

DA proposes task force to close juvenile hall; news surprises some county supervisors

Plan could see juvenile hall close as early as 2021

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A plan from the Contra Costa County district attorney made public Tuesday proposing that the county's Juvenile Hall should close in 2021 was praised by some county supervisors for its focus, but blasted by others for the way it was presented.

On Tuesday morning, District Attorney Diana Becton sent out a news release announcing her formation of a "Reimagine Youth Justice Task Force" of county and community representatives promoting more restorative youth justice programs.

The task force, Becton said, would also develop a process to close Juvenile Hall in Martinez.

Two supervisors, John Gioia and Federal Glover, are quoted in the release. Gioia said, "We need to move away from institutionalization of young people and instead invest in community-based restorative justice solutions which make us safer and are more fiscally responsible."

Added Glover, "In many cases, a service-oriented approach will achieve much more in rehabilitating and helping (young people) to become productive members of our community."

During county departmental budget hearings Tuesday, the other three supervisors said they are disappointed and surprised to have first heard of Becton's planned task force Tuesday morning.

Supervisors Candace Andersen and Karen Mitchoff said Becton's announcement is a "slap in the face" to Chief Probation Officer Esa Ehmen-Krause, under whose purview fall both Juvenile Hall and the Orin Allen Youth Rehabilitation Facility, also called the Byron Boys Ranch.

Andersen said she was troubled that Becton announced the task force plan with little discussion with or input from the full Board of Supervisors. Mitchoff said she didn't appreciate learning of the task force from the news release.

Added Burgis, "I do feel we've put our chief probation officer in an awkward situation."

In her department's budget presentation a few hours later on Tuesday, Ehmen-Krause said that given declining populations at both the Juvenile Hall in Martinez and the Orin Allen facility near Discovery Bay, and considering the maintenance needs at the Orin Allen facility, her office proposes closing the Orin Allen facility in 2022.

Residents there would be moved to Juvenile Hall, Ehmen-Krause said, and new community-based programs could be based there, too.

Those ideas run counter to those presented in Becton's news release Tuesday morning, which supports keeping the Orin Allen facility open, and not Juvenile Hall. Ehmen-Krause told the supervisors she was "taken aback a little bit" by Becton's announcement, a draft of which she saw late Monday. Ehmen-Krause said Tuesday afternoon she shared her concerns with Becton earlier in the day.

A district attorney's spokesman said Tuesday afternoon that Becton had no comment Tuesday on the situation beyond the morning press release.

The Probation Department, like the District Attorney's Office and every other county department, faces budget cuts caused largely by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has meant increased spending for many departments and less revenue for most.

The 2020-21 budget, yet to be finalized, at this stage is about \$24 million less than its earliest draft had called for.

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