

A court that protects children, and helps parents

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By John E.B. Myers

Last Sunday, The Enterprise's front-page story described the effort underway in Yolo County to improve the child-welfare system. The effort is led by Supervisors Matt Rexroad and Jim Provenza, and holds the promise of strengthening our county's effort to safeguard children and support struggling parents.

A vital component of Yolo County's child-welfare system is juvenile court, presided over by Judge Steven M. Basha. County child-welfare social workers bring cases to Basha's court when children are abused or neglected at home, and the authority of the court is needed to protect the children and help the parents.

Although the juvenile court plays an enormously important role in society's effort to protect children, the average citizen will never see what happens behind its closed doors. Proceedings in juvenile court are confidential in order to protect the privacy of children and parents. The public and the press are excluded.

Because I have the privilege to represent children in juvenile court, I'm allowed to pass through those doors. Sneak inside with me for a peek into the world of Basha's courtroom.

There is no jury in juvenile court. The judge is on the bench. Beside and below him, sitting at her computer, is the courtroom clerk, assigned the Herculean task of keeping the mountains of paperwork in order. Without her, court would grind to a halt in no time.

The court reporter sits at her desk in front of the judge, taking down a verbatim record of what is said. The bailiff, a deputy sheriff, keeps the ship running smoothly by ushering families in and out of the courtroom when their case is called. Some parents are "in custody," that is, in jail, but they have a right to be there for their case, and they are transported to and from jail by deputies.

Today's calendar has 20 cases — 20 families whose cases are in various stages. The families wait in the hall until the deputy brings them in for their case. The hall is crowded with children, from babes-in-arms to teenagers. Child-welfare services social workers sit in back of the courtroom, waiting for their cases to be called. One social worker is called a "court worker," and that person is assigned the responsibility to take careful notes on everything that transpires, and to be aware of all the moving parts as cases are called.

Then there are the attorneys. Yolo County is fortunate to have three dedicated lawyers who have devoted many years to the juvenile court: Linda Case, Alice Meserve and Christina Beede. These three represent the vast majority of children and parents in juvenile court. The child-welfare services agency is represented by experienced Deputy County Counsels Sheryl Cambron and Jennifer McCoy.

Last, but certainly not least, are the Court Appointed Special Advocate volunteers. CASAs are college students, retirees and regular citizens interested in helping children. CASAs receive training on child abuse, the child-welfare system and juvenile court. CASAs are assigned one or two children, and they spend time with the kids. Often, CASAs know the kids better than the professionals do.

As you can see, the courtroom is pretty crowded. Much more important than the number of professionals, however, is the feeling you get when you watch and listen to the court at work. As each family comes into court, they are treated with respect, dignity and patience by Basha and everyone else. The attorneys and the court social worker do most of the talking, but Basha makes sure the parents and the children have ample opportunity to speak directly to him.

On one hand, he is stern with parents who fall short, but, on the other hand, he is the cheerleader-in-chief, urging parents to “Work hard for your kids,” and telling them, “You can do this for yourself and your family.”

Recently, a grandmother was in court in her wheelchair, worried about her grandchildren. Basha interrupted proceedings to ask her, “And how are you doing, Grandmother? How is your health?” He listened patiently as she described her health problems, and her hopes and dreams for her grandchildren. Basha did not have to take the time to ask Grandmother how she is doing. He did it to be kind.

In another case, three young children sat in court while their parents’ case was heard. The judge addressed the children, asking them how they were doing. Toward the end, the judge said, “Ms. Beede, The Box!” Ms. Beede disappeared behind the judge’s bench, and soon emerged carrying three brand-new toys, one for each child. The children left the courtroom with broad smiles on their faces.

The toys in “The Box” are purchased with private donations, and give kids who have been through rough times a happy surprise, and perhaps a positive association with the formal environs of the courthouse.

The feeling you take away from your sneak peek behind the closed doors of Basha’s juvenile court is a feeling that this is the government at its best. The professionals in that court, from the judge on down, are motivated by a kindness of spirit, and compassion for children and families.

Juvenile court can't solve the problem of child abuse and neglect, but make no mistake, the court protects children and helps parents every day.

— *John E.B. Myers is a professor of law at McGeorge School of Law at University of the Pacific.*