

# **SIERRA YOUTH CENTER**

## **Summary**

The Sonoma County Grand Jury reviewed the facilities, procedures and programs at the Sonoma County Probation Department Sierra Youth Center (SYC). Of particular interest were programs provided to the youth in residence and the adequacy of facilities. The Grand Jury concluded that the facilities at SYC are antiquated and inadequate and that new facilities should be sought. However, through the dedicated work of SYC staff, its programs are doing well. Also, some community organizations are providing appreciated assistance.

## **Reason For Investigation**

The facilities at SYC are the same vintage as the facilities at Juvenile Hall. Concern about the inadequacy of the Juvenile Hall facilities has been expressed in the past Grand Jury Reports, the news media, and by various governmental officials. Accordingly, the Grand Jury's investigation was to determine if similar concerns apply to SYC.

## **Background**

SYC is located in Santa Rosa behind Juvenile Hall. SYC is a 20-bed residential treatment program for boys between 12 and 16 and girls between 12 and 18 who are committed there by the Juvenile Court. For Fiscal Year 2001-2002, the average daily population was 20 and the average length of stay was 180 days. SYC's residential program is followed by a minimum of 90 days aftercare.

SYC also operates two Weekend Program work crews who work in local parks on community projects. The crew members are SYC residents and youth who would otherwise be in Juvenile Hall. The number of minors in this program during Fiscal Year 2001-2002 was between 30 and 35 each weekend.

The SYC residential program provides early intervention aimed at modifying the minor's delinquent behavior and promoting his/her return to family and community. An individual case plan is designed for each minor by an assigned counselor, full-time therapist, and SYC supervisors. Pursuant to his/her case plan, the minor participates in individual, group, and family counseling. Staff also provides weekly support groups for parents. Through good behavior, minors may earn furloughs home each weekend to be with their families.

Much attention is given to each minor's education. There is an on-site school with a fully credentialed teacher (provided through Sonoma County Office of Education) who gives intensive, individualized attention to each minor. A Garden Project teaches ecology, gardening, landscaping, and irrigation. A Culinary Program, under the direction of a chef, teaches culinary skills and prepares meals (which include crops grown in the Garden Project) for the SYC population. In the Dog Assistance Program, offered through the co-located Assistance Dog Institute, minors train dogs to be used by the disabled.

## **Investigative Procedures**

The Grand Jury:

1. Interviewed the following persons:
  - Chief Probation Officer, Sonoma County Probation Department
  - Juvenile Division Director
  - Division Director, SYC.
  
2. Reviewed the following documents:
  - County of Sonoma Budget, Fiscal Year 2001-2002
  - 2000-2001 Grand Jury Final Report and Responses
  - Sonoma County Probation Department, Application for Approval (dated April 26, 2001), of its Comprehensive Multiagency Juvenile Justice Plan for funding under the Schiff-Cardenas Crime Prevention Act of 2000
  - Updated Juvenile Hall Needs Assessment
  - Assistance Dog Institute's general brochure
  - Sierra Youth Center information pamphlet
  - Sierra Youth Center Program Description
  - Sierra Youth Center Mission Statement
  - Residents' Grievance Policy & Procedure
  - Probation Department, information sheet entitled, "2001 Fact Sheet."

## **Findings**

- F1. The facilities occupied by SYC were built in the early 1950s and do not meet current codes and standards (e.g., they are not handicapped accessible).
  
- F2. There is no air conditioning. Temperatures have exceeded 100 degrees in the summer.
  
- F3. Staff office space is extremely small and cramped.
  
- F4. The on-site school adjacent to the housing unit is a small one-room structure where all pertinent grade levels are taught.
  
- F5. The primary outside recreational area is a small grassy space next to the housing unit.
  
- F6. The on-site garden area needs additional work.
  
- F7. Nineteen SYC youth have been matched to mentors through the Mentor Program and presentations made to Sonoma State University.
  
- F8. The Rotary Club of Oakmont is building a storage/greenhouse for SYC to use in its Garden Project.

## **Conclusions**

The Probation Department employees and support staff who daily manage and run SYC are dedicated professionals. Although their full abilities are impeded by the antiquated physical plant in which they must operate, the programs provided to the youth in residence are doing well. The Dog Assistance Program, which teaches respect and patience, is especially liked by the youth because their self-esteem is increased as progress is made.

SYC is receiving some help in its Mentor Program and in its Garden Project from the community, and this is appreciated. However, even after the new Juvenile Justice Center is completed in mid 2005, SYC residents will stay in their same old dreary worn-out building.

What is sorely needed is a new facility for SYC.

### **Recommendations**

- R1. A “Needs Assessment” should be developed for SYC, similar to the one for Juvenile Hall.
- R2. A study should be initiated to find a better facility for SYC.

### **Required Responses to Findings**

None

### **Required Responses to Recommendations**

Chief, Probation Department: R1 and R2