Police: Couple arrested after leaving children in car while gambling

By Mark Walker and Danielle Ferguson *9:39 a.m. CDT July 9, 2014*

(Photo: Elisha Page / Argus Leader)

A Dell Rapids couple left a baby and two young girls in a car unattended while they gambled at a Sioux Falls casino early Tuesday, police said.

Nathan Dale Ostermeier, 29, and Betsy Rae Hansen, 26, each was charged with three counts of abuse or neglect of a minor.

Sioux Falls police received a call about 1 a.m. Tuesday from someone who reported seeing kids alone in a vehicle outside the Deuces Casino at 317 N. West Ave.

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The caller told police a couple had been taking turns watching the kids while gambling for about two hours, but eventually left the girls, ages 5 and 7, along with an 8-month-old baby, alone in the vehicle, police spokesman Sam Clemens said.

The witness guessed the girls had been alone about 30 minutes before he called police. Officers found the 5-year-old girl crying and screaming while the baby and older girl slept, Clemens said.

Janette Fennell, founder and president of the advocacy group KidsAndCars.org, said it isn't the first time she's heard about kids being left in a car outside a casino.

"Some kids have died in a car while their parents gambled. You know when you go into a casino, kids aren't allowed. (Parents) more knowingly do it. It's very reckless and certainly has something to do with a gambling addiction," Fennell said.

Clemens said it was fortunate that the incident happened at night when heat was not a risk to the girls, who were taken into care by the Division of Child Protection Services.

South Dakota Department of Social Services spokeswoman Kristin
Kellar said when children are found in unsafe situations, law enforcement first looks to place the children with relatives.

If relatives are not an option, law enforcement may seek emergency custody from the courts. Child Protective Services would then look for a foster care placement while continuing to look for relatives, she said.

Ostermeier also was charged with possession of a controlled substance and possession of drug paraphernalia after officers found methamphetamine in his pants pocket. Police suspect the couple had been using methamphetamine, Clemens said.

Ostermeier and Hansen appeared in court Tuesday.

Judge Natalie Damgaard set bond at $1,000 for Hansen and at $2,500 for Ostermeier.

Amanda Eden, a deputy state's attorney for Minnehaha County, told Damgaard that when being interviewed by police, Ostermeier and Hansen "seemed like they care more about gambling than they did the children."

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