

County renews contract housing refugee minors at juvenile detention facility

By Anne Ternus-Bellamy From page A1 | May 10, 2017

WOODLAND — Yolo County supervisors voted Tuesday to renew a contract with the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement to house up to 24 unaccompanied refugee minors at the Yolo County Juvenile Detention Facility.

The board did so after receiving assurances that there would not be a repeat of what occurred earlier this year in the case of a 14-year-old Honduran boy housed at the Woodland facility.

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 Yolo County's 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, 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 or convicted of 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, 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.

Chief Probation Officer Brent Cardall told the board last month that in G.E.'s case, ORR dropped the ball and he was prepared to recommend that the county terminate its contract with the agency.

However, after meeting with ORR representatives and receiving written agreements that would satisfy the county going forward, he recommended Tuesday that the board approve the contract.

Also urging approval were local residents who had raised the alarm about G.E.'s treatment and organized a protest march on his behalf back in March.

In a letter to the board, members of Indivisible Yolo said they strongly recommended that the contract be renewed "provided that the renewal is accompanied by a mechanism to assure the community that the unaccompanied minors in its care are indeed being treated with fairness and dignity."

Given the expertise on immigration law and child welfare that exists in Yolo County, the letter said, "The potential exists for Yolo County to lead the nation as an example of the proper and legally correct way to treat unaccompanied immigrant children."

That said, Indivisible Yolo member Joe DePietro also urged more transparency about what is happening with youths housed under the contract and asked for an opportunity for citizens to play a role in serving the detained youths.

"We are unique in the nation from UC Davis to an engaged citizenry," DePietro, a retired judge, told county supervisors Tuesday. "We can do a fine job for you folks in overseeing the contract."

Davis resident Anoosh Jorjorian also spoke in support of renewing the contract, citing "the level of services and the level of community engagement that we do have."

However, she said, "housing this program in Yolo does put a level of responsibility on the Yolo community."

"I speak for other organizations that work with immigrant communities in Yolo County and also want to partner in oversight and in situations like G.E. to help resolve those problems," Jorjorian said.

Cardall said he welcomed community involvement and added that in discussions with ORR, he urged greater transparency by the federal agency.

"They agreed to address those issues in our community," he said. "I think the more transparent you are the better. If there are concerns, it's our duty to address those concerns."

Supervisor Jim Provenza of Davis made a motion to renew the contract, but requested that Cardall continue to engage with the ORR to ensure both transparency as well as due process for the youths.

His motion was seconded by Supervisor Don Saylor of Davis, who noted that as outrage over G.E.'s situation arose, "people in the community rose up and said, 'Maybe we shouldn't be involved in this at all.'"

"But now I don't know of anybody saying that," he continued. "That's pretty incredible. Our county's residents want to hold these children as though they are our own."

The board approved the motion 4-0 with Supervisor Oscar Villegas of West Sacramento having recused himself.

— Reach Anne Ternus-Bellamy at aternus@davisenterprise.net or 530-747-8051. Follow her on Twitter at [@ATernusBellamy](https://twitter.com/ATernusBellamy)