

Sierra Youth Center, Give It a Chance!

Summary

Sierra Youth Center (SYC) is a vital treatment program serving the needs of Sonoma County's female juvenile offenders. It is one of very few such facilities in the State. As Sonoma County continues to be on the leading edge of progressive institutional programs, the Grand Jury feels strongly that this center should be supported and encouraged to continue addressing the unique needs of adolescent female offenders. Programs such as these reduce recidivism and promote a healthier youth population.

Because the current conditions and programs afforded to girls at SYC are not equivalent to what is provided for boys at Probation Camp, the Grand Jury strongly recommends that the Board of Supervisors address this matter as part of their efforts to further upstream allocation of resources – an early intervention approach. Now is the time to ensure Sonoma County's commitment to *all* of our at-risk youth.

Reason for Investigation

The 2008-2009 Grand Jury investigated a citizen complaint regarding the lack of vocational programs for girls at the SYC. The complainant stated that girls at SYC lack opportunities to learn work-readiness and vocational skills in the current available programs. This is in sharp contrast to the vocational opportunities provided for boys at Probation Camp. There, the boys have vocational programs in woodworking, welding and carpentry techniques, as well as food service. The complainant felt that the girls also require, need, and deserve to be provided with equivalent tools to work toward becoming responsible productive adults.

Background

On a case-by-case basis, juveniles in Sonoma County are sentenced by the Court to remain in the Juvenile Justice Center, or to attend either Probation Camp or Sierra Youth Center. While investigating this complaint, the Grand Jury reviewed the facilities, procedures, and programs at the three residential juvenile institutions within the County of Sonoma.

Sonoma County's primary institution, the **Juvenile Justice Center** is a state of the art detention and intake facility for both male and female juvenile offenders.

Completed in 2006 to replace an existing juvenile facility, the Center also provides a common location for two courtrooms, public defender and prosecution offices for County staff assigned to the juvenile court system. The Juvenile Justice Center consists of two 20-cell high-security pods, four 12-cell medium-security pods, and one dormitory pod for minimum-security youth. Areas for all of the housing support services including kitchen, medical, education, and visitation, are located within the structure. Attached to the housing portion of the facility is a two-story section with two juvenile court rooms and the associated support areas for visitors. It also houses the Juvenile Probation Officers, court defense and prosecution staff, and designated space for judge chambers and court clerks.

Sonoma County's **Probation Camp** is a 24-bed, three phase short-term correctional treatment facility for 16 to 18 year old males. The program was established in 1955 and has been at its current site since 1972. The program concentrates on addressing anti-social and illegal behavior, and thinking patterns. The primary goal is the individual development of basic personal, social, academic and vocational skills. Significant components of the Probation Camp program include vocational training in woodwork, welding, and food service. A Youth must progress through an average six-month residential phase, two-month transition phase, and then complete a 30-day community phase prior to release from Camp, and termination from Juvenile Court. The Camp implements the Home Treatment Program with Juvenile Probation, a program which serves up to 20 placement wards and families with multiple in-home family support services. The Probation Camp also administers the Supervised Adult Crew, a program that allows offenders to participate in work crews on projects for government and non-profit agencies.

Sonoma County's **Sierra Youth Center** is a treatment facility providing local placement for female adolescents ranging in age from 12 – 18 years who do not have extensive criminal backgrounds. The program provides early intervention aimed at modifying inappropriate behavior and promoting constructive return to the family and community. A resident's stay may vary from six to twelve months, depending on the severity of the offense and the individual's progress through the program. The SYC is a residential seven-day a week program where juveniles may earn furloughs home each weekend to be with their families. SYC has a maximum capacity for 22 residents.

At SYC each resident is assigned a counselor with whom the family interacts to improve communication and problem solving techniques. The program has an on-grounds school and credentialed teacher, providing intensive individualized attention for each resident. The school is supported through the Sonoma County Office of Education. Residents participate in regular programs for Girls Scouts, Assistance Dog Training, Girls Circle, Yoga and the Mural Project. And most recently, SYC implemented a Work-Ready certification program, providing employment preparation skills and basic computer literacy. There is also an

Aftercare Program following release from SYC, which lasts an average of eight months. This is a significant part of treatment and one of the reasons for success at SYC, because the girls are monitored and given support to ensure successful transition to their community.

Investigative Procedures

The Grand Jury toured and inspected Sierra Youth Center, the Juvenile Justice Center, and Sonoma County Probation Camp. Interviews and discussions were conducted with the following:

- Complainant
- Chief Probation Officer
- Juvenile Hall Director
- Juvenile Hall Assistant Director
- Director of Sierra Youth Center
- Deputy Chief Probation Officer
- Probation Youth Camp Division Director I
- Probation Youth Camp Division Director II
- Sonoma State Professor of Criminology and Justice Studies

The Grand Jury also reviewed the following:

- The Corrections Standards Authority's 2006-2008 biennial inspections of the Sonoma County Juvenile Hall, the Probation Camp, and the Sierra Youth Center
- 2005 Sierra Youth Center Program Assessment
- *Gender Responsive Strategies*, U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Corrections (NIC)
- Various websites, including *Center for Gender and Justice*
- County of Sonoma FY 2008-2009 Budget
- County of Sonoma FY 09-10 Budget Policy Workshop II
- Department Head Questionnaires for Sierra Youth Center and Probation Camp
- County of Sonoma, CA Citizen's Report of June 30, 2008
- The Uniform Building Code

Findings

F-1 SYC is one of very few gender-responsive treatment facilities for adolescent girls in the State. A gender-responsive program is one that acknowledges that gender makes a difference. It has comprehensive services integrating policy and practice that target the female's pathway to criminality, and creates an environment of safety, respect and dignity. This type of program addresses the unique issues of substance abuse, trauma, mental health,

physical abuse and economic marginality. Consideration is also given to the general physiological differences, reproduction, and gender roles.

F-2 While emphasizing behavior modification and support services to transition girls successfully back into the family unit, school and community, SYC is cognizant of the need for vocational services. Currently there are some opportunities directed towards vocational programming through the Assistance Dog Program, Mural Project, and Weekend Work Crew. However, only the Work-Ready program is certified. On the other hand Probation Camp has firmly established marketable vocational programs in place for the boys, providing skills verification for employers.

F-3 The Probation Camp has a full time chef who prepares food for the boys, and teaches culinary skills. At SYC the girls prepare their own breakfast and receive their other meals from the Juvenile Justice Center food services.

F-4 The physical building at SYC is old, outdated and is not conducive to a therapeutic environment. Although it has been grandfathered into the Corrections Standards Authority for inspection, that practice “gives the impression that a facility is adequate, when in reality the opposite may be true.” The Corrections Standards Authority inspection found that the physical plant at SYC does not provide a setting similar to the level found at Probation Camp. It encouraged County leaders to place a high priority on replacing the facility for SYC.

F-5 Neither SYC nor Probation Camp are state mandated programs. The Juvenile Justice System in Sonoma County is currently undergoing an evaluation, as one part of a study looking at the County’s adult criminal justice system. This part of the study is expected to be completed by fall of 2009. Furthermore, the County’s strategic plan encourages best practices, effective rehabilitation, and further upstream allocation of resources; an early intervention approach that focuses on changing societal influences.

F-6 After extensive review of financial records, the Grand Jury did not receive an adequate explanation as to why there is such a disparity in programs between the two youth facilities, given the apparent parity in funding.

Conclusions

Both SYC and Probation Camp programs serve a highly beneficial purpose in our County by addressing the needs of one of our most valuable resources, *our youth*. Recognizing the importance and value placed on upstream programs, the Grand Jury strongly advises the Board of Supervisors to take all measures necessary to improve and strengthen the SYC program. Allowing SYC the chance to develop its gender-responsive program is clearly aligned with what the

Board of Supervisors intended when the County transitioned SYC to an all female facility.

It is generally recognized in social scientific literature that prison inmates are less well educated and have fewer marketable job skills than the overall population. Providing at-risk youth with employment opportunities through academic and vocational education is an essential strategy to discourage future delinquency and incarcerations. This strategy is also believed to be the most cost-effective.

SYC is a young program and is currently lacking in vocational opportunities for the female residents. Probation Camp has been in existence for more than 50 years and its vocational training is firmly established in the Juvenile Justice System of Sonoma County. While current activities at SYC are worthwhile in terms of education and therapy, much more is needed to serve this most vulnerable population. Although, the age and population at SYC is different from that at Probation Camp, the need for vocational opportunities is no less important for the young women. By effectively utilizing an upstream allocation of resources, all of the at-risk youth programs could be successful.

Commendations

The Director and staff at SYC are to be commended for the outstanding work they have done with the minimal resources available. They have successfully transitioned girls returning to their homes, schools and community. Sonoma County prides itself on having a progressive and forward-thinking government and these programs are fine examples of that. If SYC is given the chance to fully develop, just as Probation Camp has, Sonoma County could continue to lead the way and be a model of success through its gender-responsive girls program.

Recommendations

R-1 The Sonoma County Board of Supervisors should take all necessary steps to retain the program at SYC, even if budget cuts are required for the Probation Department. SYC must be allowed and given appropriate time to fully develop into a gender-responsive program, and prove its true benefit to our communities.

R-2 The Probation Department should enhance existing programs at SYC, and expand them to include certified vocational programs. It should develop and/or make available trainings comparable to those offered to the boys at Probation Camp, including a Culinary Arts Program. This can be done by bringing a chef back to SYC, which will provide vocational training and offer a positive role model.

R-3 Until a new facility for SYC can be realized, the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors should make all necessary upgrades to the existing physical location to enhance the therapeutic environment. The following improvements are needed immediately:

- Furnish and install an Intercom system
- Furnish and install indoor and outdoor cameras
- Repair the existing access road to SYC

R-4 The Probation Department should establish and secure the necessary space requirements for conducting all programs, so that SYC staff does not have to search out available space/rooms, move equipment and supplies, nor rearrange schedules. Similar Type One fire-resistive reinforced concrete construction, now being occupied by SYC, exists nearby and can be re-occupied as I-3 Occupancy under the Uniform Building Code.

R-5 The Probation Department should be required to explain the expense anomaly between SYC and Probation Camp, given the difference in staff size and number of juveniles served. Providing transparency will lead to more equitable allocation of resources and adequate funding for SYC.

R-6 Immediately upon completion of the current Juvenile Justice study, the Probation Department should furnish the Grand Jury with its findings.

Required responses to Findings

Board of Supervisors – F-4
Chief Probation Officer – F-3, F-6

Required responses to Recommendations

Board of Supervisors – R-1, R-3
Chief Probation Officer – R-2, R-3, R-4, R-5, R-6

Requested responses

Board of Supervisors – F-6, R-2, R-5
Chief Probation Officer – R-1