

Aliyah Branum

2 Years Old

BORN October 25, 2010

DIED April 26, 2013

COUNTY Citrus

CAUSE OF DEATH Brain hemorrhage

MANNER OF DEATH Homicide

HER STORY

By the spring of 2013, there was mounting evidence that 2-year-old Aliyah Branum was in danger: Her mother, Chelsea Huggett, suffered from a chemical imbalance — a vestige, she said, of her service in the military — that left her explosively angry, and she spoke openly of her inability to cope with a needy child.

Aliyah had first come to DCF's attention in June 2012, when the agency "screened out" — deemed unworthy of response — two calls to the abuse hotline saying that the girl and her mother were living in a hot storage shed. Another report said that the family was homeless.

On Aug. 8, 2012, the agency received information that Aliyah was too skinny and that she was suffering from a "horrible" diaper rash because her mother's boyfriend, Jason Ruane, with whom the child was sometimes left, refused to change her diapers. "Aliyah's legs were bleeding due to the rash," a report said. It was also reported to DCF that Ruane had threatened to kill Aliyah's mother with a box cutter, and was involuntarily committed, according to accounts in the Branum family file.

When Aliyah cried at a Veteran's Administration office building, the report said, Huggett put a blanket over her mouth and smacked her "really hard" on her

legs. She sustained finger-shaped welt marks as a result. DCF was told Huggett had tried to smother the girl, an allegation she denied.

Huggett acknowledged that she had severe anger issues.

In the reports DCF did look into, the agency discounted the physical abuse allegations, though the state's Child Protection Team concluded that Aliyah was indeed being beaten. A DCF investigator asked Huggett to sign a safety plan promising not to use excessive corporal punishment, and Huggett was referred to local programs for hands-on parenting advice.

After Aliyah died, Huggett blamed Ruane, telling police officers that he had killed the child by spraying her with bug repellent. Huggett later admitted that she had been responsible, and had shaken her baby violently because "she would not stop whining."

Huggett said she had covered the little girl's mouth with her hand "to muffle her cries," and then shook her relentlessly, a report of the incident said. Finally, in the middle of the night, Huggett said, she slammed her baby's head into a wall and head-butted her, fracturing the toddler's skull. A police report said Aliyah had bruising to her forehead, cheeks, lips, shoulders, back and behind her ears.

Huggett, who was eight months pregnant at the time, was charged with first-degree murder and aggravated child abuse. She pleaded guilty to the killing earlier this year.