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In Contra Costa, debate erupts over whether to close juvenile hall or boys ranch

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At the Orin Allen Youth Rehabilitation Facility in Byron — commonly called “the boys ranch” — the basketball court is an open setting just like any found in a typical neighborhood park court, except for the perimeter fence around the facility.

The basketball court at the more traditional juvenile detention facility near the Contra Costa County Sheriff’s Office in Martinez, on the other hand, is enclosed in a cage, even above.

“The difference is stark,” Contra Costa County Supervisor John Gioia said Tuesday, but the court is also symbolic of the difference between the two facilities.

He made the observation at a 12-hour county budget hearing during which the fate of the two juvenile facilities was heatedly debated. The county’s district attorney wants the main juvenile detention facility shut down and the county’s probation chief is pushing for the closure of the boys ranch instead.

Meanwhile, some of the 91 people who spoke at the hearing said both should be closed and the money paying for them reallocated to community programs that can help the kids without placing them in an institution setting.

By the end of the hearing, no resolution had been reached, ensuring that the debate will be resumed in the future.

Before the hearing, District Attorney Diana Becton announced in a statement that she is encouraging the county to keep Orin Allen open while she convenes a Reimagine Youth Justice Task Force to study a process for closing juvenile hall.

Although Becton had signaled her intent to help kids avoid getting locked up by [launching a restorative justice pilot program](#) last year for young people, some supervisors were surprised and angry that she sprung the announcement of a task force without their knowledge or any discussion.

Supervisors Candace Andersen and Karen Mitchoff called Becton's announcement a "slap in the face" to Chief Probation Officer Esa Ehmen-Krause, who oversees juvenile hall and the boys ranch.

Supervisor Diane Burgis said it put Ehmen-Krause in an "awkward position" because closing juvenile hall runs counter to her proposal to close Orin Allen.

Ehmen-Krause said in an interview Wednesday that although she's technically on the task force and wants to partner with Becton, she was surprised by the announcement.

Becton didn't attend the board meeting or elaborate beyond her announcement.

Closing either or both facilities is ultimately up to the Board of Supervisors.

Populations at both facilities have been declining as more children accused of crimes are being directed toward community programs instead of being sent to institutions.

There's currently 48 children or young people at the Martinez juvenile detention facility and 15 at the Orin Allen Youth Rehabilitation Facility, according to the data that Ehmen-Krause presented Tuesday. The populations are disproportionately Black and Hispanic, according to her data.

It's expensive to incarcerate youths at either place — \$456,876 a year at the Martinez facility and \$487,546 at the ranch.

Contra Costa County isn't alone in reevaluating the need for youth detention centers. The San Francisco Board of Supervisors last year voted to close its juvenile hall by 2021. And in Alameda County, plans to rebuild a juvenile detention camp in the San Leandro like the one in Byron were recently canceled, especially after the probation department reduced the number of youths housed at the medium-security facility because of the coronavirus pandemic.

In May, Gov. Gavin Newsom proposed closing state juvenile prisons as part of his revised budget.

Contra Costa County also is repaying a bond it used to rebuild the juvenile detention facility, County Administrator David Twa pointed out at Tuesday's meeting. And keeping Orin Allen open would require some building upgrades.

"We shouldn't decide on the future of our young people based on the value of a bond," Gioia responded, after expressing support for Becton's task force.

Some of the speakers who advocated reallocating law enforcement dollars to health and social services said they're OK with keeping Orrin Allen if juvenile hall is closed.

"They are really different," Nicole Herron, a deputy public defender who has handled juvenile cases for about half of her 15 years at the office, said in an interview.

She said some staff members at Orrin Allen had also spent time working at the detention facility.

"They said it was depressing, dark, cold, and how happy they were to get back to the ranch," Nicole Herron said, adding that she too had noticed a difference in walking into Orrin Allen and meeting with kids inside a facility that isn't locked and has people milling about. Its programming and atmosphere were more therapeutic than the detention facility, where "kids are sleeping in cells," she said.

Ehmen-Krause acknowledged in an interview Wednesday there is a clear difference, but offered another take.

"There is no denying the juvenile hall is what it is. It's institutional in nature," she said. But she argued moving the programming from Orrin Allen to the detention facility would create a unit that is less institutional and more "like a college dorm."

It's closer to services and to many kids' families than the Byron ranch, she said. She also worries that closing the Martinez juvenile detention center would result in Orrin Allen becoming more institutional.

"If in one breath we're saying close juvenile hall, all we'd be doing is relocating the more secure functions to (the ranch)," she said.

The task force could be a way to sort all that out, its proponents say. And for many, the ultimate goal is decarcerating kids.

"Youth crime has been on a steady decline over the last 20 years, reinforcing the conclusion that moving away from youth incarceration is in the best interest of rehabilitation, public safety, and fiscal responsibility," Becton said in her announcement.

"Programming and services which are based in the home or in the community are more successful at holding youth accountable and positively changing behavior than institutional settings," she added.

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