



Julie Burns, director of the juvenile program that houses federal detained youths at the Yolo County Juvenile Detention Facility, discusses the program as Brent Cardall, the county's chief probation officer, looks on during a hearing of the Yolo County Board of Supervisors, Tuesday, June 26, 2018, in Woodland, Calif. The board voted to accept more than \$2 million from the

federal government to continue housing troubled older immigrant children at the facility. County officials say the youths are not among those separated from their families under a recent Trump administration policy. **Rich Pedroncelli** AP Photo

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Northern California county retains youth immigrant contract

BY DON THOMPSON

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WOODLAND, CALIF.

Officials in a Northern California county accepted more than \$2 million in additional money from the federal government Tuesday after a more than two-hour debate over whether the county had a moral duty to cease housing troubled immigrant children amid increased scrutiny and controversy surrounding such facilities.

The Yolo County Board of Supervisors will use the \$2.25 million through January to hire nine more employees at its juvenile detention facility.

The federal program operated by the Office of Refugee Resettlement faces renewed scrutiny after The Associated Press last week reported allegations of abuse of immigrant children at a juvenile detention center in Virginia. Children in the Shenandoah Valley Juvenile Center near Staunton, Virginia, reported

being beaten while handcuffed, locked up for long periods in solitary confinement and left nude in concrete cells.

The teens housed in Yolo County are not among those separated from their families under a recent Trump administration policy.

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About 50 separated children of all ages are living in 17 state-licensed group homes and foster agencies in California that have contracts with the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement, the California Department of Social Services reported Tuesday. The department's inspectors found no immediate health and safety concerns, said department spokesman Michael Weston.

The Yolo and Shenandoah lockups are two of just three detention facilities in the country with federal contracts to provide "secure placement" for older immigrant children who had problems at less-restrictive housing.

In Yolo County, as many as two dozen teenagers are held until authorities decide if they can remain in the United States or are to be deported. The current three-year contract pays the county \$2.9 million a year. Most are 15 to 17 years old and are charged with committing serious crimes or are considered threats to themselves or others.

"I think it would be morally wrong to leave the program at this point because I don't know where those kids would go," said supervisor Jim Provenza, touting the care offered by Yolo County and more than 100 community volunteers. "We would be hurting these kids, I think, to make a point...I am not willing to do that."

Supervisors acknowledged there have been problems.

The county was named in an American Civil Liberties Union lawsuit last year alleging that some youths were wrongly tied to criminal gangs.

Last year attorneys had to force the release of a then-14-year-old Honduran boy who was held in the Yolo County facility for nearly a year despite having no criminal record and being granted asylum.

The teen was detained in 2016 while entering the United States alone in Texas. Attorneys with Legal Services for Children alleged that he repeatedly tried to harm himself and acted out against employees, causing them to repeatedly use pepper spray or to restrain his wrists and ankles.

County officials blamed federal immigration officials for the problems at the facility, and said the troubled youths were more likely to assault and injure county employees than were Yolo County juveniles also held at the facility for alleged wrongdoing.

"The kids are more important than all that stuff," said supervisor Don Saylor, voting to keep the program running.

Only supervisor Matt Rexroad was opposed, saying the problems overwhelm the benefits even though the "pot's been sweetened" with federal money.

The vote came after the majority of about two-dozen speakers, many of them volunteers, urged the board to keep the contract despite their qualms over the federal immigration policy.

Helping youths is better than "thumbing our noses" at the federal government," said David Lichtenhan, vice chairman and treasurer of the Yolo Interfaith Immigration Network. "They're much safer there than they would be in Virginia or a tent in Texas or Arizona or running on the streets."

However, youths held at the facility complained about the conditions in court documents.

A 17-year-old from El Salvador said in a sworn statement that he hates the food, while a 15-year-old from Mexico called the facility "a horrible place. They used pepper spray on the kids there, and I was sprayed seven times in my eyes. It burned and hurt a lot."

"We are stuck inside concrete walls all the time," said a 16-year-old whose country of origin was not given. "I want to be able to see the sky more."

The Rev. Mary Westfall was one of the few who urged the board to end the contract.

"Take a stand in this moment on behalf of these young people," she said.

The board plans to consider the contract again next year.