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Woman charged in unborn baby's death

By Tom Smith,
Senior Staff Writer

FLORENCE A local woman has been arrested after she was accused of killing her unborn child by cutting the umbilical cord, authorities said Monday.

Jennifer Darlene Johnson, 30, of 1796 Lauderdale 7, Florence, has been charged with manslaughter, authorities said.

Manslaughter is a Class B felony, which is punishable by two to 20 years if convicted.

Florence police detective Capt. Ron Tyler said Johnson was seven months into her pregnancy when she was taken to Helen Keller Hospital in Sheffield on Friday night, where her baby was delivered. Tyler said the baby was dead at birth.

"She said her water broke sometime Friday morning and then she started experiencing pain and bleeding and was taken to Helen Keller Hospital," Tyler said.

He said medical personnel at Keller Hospital, during the course of the baby's delivery, discovered the umbilical cord had been "severed while still inside the mother's uterus."

"Investigators believe the evidence demonstrates that the death of the infant is directly related to the intentional severing of the umbilical cord," Tyler said.

Police say it is believed the cord was severed while Johnson was at her boyfriend's house at Cherry Hill Homes in Florence. Officials said the boyfriend drove Johnson to the hospital after recognizing something was wrong with her.

Detective Kevin Jackson, who along with detective Jerry Pearson conducted the investigation, said the baby died late Friday night and that the police were notified Saturday morning after medical personnel determined the umbilical cord had been cut.

Jackson said Johnson was released from the hospital Sunday but was taken into custody by Florence police a short time later on outstanding traffic tickets. She was held in the Lauderdale County Detention Center until Monday, when the manslaughter charge was issued.

Lauderdale County District Attorney Chris Connolly said his investigators worked throughout the weekend

with the police department on the case.

He said the case could be presented to a grand jury session later this year.

"Certainly, the events surrounding this case are highly unusual," Tyler said. "Though under normal circumstances, the members of our police department would be sensitive to the needs of a mother who recently lost her baby.

"But, our investigators simply could not ignore or overlook the evidence in this case, and the decision was made to charge the infant's mother with manslaughter."

Investigators said several pieces of evidence, which are believed to have been connected with the incident, have been collected and will be turned over to the Alabama Department of Forensic Sciences for examination.

Johnson was in the Lauderdale County Detention Center on Monday on bail totaling \$50,000.

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