

County to end ORR contract

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After 11 years, the end has come.

The Yolo County Board of Supervisors on Tuesday decided not to renew a contract with the federal government to house unaccompanied refugee minors in the county's juvenile detention center.

The contract will expire in January and, between now and then, the county will stop accepting youths and probation officials will work to find the least restrictive settings for the half-dozen children still in their care.

Thus will end what has been an often tumultuous relationship with the federal government.

Along the way have been lawsuits, a grand jury investigation, audits and media attention on what has been one of just three secure facilities in the country where the Office of Refugee Resettlement places unaccompanied refugee children who crossed the border into the United States without a parent or guardian. Those youths determined by the federal government to be a danger are locked in secure facilities until they can be released to family or foster care or returned to their country of origin.

For over a decade, the juvenile detention center in Woodland has been one of those facilities. And as recently as a year ago, a majority of the Board of Supervisors had voted to continue the contract with ORR. But by Tuesday morning, all had changed their minds.

Staff difficulties

Prior to voting, they heard from Chief Probation Officer Dan Fruchtenicht, who recommended not renewing the contract. In his staff report, Fruchtenicht cited the amount of staff time required to respond to media requests for information and interviews on top of grand jury investigations, government audits and more, all related to the ORR program.

On Tuesday, he also reiterated an argument made by his predecessor — Brent Cardall — that the high rate of assaults by ORR youth on staff made it difficult to justify continuing the contract. Prior to his retirement, Cardall had told the board those assaults had declined when ORR agreed to pay for additional staffing.

But Fruchtenicht told supervisors Tuesday that probation staff at the juvenile hall unanimously opposed renewing the ORR contract, even though doing so will result in layoffs due to the loss of federal funds.

His staff fears for their jobs, Fruchtenicht said, but none of them urged him to fight for the contract.

“I believe they’re just tired,” he added.

County supervisors, too, seem to have grown weary of the partnership with the federal government and policies they disagree with.

“I wish we could make it work, but it just doesn’t sound like it’s working like it should,” said Supervisor Duane Chamberlain of the rural 5th District.

Said Supervisor Gary Sandy of Woodland: “I’ve only been here 10 months but this program has been problematic during that time.

“It’s important to remember,” he added, “that the board and the county has worked extensively with this program ... It’s been a difficult dance, but they are a federal agency engaged in a practice I find nefarious, which is shifting these young people around the country.”

However, he said, “Our first priority needs to be our local kids ... Our second priority needs to be to our own staff, to ensure that they have the protections they need that they can go to work every day and come home without injury. We ought to be able to afford them that environment.

“At this point I think we should part company with the federal government on this program,” Sandy said.

Like his colleagues, Sandy praised the “efforts, the sincerity and the compassion” of the many community volunteers who have invested countless hours over the last 11 years visiting with the ORR youth on a weekly basis.

“It’s really a commendable act on their part and a commendable aspect of our community that we should celebrate,” said Sandy.

Local volunteers

Many of those volunteers turned out for Tuesday’s Board of Supervisors meeting, just as they have time and again when the ORR contract was on the board’s agenda. Most are affiliated with faith-based programs, including members of the Yolo Interfaith Immigration Network, who have long urged county supervisors to keep the ORR contract.

Some did so again on Tuesday.

“I don’t think any of us like to see these kids locked up in a jail situation,” said Ramon Urbano, former chair of YIIN. “However, these kids are in our care and what really concerns me is what are the options?”

“Right now this community is supporting these kids at juvenile hall. That’s what we can give here... I just hope that we don’t end up (with) ‘Out of sight, out of mind.’ I urge you to consider having the contract continue.”

Allison Pease, a YIIN member who has volunteered with ORR kids at the juvenile hall for 11 years, said, “None of us like seeing the children incarcerated.”

“I do feel that ORR is a difficult partner, it always has been to some extent — it’s almost impossible now,” she added.

But by ending the contract, Pease said, nothing gets better for the children themselves.

“Particularly in recent years,” said Pease, “these children from Central America have experienced a life that we would never want for anybody we love... I realize the problems created for this staff are real and I don’t minimize that... but these kids are refugees from extreme violence and extreme poverty. They come here out of desperation, but they also come here with hope and I just wish we could always keep that in mind.”

Others, like Dr. Pat Moore-Pickett, a member of the immigration justice team at the Unitarian Universalist Church in Davis, favored ending the contract.

“I’m here to support the staff recommendation,” she said. “We urge you to keep the welfare of these youths foremost in your considerations. Some of these incarcerated youth, as you well know, have not been formally charged with a crime... Some are behind bars because of their severe mental distress and many of these youth have been traumatized by violence in their home country and during their escape to the U.S.

“Incarcerating these youth causes further harm and is wrong,” she said.

In the end, that was the approach the board took, even members like Supervisors Jim Provenza and Don Saylor of Davis who had long said they believed the ORR youths were better off in Yolo County than anywhere else the federal government might place them.

“I don’t regret at all extending this contract last year,” said Provenza. “I believe the youth we received are better off than if they’d gone somewhere else. But I am concerned about whether that’s an appropriate type of placement if we’re having increased assaults, if we’re not actually able to offer the types of assistance that they truly need.

“I’ve come to the conclusion that it’s time to get out of the program,” Provenza added. “It makes sense to me to not renew, to make every effort ... while they’re with us, to get them to the least restrictive placement.”

“It’s more and more clear that it’s time to sever that tie,” said Saylor.

Next move

Staff will return to the board with a process for what comes next, but a majority of the board favored an option offered by Fruchtenicht for dealing with the loss of federal funds by reducing staffing at juvenile hall by 22 full-time positions and keeping a staff-to-youth ratio of 1-to-8.

Saylor was the only supervisor not on board with that option, instead wanting further exploration of a proposal previously brought to the board that would essentially shut down the juvenile detention program altogether and send Yolo County youth offenders to another county. That proposal was discussed by the board earlier this year, but with only Saylor and Sandy in favor, it failed to move forward.

Tuesday's discussion got a bit testy at times between Provenza — who opposes sending Yolo youth offenders elsewhere and noted the board had already made a decision on that topic — and Saylor, who still believes it is in the best interest of the county, as well as the youth.

County Administrator Patrick Blacklock told the board staff will return “with a deeper dive into what the future options are for the juvenile facility.”