



Yolo County chief probation officer Brent Cardall speaks to the Board of Supervisors Tuesday, recommending the board approve an agreement with the Office of Refugee Resettlement that provides more federal funding to care for unaccompanied refugee minors at the county juvenile detention center. Anne Ternus-Bellamy/Enterprise photo

Supervisors vote to keep housing refugee minors at juvenile hall

By Anne Ternus-Bellamy

WOODLAND — The Yolo County Juvenile Detention Facility will continue to house unaccompanied refugee minors under an agreement reached between the county and the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement.

The Yolo County Board of Supervisors approved that agreement Tuesday by a 3-1 vote following a lengthy public hearing which featured dozens of people speaking during comment — most of them members of local churches who volunteer at the detention center and urged supervisors to continue the program.

Supervisors Don Saylor and Jim Provenza of Davis and Duane Chamberlain of the rural 5th District voted in favor of the agreement while Matt Rexroad of Woodland voted against it. Supervisor Oscar Villegas of West Sacramento recused himself because of his work with the state Department of Corrections.

At issue is a 10-year-old contract between the county and ORR under which up to 24 refugee minors who arrived in the United States without a parent and who have either been adjudicated of a crime or are considered a danger to themselves

or others are housed at the Woodland juvenile hall until they can either be reunited with family, placed in foster care or returned to their countries of origin.

Chief Probation Officer Brent Cardall had asked the board to terminate the contract in April, citing a high rate of assaults on staff by ORR youth at the facility.

Supervisors instead asked Cardall to seek additional funding from the federal government in order to improve the staff-to-youth ratio at the facility.

Cardall did so and was able to secure an additional \$2.2 million in funding to hire nine additional full-time staff at the detention center.

On Tuesday he urged the board to accept the agreement.

“I believe we do have the resources to make it work and I know we can,” Cardall told the board.

The additional resources will include seven more detention officers, an additional clinician and one more case manager.

Cardall added that it would “break my heart” to have to go tell his staff and the ORR youth that the program was being terminated.

“We’ve invested too much in our youth, in our staff... it would be egregious to go to them and say the board cancelled it,” Cardall said.

He was backed up by a standing-room-only crowd that, with a few exceptions, also urged the board to continue the program.

Many of them volunteer at the facility weekly, spending time with the ORR youth, including playing games, teaching them how to play musical instruments and more.

They fear what would happen to the youths if the contract is terminated.

The county juvenile detention center is one of just three secure facilities used by ORR to hold unaccompanied refugee minors who the government believes need to be locked up. One of the others — the Shenandoah Valley Justice Center in Virginia — has been in the news of late, having been sued over allegations of inhumane treatment.

ORR itself has also been in the news a lot lately, as it is the same agency that has assumed responsibility for thousands of children separated from their parents at the border under a Trump administration policy.

Provenza cited the chaos that has ensued in explaining his vote in favor of keeping a small number of the refugee minors in Yolo County.

“We have ORR trying to track down babies that were taken from their mothers’ arms on the border,” Provenza said. “Why would I send these kids out to some unknown situation?”

“I read affidavit after affidavit of abuse at Shenandoah,” he added. “I have no idea where these kids would go but I do predict they would worse off.”

In Yolo County, he noted, these youths have the attention of more than 100 volunteers from local faith-based organizations and the UC Davis Youth Empowerment Program as well as legal representation from pro bono lawyers in Davis and San Francisco — something not guaranteed to be found anywhere else.

Saylor also noted the involvement of the local community in explaining his vote.

“It’s not easy,” he said. “It’s not a simple matter, and if not for the resources we have here and the embracing of this group of kids by the community, we wouldn’t be continuing to do this.”

Cardall also praised the volunteers, calling them “truly amazing.”

“Without them I don’t think our juvenile hall would be as good,” he said.

There are currently 21 ORR youths held in Woodland, all of them boys between the ages of 14 and 17.

None were separated from their families, said Julie Burns, the ORR program director in the probation department. Rather, 19 travelled to the United States alone, while one arrived with a brother and another with a grandparent.

Most youths stay at the facility for an average of 40 to 50 days before being placed in another setting or being repatriated, Burns said.

The Rev. Mary Westfall urged the Board of Supervisors to terminate the contract, arguing it makes the community complicit in an unjust immigration policy. Anne Ternus-Bellamy/Enterprise photo

They arrive having experienced significant trauma and many have mental health issues, Cardall has said, and they've gotten in trouble with the law.

“There's serious issues with these kids, (they) have been in trouble, but when they're in a secured setting ... they have opportunities to change,” he said. “We believe in these kids and giving them opportunity for change. Really what these kids need are a family.”

The fact that they are locked up, however, is why some speaking during public comment on Tuesday urged the board to terminate the contract.

“Even with games and art classes,” said the Rev. Mary Westfall, “juveniles deserve better.”

“I question the very morality of such a system. Take a stand in this moment and terminate that contract,” she urged the board.

A couple other speakers echoed Westfall's comments, urging that the county find an alternative to housing the minors at the juvenile detention center, perhaps elsewhere in the county.

However, Cardall said, “if we didn't have the secured facility, we wouldn't have the youth.”

Rexroad, meanwhile, voted against keeping the contract, saying, he doesn't believe ORR is a good partner and that the program is not part of the county's core mission.

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