

County evaluating contract that houses child refugees at juvenile detention center

By Anne Ternus-Bellamy From page A1 | April 30, 2017

Yolo County officials believe the county received an undeserved black eye due to state and federal handling of a 14-year-old Honduran boy who was held at the Yolo County Juvenile Detention Facility for nearly a year before his release in March.

Now, county supervisors must decide whether to renew the contract with the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement that landed the boy in the Woodland facility in the first place.

The boy — identified in media reports by the initials G.E. — was apprehended last March trying to enter the United States alone at a Texas border crossing.

He was placed in the Yolo County Juvenile Detention Facility as his attorneys worked on an asylum case on his behalf that documented severe abuse by his parents and caregivers in Honduras. He was officially granted asylum in the United States in January.

However, the boy remained at the detention center and was released in March only following media coverage and public outcry.

Under the terms of the contract between Yolo County and the ORR, up to 24 unaccompanied minors like G.E. may be housed in the secure facility in Woodland, but only if they meet specific criteria; namely, that they have been deemed a danger to themselves or others or have been charged with a crime.

G.E.'s attorneys with Legal Services for Children in San Francisco and the UC Davis Immigration Law Clinic argued that none of those criteria applied in his case.

As outrage grew over G.E.'s continued incarceration and claims by his attorneys of mistreatment, Yolo County officials requested permission from ORR to take custody of the boy and assume responsibility for his placement and care.

Both the federal and state governments quickly relinquished any responsibility for the boy and Yolo County's Child Welfare Services took custody, placing the boy in a local Spanish-speaking foster home in March.

'It was wrong'

But the whole episode angered Yolo County officials, who received the brunt of much of the public outrage over G.E.'s treatment.

"We got a black eye for doing the right thing for one kid and it was wrong," Supervisor Matt Rexroad of Woodland said during Tuesday's Board of Supervisors meeting.

In fact, both ORR and the state have Unaccompanied Refugee Minor (URM) programs could have served G.E. upon his release. But both refused to accept the teen into their programs despite his eligibility, according to a report prepared for the board by the Yolo County Probation Department.

Those URM programs provide child welfare services, including placement in foster homes and similar facilities, as well as cultural, language and mental health services to unaccompanied minor refugees and asylees such as G.E.

ORR acknowledged that G.E. qualified for the Unaccompanied Refugee Minor program, but made a discretionary decision to abandon the youth rather than provide services, the report said.

Likewise, the California Department of Social Services advised the county in a March 13 email that “the state does not intend to accept responsibility for the youth” and also refused to provide services through its URM program.

“We’re the only ones who did our job in that situation,” said Supervisor Jim Provenza of Davis.

If the county is to renew its contract with ORR, Provenza said he wants assurances that there be “some way of financially backfilling us if we do the right thing because the state and federal government don’t.”

‘Dropped the ball’

According to Yolo County Chief Probation Officer Brent Cardall, the county’s contract with ORR — in place since 2008 — has made “for a fairly good relationship ... except for the last two months.”

“ORR has frankly dropped the ball in many areas,” he added.

Cardall said he was prepared to come to the board this week and recommend that the contract be terminated.

“If you denied this contract, you’d frankly make my job a lot easier and I would sleep a lot better at night,” he said.

However, Cardall added, he’d also be asking the board to come up with \$500,000 to \$700,000 to replace the funding the contract currently provides, as those funds provide services to all youths housed at the facility, including the county’s own.

“When you meet with these kids, and they show you what kind of services they’re getting, you’ll be amazed,” Cardall said.

Those services include a full educational program provided by the Yolo County Office of Education as well as on-site medical, dental and mental health services; weekly therapeutic services with community-based organizations including CommuniCare, Phoenix House and

Victor Community Support Services; as well as numerous volunteer support programs, including those provided by the Yolo Arts Council, the Yolo Interfaith Immigration Network and more.

Supervisors expressed support for the services provided by the program and a willingness to continue, provided they receive assurances that what happened with G.E. won't happen again.

"The idea of a bounty for us housing them is very secondary," said Supervisor Don Saylor of Davis. "If we can do the right thing for these young people ... (after) all the things they've been through to get to us, then that's the purpose and that's why I support what you're doing.

"If we believe that this is inappropriate for us, I don't care about \$700,000," he said.

Rexroad echoed Saylor's comments, telling Cardall, "I like the contract with ORR ... because of the economies of scale and the benefits it provides for our own children."

However, he said, "If ORR is an obstacle because they're a bad partner to work with, fire them. I will vote for that."

Assurances made

Cardall said that while he'd been prepared to tell the board to drop the contract, a meeting with the ORR director last week provided some assurances.

The director met with Cardall, the county administrator and county counsel on April 18 and "frankly acknowledged the weaknesses and the areas where the ball had been dropped," Cardall said.

"I think we've resolved a lot of the different areas with the director," he added.

He said he'd asked the ORR to come back with policies and procedures or a memorandum of understanding to address specific issues related to releases, transfers from ORR to state or county child welfare systems and assurances that policies are consistent with child welfare services best practices and ensure that youths will expeditiously enter foster care.

If he receives those written assurances, Cardall said he would return to the board in two weeks to recommend renewing the contract through January 2018.

According to the Probation Department's report, the average stay of unaccompanied minors at the Yolo County Juvenile Detention Center was 62 days, with more than 600 youths having been in custody there since the contract began in 2008.

More children come from Honduras than from any other country, followed by El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, Nicaragua and China.

Of the 578 youths released from the facility prior to October 2016, 277 were placed in group homes throughout the country; 171 were repatriated or deported to their country of origin (repatriation comes at the youth's request with a judge's consent; deportation is by a judge's order); and 120 were reunified with an approved sponsor in the United States (92 percent of them were released to a parent).

As of last week, 11 youths were in custody in the Woodland facility.

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