

Chester County District Attorney's Office

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NEWS RELEASE

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MOM ARRESTED IN VIRGINIA FOR KIDNAPPING 6-YEAR-OLD CHILD

The DAO and Downingtown Police announce the arrest of Venessa Gutshall, 37, for the kidnapping of her 6-year-old daughter at East Ward Elementary School in Downingtown on Oct. 25, 2022. The defendant and child were located in Fairfax, VA, after a traffic stop. The child is safe and appears to be unharmed. The defendant is charged with kidnapping of a minor, unlawful restraint of a minor, endangering the welfare of children, and related charges. She is awaiting extradition back to Chester County.

DA Deb Ryan said, "Local, county, and federal law enforcement worked around the clock and never gave up hope of finding this little girl. She is safe tonight because of the efforts of Downingtown Police, the FBI, Chester County Detectives, Fairfax (VA) County Police, and law enforcement from Dauphin, York, and Lancaster counties. We are grateful to the community for their tips and support. This was a successful team effort because of our collaboration, and I thank them all for saving this young victim's life."

Downingtown Police Chief Howard Holland stated, "We are extremely grateful to all the assisting law enforcement agencies. Due to their help and dedicated efforts, we were able to locate Zoe quickly and protect her from any further harm. Today was a very good day."

The allegations in the complaint are the following¹:

On Oct. 25, an Amber Alert was issued for the abduction of a child who was last seen at East Ward Elementary School, 435 Washington Ave., Downingtown. The child was at that location for a court-ordered, non-school-related supervised visit with the defendant, her biological mother. The defendant did not have custody rights to the child and was only permitted to see the child during supervised visits. The defendant was homeless then, and there were concerns about her ability to keep the child safe.

The supervisor of the visit, who worked as a contractor for Chester County Children, Youth & Family (CYF), reported to police that the mother fled with the child in a gray 2016 Volkswagen Jetta in direct violation of a court order.

The defendant was seen later that day at the Rivertowne Restaurant & Bar in Wrightsville, PA, about an hour west of Downingtown near York, without the child. An Amber Alert was issued by Pennsylvania State Police soon after.

The defendant was arrested by Fairfax County Police in Mclean, VA, on Oct 27 at approximately 11:30 a.m. after police observed a stolen Virginia license plate on the same vehicle in which she fled with the child. Law enforcement determined that another license plate had been affixed to the car to conceal the child.

Initially, when police stopped the vehicle, no one else was seen inside. Several minutes later, they found the child hidden under blankets in the back seat. The defendant, child, and vehicle were transported to the Mclean District Station of the Fairfax County PD. The child appeared unharmed, but she will undergo a medical examination soon.

¹ A defendant is presumed innocent until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt.

CYF is currently en route with the child's foster parents to bring her back to Chester County. The defendant will be arraigned in VA and extradited back to Chester County as soon as possible.

Downingtown Police and Chester County Detectives are investigating. DDA Erin O'Brien is the assigned prosecutor.

If you have any information about this case, call Downingtown Police at 610-269-0263.

Approved for release by Deborah Ryan, District Attorney