

Sonoma County Juvenile Justice Commission

January 21, 2016

As the Sonoma County Juvenile Justice Commission, we believe that Residential Treatment for Foster Youth is under attack in California. In the past five years, over half of all treatment facilities providing services for children and adolescents in California have closed.

Our commission is extremely concerned about state policy changes surrounding the care and treatment of one of our most vulnerable populations, children with histories of significant abuse and neglect. These children have often experienced profound trauma, which can include severe physical and sexual abuse, drug exposure in utero, and various forms of neglect including lack of medical care, safe housing, malnutrition, and starvation.

No one would argue that we would like all children to grow up with the support of a family. However, families are often ill equipped to deal with the extreme behaviors some foster children, with emotional disturbances and mental illness, exhibit. Behaviors can include, self-harm and suicidal behaviors, sexual acting out, violent and assaultive behaviors, elopement, school failures, and many other serious behavioral issues related to symptoms of anxiety, depression, and attachment.

Limited research has been used and cherry picked to further the agenda of individuals who believe that our most traumatized children only need to be with a family to “heal” from this trauma. The truth is that many of these children will carry the trauma of their childhood throughout their lives, resulting in higher rates of substance abuse, incarceration, psychiatric hospitalization, and homelessness than the general population.

The goal of placing youth in family settings first is not a new policy. Youth who are referred to residential care programs have usually suffered many years of failed placements with family and in foster care before residential treatment is considered. These placement failures only add to a youth’s history of trauma and failure. For youth whose needs cannot or have not been met in less-restrictive settings such as family-based programs or foster care, treatment in a quality residential treatment program, provided at the right time, for the appropriate length of time is essential.

Each county in the state of California is required to have a Juvenile Justice Commission (JJC) as established by the Welfare and Institutions Code. The JJC may inquire into the operation of any group home that serves children. Hundreds of JJC commissioners in California inspect group homes and interview youth annually. Continuum of Care reform was developed with feedback from everyone except California’s Juvenile Justice Commissioners.

During the 1990’s Australian State and Territory governments closed residential programs. The reported justification for this policy change was that foster care was more beneficial and less expensive. In the late 1980s the same decision was made in parts of the UK in favor of foster care. The conclusion was it didn’t work. Currently, both countries have increased their investment in therapeutic residential care for this special population.

Residential Treatment for youth with this level of trauma should not be relegated to an arbitrary goal of a specific number of days in treatment. Treatment should be guided by the child's current needs and in which setting they can best be met. We believe quality residential care should be an essential element of any continuum of care and, when needed, can be the treatment approach of choice to therapeutically address the impact of trauma.

Please consider the need for ensuring that quality residential care remain available and can be a significant part of the continuum of care.

Sincerely,

Sonoma County Juvenile Justice Commission