

## **FamiliesFirst to close Yolo Crisis Nursery; officials call it retaliation**

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From page A1 | March 28, 2014 | 5 Comments

<http://www.davisenterprise.com/local-news/familiesfirst-to-close-yolo-crisis-nursery-officials-call-it-retaliation/>

The Yolo Crisis Nursery will close its doors for good this summer, ending 13 years of providing emergency respite care to hundreds of families in crisis throughout Yolo County.

Officials from EMQ FamiliesFirst, which operates the nursery in Davis, confirmed the plan at a meeting with Yolo County officials on Thursday, prompting an angry response from some who believe the decision is retaliation for the community's response to issues that arose at FamiliesFirst's embattled Davis group home last year.

"It's despicable," Yolo County Supervisor Jim Provenza said Thursday. "We didn't cause their problems ... they did."

Those problems came to a head last June when the state Department of Social Services announced it would revoke FamiliesFirst's license to operate a group home for troubled youth on Fifth Street after an investigation into reports of frequent runaways and alleged criminal activity. The investigation followed the arrests of two teenage boys on suspicion of forcibly raping an 11-year-old girl. All three youths were FamiliesFirst residents.

Davis police said at the time that they had responded to multiple disturbances in the community involving youths from FamiliesFirst — youths who had generated more than 500 calls for service between January and May of last year.

Shortly after the state took action against FamiliesFirst, Yolo County's mental health department followed suit, revoking the agency's certification for providing mental health services to certain emotionally disturbed children covered by Medi-Cal.

Those actions led FamiliesFirst, in turn, to suspend operations at the facility early last fall.

Since then, the agency reached a settlement with the state that would allow FamiliesFirst to continue providing services to 18 children, but such a small caseload at a facility that formerly housed 63 youths would not be sustainable, said Craig Wolf, EMQ's vice president of clinical operations.

In the meantime, Wolf said, the Yolo Crisis Nursery in Davis has been operating at a deficit, covered largely by EMQ's "charitable contributions."

Indeed the nursery's fiscal year 2012-2013 budget of \$630,000 included \$370,000 in grant funding from EMQ.

"This is the only program that (EMQ) runs at that level of deficit," said Eva Terrazas, EMQ's director of public policy.

For the past 13 years, the crisis nursery — located on a quiet residential street in Davis — has provided respite care for children between the ages of newborn and 5 years whose parents or guardians were in crisis. The nursery has been credited with saving hundreds of children from abuse or neglect that might have occurred had their parents not had a safe place to bring them.

The nursery served 98 children in fiscal year 2012-2013, with repeat users bringing total intakes for the year to 335. All services at the nursery are free of charge, including emergency overnight care, emergency daycare, case management for parents by a social worker, supervised visitation and skills training for parents.

Unlike the FamiliesFirst group home, which had no Yolo County children in residence when licensing issues arose last year, the crisis nursery serves local children.

EMQ decided to close the nursery after its statewide board of directors met earlier this week, Terrazas said.

"The board had a pretty lively discussion about providing services in a county that was not working in partnership with us," she said, also referring to "a climate that has not been as friendly" in Davis as it has in the past.

But while Wolf and Terrazas insisted the decision to cease operations at the crisis nursery was purely financial, Yolo County officials weren't buying it.

At a meeting organized by state Sen. Lois Wolk at the state Capitol on Thursday, both Provenza and Supervisor Don Saylor suggested FamiliesFirst was closing the crisis nursery in retaliation for county actions and the community uproar that preceded the group home's suspension of operations.

"I don't think it's Yolo County's fault that happened," Provenza said. "We didn't screw up the facility in Davis, but our infants and children are being punished for it."

"It certainly sounds like retaliation," added Saylor. "I hate that the crisis nursery has to be a casualty of the management practices of EMQ."

Whether it is retaliation or not, EMQ's decision to close the crisis nursery by the end of June has left county officials scrambling to find alternatives for many of the nursery's services.

Saylor noted that Yolo County simply does not have a nonprofit agency capable of shouldering the \$370,000 burden that EMQ has shouldered up until now. That includes the Yolo County Children's Alliance

"We can't take that on," said Katie Villegas, executive director of the alliance, who explained with the alliance's \$1 million budget, adding the crisis nursery "would sink us."

With no single agency able to take over running the crisis nursery, current plans call for services to be spread piecemeal over many.

Joan Planell, director of the Yolo County Department of Employment and Social Services, said a request for bids has already been issued in order to find another agency to take over the supervised visits the crisis nursery has been providing and another request will go out shortly for skills training services.

As for the actual crisis care the nursery provides, that remained up in the air on Thursday.

Ideas floated at Thursday's meeting included having licensed foster homes provide crisis care on an emergency basis, possibly with fees charged on a sliding scale, and enlisting the help of the state Legislature in funding a pilot project on the effectiveness of crisis nurseries.

Heidy Kellison, a longtime supporter of the Yolo Crisis Nursery, noted that a study done in 2004 found that families without access to crisis nurseries were 50 percent more likely to have allegations of abuse or neglect substantiated by child protective services.

Indeed the most recent annual report by the Yolo Crisis Nursery found more than 95 percent of families that received services there did not become involved with child protective services. When asked at exit interviews what they would have done had they not been able to leave their children at the Yolo Crisis Nursery, the majority of parents reported they would have left their children in unsafe situations or called child protective services themselves.

Now Kellison hopes that a pilot project showing the effectiveness of crisis nurseries in protecting children would help generate — and preserve — funding for such nurseries, including the two crisis nurseries in Sacramento as well as Yolo's.

In the meantime, she urges local supporters of the Yolo Crisis Nursery to make their voices heard.

"I would like the community to contact their leaders and let them know how important the nursery is to them," Kellison said.