.