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# County to keep immigrant-youth detention contract for now

**By Anne Ternus-Bellamy**

Yolo County supervisors on Tuesday declined a request from their chief probation officer to terminate the county's contract with the federal government under which unaccompanied refugee minors are housed at the county's Juvenile Detention Facility.

Instead the board directed Chief Probation Officer Brent Cardell to seek amendments to the contract that would ensure better staff-to-youth ratios at the facility.

Cardell had sought to end the 10-year-old contract with the Office of Refugee Resettlement for a number of reasons, the most significant being the high rate of assaults on staff by ORR youths.

Data he provided to the board on Tuesday showed while ORR youth make up 57.4 percent of the juvenile detention population in Yolo County, they are assaulting staff at a higher rate and being subjected to use of force by staff more often than their non-ORR peers.

In the first quarter of 2018, Cardell said, there were 21 assaults on staff by ORR youth and two by non-ORR youth.

Since the middle of last year, 95 percent of staff assaults were committed by ORR youth, he said.

Those assaults, Cardell said, included staff being punched in the face, kicked, bitten, head-butted and more.

"Any time we have an incident, we have to do hands-on, which is basically the use of force," Cardell told supervisors Tuesday.

"This is one of my primary reasons for asking the board to terminate this grant," he added.

Use-of-force incidents (those that require the highest level of restraint by staff) occurred 107 times with ORR youth since the middle of last year, versus 27 times for non-ORR youths, Cardell said.

And there is no "relief valve" in these situations as there is with non-ORR youths, who can be sent to the state Division of Juvenile Justice when needed. Rather, the county must continue caring for them and if the district attorney files charges over an assault

on staff, the youths fall under the supervision of the county's probation department thereafter, Cardell noted.

While the county has housed ORR youths for a decade, the situation has deteriorated because, Cardell said, "we are getting the worst of the worst in the nation."

Under the contract, unaccompanied refugee minors sent to Yolo County's juvenile detention center must have been deemed a danger to themselves or others or have been adjudicated of a crime. They remain housed by the county while the federal government pursues legal proceedings against them.

Increasingly however, Cardell said, the youths arriving have been through severe trauma and are suffering from mental illness.

"That's what's frustrating to me. Some of these kids are not what the federal government says. They're high-trauma youth, very uncontrollable and the mental illness is greatly increased."

"I'm very disappointed in the federal government. They are not a great partner," he added, noting — as did several supervisors — that not a single representative of ORR or the federal government was even present for Tuesday's meeting.

The ORR contract is worth about \$3 million annually, but in order to deal with the greater security needs, would have to increase to more than \$4.3 million to create a security staff-to-youth ratio of 1-to-4 and a clinical staff-to-youth ratio of 1-to-8, Cardell said — something he did not believe the federal government would be willing to consider.

Another option presented by his department would maintain the current \$3 million in funding, but for fewer youths — reducing from 24 to 16 the available beds for ORR youth, resulting in the better staff-to-youth ratios.

The federal government might consider the latter option, Cardell said, given "they are desperate and need our help."

Yolo County's juvenile detention facility is one of only three secure facilities contracting with the federal government to house unaccompanied refugee minors.

Cardell's preference was to terminate the contract altogether, but the board voted 3-1 to instead seek an amended contract with ORR reducing the number of beds available while maintaining the existing funding.

Supervisors Don Saylor and Jim Provenza of Davis and Duane Chamberlain of the rural 5th District voted in favor of the plan, while Supervisor Matt Rexroad of Woodland voted against it, saying he would prefer to terminate the contract altogether.

Supervisor Oscar Villegas of West Sacramento works for the state Department of Corrections and recused himself from the matter.

Provenza said he had come to Tuesday's hearing prepared to terminate the contract, but after hearing from about a dozen members of the Yolo Interfaith Immigration Network — who volunteer weekly at the juvenile detention center — said he felt differently.

Many of those volunteers reported never feeling threatened or unsafe during weekly meetings where they play games, chat and teach music to the youths. They also expressed concerns about what would happen to the kids if Yolo County's contract is terminated, particularly given that one of the two other facilities used by ORR — the Shenandoah Valley Juvenile Center in Virginia — was sued recently for allegedly housing youths in inhumane conditions.

"We've been entrusted with the care of these children and we have to take responsibility carefully," said YIIN chair Ramon Urbano. "I have not heard of any alternative place for these (youths) to go."

Noting Shenandoah's legal situation, Urbano said, "I'm not excited about moving our kids there."

Cardell praised those volunteers, saying, "We couldn't have done the ORR program without them," said many likely wouldn't know about violent incidents involving ORR youth "because a lot of times, if we do have incidents, we don't let (the volunteers) in."

YIIN volunteers, meanwhile praised not just the program, but also the efforts of Cardell and his staff.

"I've seen much positive interaction between the staff and the ORR kids and the local kids," said YIIN volunteer Allison Pease. "I've had a very good feeling about how the staff relates to all the children there."

Now the focus will turn toward protecting that staff.

"We can't continue without addressing the issue," said Saylor. "I'm not ready to terminate the contract at this point, but we can't continue ... as we are now. We want to have this program in place only if it's beneficial to the kids involved and only if it can be done safely for our staff."

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