

RETROSPECTIVE: VALLEY OF THE MOON CHILDREN'S HOME

Summary

The 2004-2005 grand jury has revisited a report issued by the 1999-2000 grand jury that investigated the Valley of the Moon Children's Home (VOMCH). Among the recommendations of the 1999-2000 grand jury was that funding for construction of a new Valley of the Moon Children's facility be a top priority for the Board of Supervisors. The Board of Supervisors, in its required response, agreed to the recommendation, adding a budget allocation of \$1.6 million to the VOMCH construction fund, which allowed construction to begin.

The 2004-2005 grand jury, reviewed the current status, and is pleased to report that construction of the new Valley of the Moon Children's Home was completed in May 2005, and admission of children is planned to begin June 2005. It is said to be a state-of-the-art facility that meets or exceeds all state standards. The new facility was built under the guidance of the Valley of the Moon Children's Home Foundation, with one goal in mind: to provide a safe, supportive and nurturing environment for children-in-crisis between birth and 18 years of age.

In Sonoma County, there are 44 group homes for children, as listed by the Juvenile Justice System. All the homes, including VOMCH, are licensed by the State of California to provide shelter for the many children who are referred to them each year. VOMCH is unique in that it is the only group home that is licensed to serve as a temporary shelter for abused or abandoned children between birth and 18 years of age, without regard to any special eligibility requirement but solely upon the need for a safe environment.

Background

The Valley of the Moon Children's Home functions as an emergency shelter and cannot turn away children who are in need of protection. (California Welfare and Institution Code §§ 300 et al. and State of California Community Care Facility License #496800985).

The original VOMCH shelter was built in 1976. Several years ago a lawsuit was filed, suing the counties in California to require facilities such as VOMCH to be licensed by the State of California Community Care Licensing Division (CCL). The CCL sets out stringent requirements and definitions from the children's needs to the environment in which they live. Licenses for group homes such as VOMCH are renewed each year.

On August 6, 2002, CCL reissued a license to VOMCH with waivers of two requirements: no more than two children per bedroom and the right of children to wear his/her own clothing. This license was issued with the understanding that a new facility would start construction in 2003.

Attributes of the New VOMCH Facility

The new facility, which is the second phase of a three-phase project, meets all of the State of California licensing requirements. The building is significantly larger than the old building, increasing capacity from 38 to 72 children, housed in separate living areas by age and sex.

The separate male and female living areas have four wings each, which allows for age differentiation. The staff of VOMCH is exploring a plan that would allow siblings to live together in one of the wings in order to maintain emotional ties and family continuity.

The administrative offices, lobby, main desk, and the controls for monitoring the children (located at the main desk) are in the center of the building. The layout of the main desk allows for excellent visual supervision of all wings by adult supervisors. In addition, for the protection of the children, the new facility has an emergency call system, which allows a child to push a button, setting off a visual alarm, alerting an adult authority at the main desk.

Each bedroom has been constructed for no more than two occupants pursuant to California State requirements. The rooms have windows for natural light, and each is equipped with two beds and two study desks. The new facility has a modern kitchen, allowing it to function on a self-contained basis, without reliance on its former food contract with Juvenile Hall.

There are ample common rooms where the children can meet, socialize and study. Most importantly, private rooms have been set aside for consultation, counseling, and therapy when special-needs children require critical counseling.

Conclusions

A new facility was needed in order to meet mandatory California State licensing requirements.

Over the past 30 years, the children who have been admitted to VOMCH have shown significantly more emotional and physical injuries, are more fearful of authority, are less trusting, and are more street-wise. They have often been living on their own. These factors demanded that more space was needed for private counseling and new behavioral programs. The new facility provides the necessary space.

To the credit of all who have helped realize the new VOMCH, this is a premier facility with programs to aid children on a temporary basis, and to provide a safe environment to help them assimilate what is happening in their lives and give help and direction.

Commendations

The grand jury commends the VOMCH administration and staff for assisting in designing the new facility. The grand jury wishes them well in achieving their endeavors.

The grand jury commends the VOMCH Foundation, the Board of Supervisors, anonymous individuals, service and social groups, companies, and the community as a whole for raising \$11 million in public and private funds to build the new VOMCH facility.

Conduct of the review

1. The grand jury interviewed the following:

- Program Manager of the VOMCH
- Director of Family, Youth and Children Division
- Director of Court Appointed Special Advocates
- Senior Project Specialist, for construction of new VOMCH
- Community Resource Development Manager (VOMCH Foundation)

2. Documents reviewed:

- *Understanding the Child Welfare System in California*, Primer for Service Providers and Policymakers, California Center for Research on Women and Families, Berkeley, California

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- *Overview of Programs in the Human Services Department*, Director, State of California, Department of Human Services
- The Valley of the Moon Children's Home Facility public file
- License #496800985, State of California, Community Care Licensing Division
- Valley of the Moon Children's Foundation Capital Campaign Binder
- Policies and Procedures Manual, State of California, Community Care Licensing Division.

3. Tours:

- Tours of the old and new VOMCH.



Artist's impression of the new Valley of the Moon Children's Home