

# Truck stop

From A1

He is being held at the Walworth County Jail.

Deana Patino, another employee at the Loves Travel Stop, said the boy thanked workers for contacting police. Although Patino could tell the children needed help, she said she had no idea their situation was so desperate.

"It's sad," she said. "Like, who would have known?"

Officials at Loves Travel Stop corporate offices also declined to comment.

Social workers in the Walworth County Health and Human Services Department declined to comment on how the two children were recovering.

Carlo Nevicosi, deputy director of county health and human services, praised the efforts of the truck stop workers who assisted the children.

"Our children are safer when the public is aware of their important role in preventing child abuse," Nevicosi said. "If something does not seem right, we encourage our community members to reach out, ask questions, and offer to help."

According to Elkhorn police reports, the situation began about 1 p.m. on Jan. 2 when the two teenagers showed up inside the Hardee's restaurant, which is open 24 hours a day as part of the truck stop. Employees said they noticed the boy was watching movies for hours on a laptop in one of the restaurant's booths.

The girl later joined him, employees said, and the two kids were still in the restaurant as the clock approached midnight.

"They said they were hungry, and they didn't have any money for food," police reported.



SCOTT WILLIAMS, REGIONAL NEWS

Witnesses say two homeless children from Macon, Georgia, spent hours Jan. 2 in this Hardee's fast-food restaurant at the Loves Travel Center in Elkhorn before police got involved and arrested their father.

After giving the two teens free food, employees at the Loves Travel Stop contacted police shortly before midnight — after the children had been at the truck stop for about 11 hours.

Police reported that the teenagers told investigators they had been homeless for more than a year, had not been attending school, and had not seen their mother for 10 years.

"They lost their house, so they have been on the road ever since," police quoted the children as saying.

Bronson confirmed for police that the family was homeless, and that the children were traveling with him in his truck. He said he got angry at them for making a mess inside the truck.

"His truck is his work and that it needs to be in good condition," he told police. "And the kids make a mess."

Their mother was living in Texas, Bronson said, and he had

considered driving the teens to live with their mother.

After the father admitted to having an physical altercation with the children, according to police, he was taken into custody. He left the keys to his semitrailer with workers at the Loves Travel Center.

Bronson was charged in a criminal complaint issued Jan. 8 by the Walworth County district attorney. Court records show he is due back in court Jan. 17 for a preliminary hearing in the case.

Employees at the truck stop said they were happy to have played a role in helping the children break free from troubling circumstances.

Schmidt said she had no idea the teens had such a disturbing story to tell.

"I'm glad they got help. Who knows how much longer they would've gone on," Schmidt said. "One of them could've ended up dead at a truck stop."