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State to Seek Death Penalty Against Stephan Sterns

OSCEOLA COUNTY, Fla. – The Ninth Judicial Circuit State Attorney’s Office has filed a Notice of Intent to Seek the Death Penalty in the First Degree Murder case against Stephan Sterns for the murder of 13-year-old Madeline Soto.

Madeline Soto was reported missing on February 26 by her mother. During the investigation into Soto’s disappearance, law enforcement found several disturbing pictures and videos on Sterns’ phone. He was arrested on 60 charges including Capital Sexual Battery, Lewd or Lascivious Molestation and Unlawful Possession of Materials Depicting Sexual Performance by a Child. Soto’s body was found in a wooded area less than a week after she was reported missing. In April, a grand jury indicted Sterns on First Degree murder in her homicide.

The decision to seek the death penalty in the homicide case is based on several aggravating factors the State intends to prove including:

- The capital felony being committed while the defendant was engaged in the commission of, or an attempt to commit, aggravated child abuse.
- The victim being particularly vulnerable because the defendant stood in a position of familial or custodial authority over the victim.
- The capital felony was especially heinous, atrocious or cruel.
- The defendant was previously convicted of another capital felony or a felony involving the use or threat of violence to the person. (The current sex charges against Sterns will serve as priors if he is convicted.)

Please check the Osceola County Clerk of Courts website for updates on the defendant’s future court appearances.

Our office acknowledges the public interest surrounding this case. However, we cannot provide further comment to protect the integrity of the case.

Charges are merely an allegation and all defendants are presumed innocent until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt in a court of law.

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