

County sets up pilot program for Laura's Law

By DON FRANCES

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Yolo County may become one of the only places in California to implement Laura's Law after the Board of Supervisors agreed to a one-year pilot program Tuesday.

The move indicates a shift away from decades-old skepticism when it comes to court-ordered mental health treatment -- an issue officials have been grappling with ever since the tragic shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn. last December.

In March, Kim Suderman, director of the Yolo County Alcohol, Drug and Mental Health Department, came before the board to discuss Laura's Law, telling supervisors that "the timing is right" to implement it due to a number of bills moving through the state Legislature. (Since then they have been whittled down to a single bill, SB 585.) She promised to conduct community outreach, receive feedback and return to the board in June with more information.

That day arrived Tuesday, and supervisors praised the job she did in bringing the idea to Yolo County -- then unanimously approved a \$100,000 budget for a one-year Laura's Law pilot program.

The program will create four new slots for "assertive outpatient treatment." Those patients will be treated through the county's current mental health provider, Turning Point. Implementation will begin in July.

With assertive outpatient treatment, the small number of Yolo County residents who have severe mental health issues but resist treatment -- estimated at no more than 20 -- can receive it anyway under court order. The county's law enforcement and health care systems will help in implementing the program.

Forced treatment can be used only if a judge finds that a patient is not getting treatment voluntarily, has a history of hospitalization or violent behavior, and may be dangerous. The judge's review can be requested by a parent, spouse or other adult family member, a doctor or police officer, or even a roommate.

"There are some times when people do not understand their own illness and their own needs," Suderman said Tuesday.

The idea of forced treatment makes some people nervous, and given the potential for controversy, "It's a small wonder frankly" that more opposition to Laura's Law wasn't being voiced, said Supervisor Don Saylor, one of the program's main advocates on the board.

Supervisor Matt Rexroad agreed, counting himself among those people who needed convincing.

"It's certainly set aside a lot of my suspicions" to hear the facts presented by Suderman and her colleagues, he said.

Among the speakers was Michael Heggarty, Nevada County's behavioral health director, who has worked with Suderman and other Yolo County officials seeking information on the program. Heggarty said Laura's Law has allowed his county to successfully treat "approximately 62 individuals. These individuals are mentally ill, dangerous to themselves or other people," and had resisted treatment.

But supervisors remained cautious on the key question posed by Laura's Law: At what point should authorities be allowed to force someone to receive mental health treatment against their will?

Supervisor Jim Provenza drew on his own experiences working in a psychiatric ward out of college, conjuring images out of "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest."

"My memory was of forced drugging ... physical abuse, people being given involuntary treatment," Provenza said. "Situations so horrible that if you weren't there to see it you wouldn't believe it was occurring."

"Where does involuntary treatment fall into the mix?" he asked, concluding that as Nevada County has shown, the answer is: "As a last resort."

"It's a pretty awesome authority. ... We have to make sure we do it correctly."

Still, Provenza shared his fellow supervisors' confidence in the program, and supported it so long as Suderman agreed to give four reports on its progress over the next year.

The one-year funding was taken from the county's Health and Human Services Contingency Funds. At the end of the pilot program, county leaders can decide to expand it or abandon the effort.

Saylor said Laura's Law is only one "tool in the tool shed" for Yolo County. Other tools for addressing mental health, he said, include a newly launched Mental Health Treatment Court, headed up by Judge Janet Gaard, and District Attorney Jeff Reisig's Neighborhood Court, also in a pilot stage in Davis.

"The one that we have before us today is a necessary part of the array of tools" for addressing mental health, Saylor said.

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