



A-block at the Yolo County Juvenile Detention Center, which houses local youths charged with crimes as well as those detained by ORR. Fred Gladdis/Enterprise photo

## Local News

# Divided board leaves plans for juvenile hall up in the air

By Anne Ternus-Bellamy

A proposal to repurpose Yolo County's underutilized juvenile hall to adult-offender uses failed to garner enough support from county supervisors on Tuesday, though staff will return in two weeks with additional analysis and information which may persuade one more supervisor to support the plan.

Neither Supervisor Jim Provenza of Davis nor Supervisor Duane Chamberlain of the rural fifth district was willing to move forward with the proposal on Tuesday, with both saying they objected to Yolo County juveniles being housed in detention facilities in other counties.

With Supervisor Oscar Villegas of West Sacramento recused from the matter due to his work with the state Board of Corrections, either Provenza or Chamberlain will need a change of heart for the plan to move forward.

Supervisors Don Saylor of Davis and Gary Sandy of Woodland both expressed support for the proposal.

Meanwhile, also left up in the air, is the future of unaccompanied minors currently housed at the juvenile detention facility in Woodland under a contract with the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement.

The proposal put forward by Chief Probation Officer Dan Fruchtenicht would end that contract and require that the county's own youth offenders be sent to juvenile halls in other counties. That, in turn, would free up the Woodland facility to be used during a major expansion and rehabilitation of the county's main jail — work which will require a temporary booking facility and additional bed space for the adult population while the construction is underway.

### **Transition space**

Under Fruchtenicht's proposal, the juvenile detention facility would provide that booking and detention space during the 18 to 24 months that the jail construction is ongoing. After that, Fruchtenicht has proposed creating a new transitional-aged youth program — geared toward offenders between the ages of 18 and 25 — to be housed in the juvenile facility.

Currently, Fruchtenicht said, those young men and women are housed with the general adult population but would likely be better served — and better off — separated from them in a facility that also provides services geared specifically toward that age group.

But the sticking point for Provenza and Chamberlain, as well as for many community members who attended a meeting hosted by Saylor and Provenza in Davis last week, is what becomes of the children.

There are not many of them. The average daily population at Yolo County's juvenile hall has declined by 52 percent over the past two years, Fruchtenicht said, a decline mirrored by the rest of the state as the approach to juvenile justice has included a move away from incarceration.

At one point this year, there were only three Yolo County youths housed in the 90-bed facility. Last week there were four.

Additionally, the local youths detained have been outnumbered in the facility by ORR youths for the past several years.

Under the terms of that 11-year-old contract, Yolo County 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.

They remain at the Woodland facility until they can either be reunited with family, placed in foster care or returned to their countries of origin. That population, too, has declined, with just eight ORR youth at the facility as of May 15.

The program has been controversial for many years, with some county residents contending Yolo County should not be in the business of locking up refugee youths at all, while others say Yolo County is the safest place for these children, particularly given alternatives like the Shenandoah Valley Justice Center in Virginia, which also contracts with ORR to house unaccompanied minors. That facility was sued over allegations of inhumane treatment.

### **Local angle**

On the other hand, more than 100 community volunteers regularly visit youths housed at the Woodland facility, forming bonds over games, music lessons and more. Some of those volunteers have repeatedly testified to the Board of Supervisors that the care both the Yolo County youths as well as the ORR youths receive from staff is excellent and far better than they would receive elsewhere.

On Tuesday, members of the Yolo Interfaith Immigration Network and others reiterated that belief. Among them was YIIN chair David Lichtenhan, who noted presentations made earlier in the meeting about the excellent educational programming being provided at the juvenile hall.

“Now we’re going to throw that away,” he said. “We’re throwing the kids under the bus for money. Financially this sounds great... but I think we really need to think about what are the other alternatives... to make sure kids are getting these services... They’re not going to get that anywhere else.

“I just wish we would give it a lot more deeper thought.”

Where the Yolo County kids would go is unclear, as is how much it would cost Yolo County to send them there.

Fruchtenicht said he has been in discussions with another county, and while he did not name the county, both Saylor and Provenza indicated it may be Sacramento County.

Both said they recently toured the Sacramento juvenile detention facility but they came away with different impressions.

Saylor cited the excellent work done in Yolo County in recent years and said, “the Sacramento juvenile hall has been doing that same work for many, many years.”

And because the facility has a larger population — more than 100 juvenile offenders — it can offer more programs, Saylor said, as well as more staff, including eight mental health clinicians, and visiting hours every day, versus two days a week in Yolo County.

“When I toured this facility in Sacramento last week, as I walked from pod to pod, I saw an extremely kid-focused group of staff,” Saylor said. “It was everything you would want. I’m confident that program would meet or exceed what we’re doing.”

Provenza, however, countered that while “it’s a fine facility with good programs ... I don’t think that substitutes for what we can do and what we are doing in our community.”

“I think our juvenile hall is the best,” he added, citing the educational programming and the army of volunteers.

He also expressed concern that some families would have difficulty visiting the Sacramento facility off Highway 50 and that while Yolo County volunteers may be welcome there, some — including UC Davis students — might have a difficult time making the trek to Sacramento as opposed to Woodland.

“I agree with Jim,” said Chamberlain. “I hate to send these kids somewhere else.”

### **Other options**

Provenza suggested that an alternative plan could be to get permission from the state to house youthful offenders in one of the juvenile detention center’s three pods and put transitional aged youths in the other two. Or simply find a smaller facility in the county for juvenile offenders.

“One of the problems I have is this coming to us without the board being presented other alternatives,” he added. “Why don’t we bring this back without a vote, because I don’t want to vote for this today.”

That, in the end, is what staff will do. County Administrator Patrick Blacklock said staff would return June 25 with more detailed analysis of Fruchtenicht’s proposal and other information requested by supervisors.

Meanwhile, the ORR program was thrown into further flux with news from County Counsel Phil Pogledich Tuesday that the federal government has notified the county it will no longer be reimbursed for educational and recreational activities provided to ORR youth or for the staff needed to provide those activities.

Pogledich said additional information has been requested from ORR and also noted a federal consent decree requires ORR to provide educational services to the children it detains.

“One of the lessons I take from this,” Pogledich said, “is really a reminder that the stability of this contract is uncertain... the stability of this relationship is an unknown going forward.”

Sandy echoed that, describing “the uneasy nature of this relationship between the federal government, which is doing its own thing, and our values and what we’re trying to achieve in this community.”

Saylor, meanwhile, appeared to be done with the ORR program.

“We’ve given it our all. We’ve done an excellent job of it and I’m not interested in us continuing to do this when we have such an unpredictable partner.”

Provenza, however, said Yolo County’s ORR program “is really an excellent program, a model program. There’s no where else in the nation that treats these youths so well and actually sends them off in a better condition than they came in.”

He added that the concern might be “overblown, because they need us as much as we need them.”

County supervisors will return to the issue in two weeks.

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