Visitation schedule set in Watkins case (originally published 3-8-12)

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Dale and Penny Watkins have a visitation schedule for their four-year old granddaughter Sidney, whom they have been unable to see since 2010. Cass County Circuit Judge denied a request from Sidney's mother. Jennifer Watkins, to delay the visitation hearing for time to find a lawyer. Hardwick had already allowed one postponement in December and decided now, at the end of February, Jennifer had been given enough time to hire counsel. At a Feb. 29 hearing, Hardwick ruled that Dale and Penny would get their first visit beginning March 30.

Penny said that visit would last a week. After that, the next visit would be another week beginning August 1, another Dec. 27-31, and the next one at Easter for a week. She said that the summer visits next year could be increased to two weeks. The exchange for visitations will take place at the Cass County Sheriff's Office and Hardwick ruled that Jennifer bear the cost of transportation of Sidney.

"We're looking forward to it," said Penny.

The ruling was the latest round of a bitter visitation battle between Sidney's grandparents and her mother and her relatives. Dale and Penny are the parents of Sidney's late father, Steven Watkins. Watkins was gunned down in Nov. 2008 while attempting to pick up Sidney for visitation at the home of Jennifer's grandparents in Ashland. Jennifer's grandmother Shirley Skinner was convicted of first-degree murder in the shooting and is serving a 55-year prison sentence.

In late 2010, Hardwick ruled on giving visitation rights with Sidney to Dale and Penny. Jennifer only produced Sidney for a few visits, and missed others, prompting warnings from Hardwick, before she moved to Orange County in Florida.

Last year, Jennifer spent five months in jail while Illinois sought to have extradited to face civil contempt and misdemeanor criminal charges stemming from her failure to comply with the visitation order. Ultimately, an Orange County judge ruled against extradition.

Jennifer attempted to have Dale and Penny's visitation order registered in Florida last year but a different Orange County judge ruled Cass County should retain control of the visitation dispute. Had Jennifer been successful, Dale and Penny may have lost visitation rights as Florida does not recognize grandparent visitation.

No one has been willing to predict how Jennifer will respond to the Feb. 29 ruling. Penny expressed cautious optimism that Jennifer would follow the ruling but also determination to continue their visitation pursuit if she does not.

"We're hoping everything will go well and they'll abide by the ruling," said Penny, "If not, we'll just keep trying."