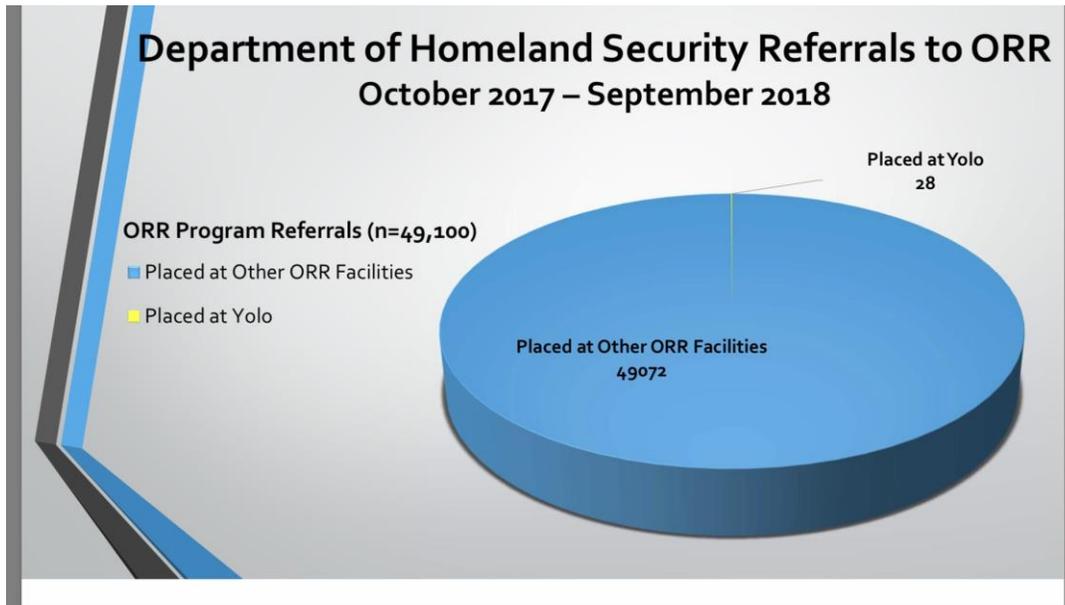


County supervisors vote to continue ORR contract



Courtesy graphic

By **Anne Ternus-Bellamy**

Yolo County supervisors voted unanimously Tuesday to extend a contract with the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement to house unaccompanied refugee minors at the Yolo County Juvenile Detention Center.

The vote followed a presentation by probation officials who said concerns raised about the program last year — including a high rate of injuries suffered by detention center staff, as well as low morale — had improved significantly after ORR provided additional funds to increase staffing, not only for detention officers but also social workers and clinicians.



Courtesy graphic

After staffing was increased in May 2018, staff injuries caused by youths at the facility were reduced by 43 percent while sick leave usage declined by 18 percent, officials said. Additional staffing increases are scheduled for the 2019-20 fiscal year.

Chief Probation Officer Dan Fruchtenicht — who was appointed last month to replace Brent Cardall — said every staff member he spoke to at the juvenile detention center had told him the program should be continued.

“They feel safe, they feel supported and they’re not afraid to show up for work,” Fruchtenicht said.

Meanwhile, members of the Yolo Interfaith Immigration Network — who volunteer at the detention center weekly, spending time with the youths — also urged county supervisors to continue the program.

YIIN chair David Lichtenhan likened changes to the program over the last year as going “from a garbage dump to where we have something that I would say is much more state-of-the-art.”

“We believe that the youth are so well taken care of here,” he added. “I would hate to see them go someplace else.”

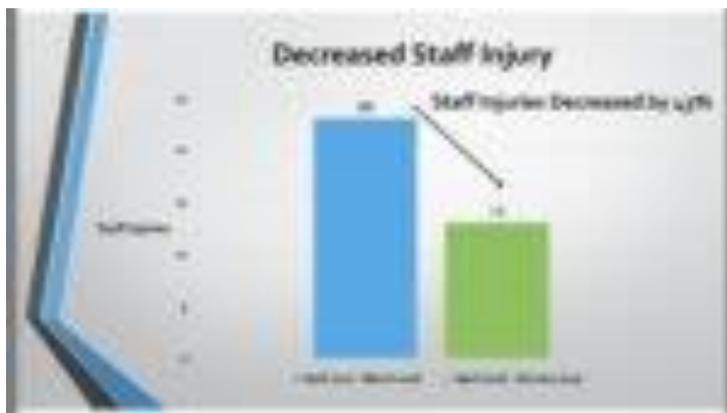
Under the terms of the county’s 10-year-old contract with ORR, the juvenile detention center provides beds for up to 24 refugee minors who arrived in the United States without a parent and who have either been adjudicated of a crime or are considered a danger to themselves or others. The youths are housed at the Woodland juvenile hall until they can either be reunited with family, placed in foster care or returned to their countries of origin.

The county’s juvenile detention center is just one of two secure facilities used by ORR to hold unaccompanied minors who the federal government contends need to be locked up and the only one, local volunteers believe, that treats the children in its care humanely.

“I don’t want children to be incarcerated because of their immigration status,” longtime YIIN member and volunteer Alison Pease told county supervisors on Tuesday. “I’m sad that a program like this is necessary.”

However, she said, “What are the alternatives for these children?”

“I do feel like we have a good program going now,” Pease said. “I was there last night. There was a lot of good stuff going on, a lot of positive interaction with staff, which I’ve noted now for some time. I know that there are kids that don’t want to be there. I think that goes without saying. But I do think the program is at its best now, and considering the possible alternatives for these children, this is something that we need to continue here in Yolo County.”



Courtesy graphic

It was less than a year ago that Cardall had recommended the county terminate the contract, telling county supervisors the youths being placed at the center by ORR had become more difficult to deal with, largely because of the trauma they had suffered before arriving. The result, he said, was an increase in injuries to staff as well as low morale among staff members.

County supervisors instead directed Cardall to negotiate for additional funds from the federal government in order to increase staffing levels. Those negotiations proved fruitful, with \$2 million in additional funding allowing him to bring in more detention officers, social workers and clinicians.

Additionally, program director Julie Burns told supervisors on Tuesday, increased funding has allows for increased staff training, including de-escalation training for all staff.

“We feel we’ve sufficiently addressed the concerns brought forward last year,” Burns said.

Fruchtenicht, in his first presentation to the Board of Supervisors since his appointment as chief probation officer last month, said, “We all wish there was no need to put any youth in secure placement.”

However, he said, “we owe it to the youth in our care to be in a place where staff are fully committed to their well-being, who work on a daily basis to improve programming, to improve services. We owe it to the youth to be in a place that has wonderful volunteers and wonderful advocates on their behalf.

“And we owe it to them to be in a place where they have attorneys who are relentless in their defense of the youth,” said Fruchtenicht. “I don’t know of anywhere in the country that meets those criteria more than Yolo County.”

And while YIIN volunteers and, ultimately, county supervisors agreed with Fruchtenicht that the program should continue, members of the immigration justice team at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Davis continue to voice opposition to the program’s presence in Yolo County.

Said one UUC member on Tuesday: “We continue to think that Yolo County should get out of the business of detaining young, immigrant, undocumented youth.”

Critics of the program also urged more oversight — including citizen oversight — if the program continues in order to ensure youths detained through the ORR program actually meet the criteria for secure placement.

That has been an issue with the program in the past, most recently last fall when a San Francisco attorney had to go to federal court to ensure a youth detained at the Woodland facility was released to his mother.

On Tuesday, county supervisors were willing to continue the program, at least for another year, and praised Burns and her staff for their work improving the program over the last year.

“None of us on this board... support what’s going on nationally with immigration,” said Supervisor Jim Provenza of Davis.

“But you’re doing the opposite,” Provenza told Burns. “Rather than the immigrants, and, in particular, children, being dehumanized, and treated as less than human in some places and some situations, you are committed to improving their lives and giving them the tools to deal with wherever they’re going. And hopefully it’s with a sponsor and hopefully it’s toward citizenship... but wherever they’re going to make them better off.”

Supervisor Gary Sandy of Woodland also weighed in, saying he’d visited the facility the day before and “came away incredibly impressed by the degree of dedication to the well-being of these youths, to staff’s professionalism, to staff’s initiative, to staff’s energy.”

“I really came away with the feeling that this is a difficult situation that none of us would wish upon the youth or our community,” said Sandy. “But in light of what’s been imposed upon us and what is before us, in light of them going someplace else, I really came away with a comfortable feeling that of all the alternatives for these youth, this was probably the best one and the most responsible one for Yolo County to take.”

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