

Our view: Keeping Yolo kids in Yolo County

By Our View

The issue: County has a responsibility to house and rehabilitate minor offenders

In a case of the proverbial “good problem to have,” declining arrests and detentions among Yolo County minors have persuaded the head of the county’s Juvenile Detention Facility that the complex should be given over to other uses and the remaining Yolo detainees housed elsewhere.

WITH THE YOLO COUNTY JAIL undergoing renovation, Chief Probation Officer Dan Fruchtenicht **proposes** to use the JDF as a booking and detention space for up to two years. Once construction is finished at the jail, the JDF would house “transition-aged” prisoners, aged between 18 and 25, who Fruchtenicht says would be served better being housed away from the general population.

Detained Yolo County minors, meanwhile, would have to go elsewhere. Fruchtenicht says he’s had talks with another county, although he doesn’t say which. Yolo County Supervisors Don Saylor and Jim Provenza, both of Davis, said at Tuesday’s board meeting that they’ve toured Sacramento’s facility.

There aren’t many of them these days. “Over the years, the Juvenile Hall has experienced a consistent year-over-year reduction in the number of youth held in our facility,” Fruchtenicht said in an email to volunteers last month. “This is not unique to Yolo County but is a trend occurring across the state as the criminal justice system moves towards greater restorative justice practices for juveniles.” The average daily population at Yolo County’s juvenile hall has declined by 52 percent over the past two years, according to Fruchtenicht.

The change would also mean an end to the controversial contract by which the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement houses up to 24 minor detainees at the Yolo JDF. 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 youths at the facility as of May 15.

(A further wrinkle was added at Tuesday’s meeting, when County Counsel Phil Pogledich said the feds will no longer reimburse the county for educational and

recreational activities for ORR youths. Depending on your point of view, this may add urgency to the notion that the program should end, or that Yolo must do what it can to keep those kids from being sent elsewhere.)

WHILE WE APPRECIATE Fruchtenicht's efforts to make the county's operation more efficient, housing detained juveniles is one of those essential services that the Yolo County government must provide for itself.

Minor offenders are kept away from jailed adults for a reason — we decided long ago as a society not to give up on them, to still treat them as people whose futures can be salvaged. Sending off our youths to be incarcerated and rehabilitated somewhere else is an abandonment of that responsibility. All due respect to Sacramento County's efforts on this front, the best place for them is here in Yolo County.

There are practical as well as moral issues. Visitation would be more complicated for families visiting their relatives across the causeway, and the volunteers who do so much for the Yolo program would almost certainly face obstacles of distance and bureaucracy in providing the same services in Sacramento.

Likewise, we continue to believe that the ORR youths are better off here than at any of the alternatives, but even if they were not involved, even if the ORR program were to be canceled, that would not change the necessity of looking after our own minors.

With Supervisor Oscar Villegas of West Sacramento recused due to his ties to the state Board of Corrections, the board is split 2-2: Saylor and Woodland's Gary Sandy support Fruchtenicht's proposal, while Provenza and Duane Chamberlain of the rural fifth district are against.

Discussion resumes in two weeks. Provenza's suggestion to house youths in one part of the JDF and adults in another is an imperfect solution, but preferable to sending them away. What is definitely imperative is finding a way to keep them in Yolo County.