

Valley of the Moon Children's Home

Summary

The Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury (Grand Jury) reviewed allegations from a complainant which included claims that staff at the Home had prevented minors from accessing their bedrooms, searched minors' personal possessions and bedrooms without cause, used inappropriate physical restraint techniques, and interfered with minors' privacy during telephone calls.

Occasionally minor children (children to the age of eighteen years) are in need of an alternate living situation. This need can arise for a number of reasons beyond the minor's control. Without a transitional residential facility such as the Valley of the Moon Children's Home (Home), it would be more difficult to stabilize, assess, and locate appropriate alternative places for them to live. Facility professional staff must exercise careful consideration to find a living situation that best meets the needs of the minor. Sometimes a minor returns to his or her own home.

Referrals to the Home can be made by an emergency response unit, social workers, law enforcement, juvenile hall or the courts. These minors may be unable to continue living in their usual home environment for a number of reasons. Many of the minors are traumatized in some way due to living in an unhealthy, abusive, or dangerous environment. Examples of this can include neglect, effect of drugs in the home on the minor, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and human trafficking.

The general objective is that the minors stay no longer than thirty days at the Home. The average stay is two weeks. Sometimes longer stays result from the difficulty in finding an appropriate place for the minor to live. The maximum capacity of the Home is sixty-two beds. The average daily census is about twenty minors. The average number of annual stays for the past three years was 344. The average cost is \$775.00 per minor, per day. The first thirty days of each stay are funded by federal money.

Professional staff provide counseling, health, and dental services. Care of bereaved minors is assisted by consultation from the WillMar Family Grief and Healing Center. The Home's professional staff assess each minor to determine his or her immediate and longer-term needs, which can include mental and/or physical health issues. They then identify the approaches to take while the minor is residing at the Home and the best placement for the minor, which could be within the foster care community.

Direct care staff provide supervision in the facility and work with the minors to assist them as needed. The minors are transported during the day to their usual schools so that their educational process is not interrupted. In addition to attending school in their own community, minors are involved in many activities outside of the Home.

After being screened and hired, staff are provided specialized training prior to working with minors. This training helps the staff provide guidance to minors who are often distressed and prone to act out behaviorally. Staff receive additional training, when necessary, to improve their interactions with minors.

Additional oversight of the Home's activities is provided by volunteers and foundation board members. Approximately seventy-three volunteers assist in the Home. Most volunteers participate at least six months. The average length of service has been about two years. Some current volunteers have been at the Home for seven to ten years and one has been there for twenty-five years. Volunteers go through a screening process and mandatory training prior to and while working with the minors. The volunteers are not allowed to work with the minors without staff present. The Valley of the Moon Foundation has thirteen board members who are involved in fund-raising activities as well as holidays and other special events. A group of individuals over eighteen years of age, called Voices, previously lived in the Home and currently provide mentoring and leadership to the minors.

The Home appears to be a well-regulated, appropriate temporary place for minors to stay while their individual needs and residential status are being assessed and determined.

Background

The Grand Jury received a citizen complaint regarding some aspects of the Home's operations. The Grand Jury investigates only complaints which are of a non-criminal nature. Law enforcement and the Community Care Licensing Division of the California Department of Social Services (Licensing), investigate allegations which are criminal in nature.

Methodology

During its investigation, the Grand Jury spoke with the complainant, and staff from the following: Licensing, the California Foster Care Ombudsman's office, the Sonoma County Department of Human Services including its staff at the Home. The Grand Jury reviewed documents generated by agencies which conduct periodic inspections, unannounced visits and/or provide regulatory oversight of the Home. In January 2015, the Grand Jury toured areas in the Home where minors live, eat and socialize, as well as the facility grounds.

The Home completes a written exit interview at the time each minor is discharged. The Grand Jury reviewed forty-two randomly-selected client exit interviews covering a span of three years (2011-2014).

Discussion

Licensing assesses the Home's compliance with state regulations and the Home's policies and procedures. Licensing analysts make periodic unannounced visits to the Home. They also investigate complaints and facility-generated special incident reports. Depending on the seriousness of an incident, an analyst makes an unannounced on-site visit to the Home after receipt of a complaint or incident report. Licensing issues a report noting both the specifics of the allegation, and the findings of their investigation. If Licensing determines non-compliance with regulations, it can impose varying levels of sanctions. When sanctions are imposed the facility is required to present

a plan to correct the deficient practice. The plan must meet specific requirements to be accepted by Licensing. Licensing returns at a later date to ensure that the facility has carried out its plan of correction.

Licensing's public file concerning the Home is available to anyone who requests to view it. This file does not contain confidential information about the minors and/or staff, including any identifying information. The public file contains reports of Licensing's investigations into complaints about the Home and facility-generated special incident reports. The Home is required by statute to report special incidents to Licensing within a specified time frame. Special incidents are defined by statute, as well as the Home's policies and procedures. These can include incidents such as medication errors, containment situations, and transfer of a minor to a mental health treatment facility or hospital.

This public file documented investigations resulting in some findings of deficient practices which did not constitute serious rights violations. For example, in September 2014, the Home failed to provide privacy for minors during telephone calls. Also, about that time the Home conducted unreasonable searches of minors' personal possessions and backpacks. In October 2014, the Home conducted unreasonable room searches and made several late reports regarding special incidents. The Home completed plans of corrections for all incidents; Licensing accepted these plans.

The Sonoma County Juvenile Justice Commission conducts annual inspections of the Home. The commission reviews the facility, services provided, operations, and interviews some of the minors. The interviews revealed no serious problems. In addition to narrative comments, the Commission rates its findings as: 1) satisfactory (or exceeds) or, 2) needs improvement/corrective action. The last three annual inspections resulted in satisfactory findings.

Administrative staff at Sonoma County's Department of Human Services and the Home were cooperative during the Grand Jury's investigation. Staff stated they welcomed oversight by the California Department of Social

Services, the Sonoma County Juvenile Justice Commission and, in this case, the Grand Jury. The staff frankly discussed Licensing's investigations and findings which had been documented in Licensing's public file of the facility.

The Grand Jury toured the Home and found it to be clean, bright, attractive and in good repair. Areas of the facility are set up so that minors in similar age groups and of the same gender reside together. The Home is unlike a single-family residence due to the nature of its congregate living. Meals, snacks and, if needed, medications are provided. The minors have access to computers, books, games, televisions and outdoor recreational areas. Housekeeping staff clean all areas of the facility daily.

Doors and gates are locked to prevent access to the Home from the outside rather than to prevent minors from leaving the facility. Closed circuit television cameras allow staff to view outside areas of the Home; alarms will sound if outside gates are opened. Staff will not physically restrain a minor who chooses to leave. Instead, they will try to convince the minor to return. If the minor refuses to return, and safety is an issue, staff will contact law enforcement.

The staff person in charge of the minor's living unit conducts a one-on-one exit interview with the minor just prior to discharge from the Home. Standardized questions are designed with the goal of providing the minor with opportunity to comment on his or her stay in the Home. The staff person completes the interview form for those younger minors who are unable to write. Older minors fill out their own forms. The Grand Jury reviewed forty-two exit interview forms, and found no comments or suggestions of material problems.

Findings

- F1. The Home appears to be an appropriate temporary place for minors to stay while their permanent residential status is being assessed and determined.
- F2. Although some minors' rights had been occasionally violated, the scope, severity and frequency of

these violations were not critical and the Home quickly and appropriately corrected these violations.

- F3. The Home is effectively regulated and monitored by the Community Care Licensing Division of the California Department of Social Services and inspected by the Sonoma County Juvenile Justice Commission.
- F4. Administrative staff of the Sonoma County Department of Human Services and the Home are cooperative with and receptive to being evaluated by outside agencies.

Recommendations

None

Reports issued by the Civil Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code Section 929 requires that reports of the Civil Grand Jury not contain the names of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Civil Grand Jury.

