

Supervisors consider closing juvenile hall

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Del Norte County's juvenile hall is requesting to be closed citing inadequate staffing as required by law and a shortage of incarcerated youth who need the facility.

Lonnie Reyman, Del Norte County's chief probation officer who runs the county's juvenile hall, told the board of supervisors that there are not enough incarcerated youth using the facility and regulations for too many staff which they cannot get hired. Reyman described the situation as a financial issue and also a morale problem. "People need hope, and my staff have no hope."

He cited numerous reasons mostly around regulations demanding a certain staff level and work requirements that don't match the reality of fewer detained youth. "Burnout, failure to meet regulations, late court reports, failure to supervise." Reyman informed the Board of Supervisors that young offenders with serious enough charges to warrant incarceration could be moved to Humboldt or other county facilities.

At the time of his request, he stated there were only two youths at juvenile hall and one would likely go home that day.

"I think we should think of this as good news as juvenile crime continues to fall." Supervisor Valerie Starkey said in response to shrinking offender numbers. "I'm not opposed to closing juvenile hall if it's just about having fewer youth who need it. If it's about money or staffing, we need to eliminate that as a reason."

Throughout California, the juvenile justice system is undergoing rapid change. Governor Gavin Newsom has ordered the closing of juvenile prisons by June of 2023 in response to the reality of shrinking juvenile crime. In the years leading up to the decision, the number of youth ages 12 to 25 locked up by the state has dropped dramatically, from an average daily population of roughly 10,000 in 1996 to fewer than 700 last year, according to the Division of Juvenile Justice.

What's happening in Del Norte is occurring around the state and nation. Numerous states are reporting fewer youth incarcerations combined with a fresh look at what constitutes juvenile crime. The trend is moving away from harsh punishment for minor offenses now that the "get tough on crime" era appears to be shifting.

Some California counties are shutting down juvenile facilities rather than re-make them under the direction of the state which is shifting responsibility to Health and Human Services. The new mandate is for restructuring as supportive and restorative justice as opposed to incarceration or punishment. Lassen County recently shut its juvenile hall and Reyman is requesting the same.

However, others like long time teacher Becky Barlow who taught many of the kids who came through the system, suggested a restructuring,

"Perhaps we could have a community day school or some ways to support the youth better," she said, "I favor more of a restructuring than a closure."

"This could be an opportunity to create a model program. I think this could be seen as a restructure, which comes with some great possibilities," said Supervisor Susan Masten who continued to support continuing use of juvenile hall but re-imagined. "We could not incarcerate but offer something that's much better."

Supervisor Starky said that given the board had just heard the report, she wanted more time to evaluate before deciding.

"This isn't like CVS cutting hours for lack of staff, this is a big decision for the public and I think we need time to investigate and consider the best ways forward," she said.

Chair Gerry Hemmingsen supported closure.

"This isn't a matter of getting some report out from others," he said. "This is about what we can't do. We can't staff juvenile hall. It has no value if we can't be in compliance. I don't think we have other options but to close it as a detention facility. That doesn't mean we can't still use it for youth in other ways"

The general tone from Supervisors and Reyman was that services for youth would still occur at the facility. The lynchpin was around the question of if those services should include detention given the difficulty in hiring staff which sits at about 4% and Reyman said they need twice that or more. "I wear a badge. People don't want to work for us right now. It's not a good time to be a sworn officer."

The Board of Supervisors agreed to continue the discussion for another day in hopes of receiving more information about what juvenile hall might look like without detention facilities and comparing Del Norte to

other California counties to see if those who closed their detention facilities are pleased with their choice.

Newsom ordered the state's four youth prisons closed by next summer, and in addition counties must set up alternatives like camps or minimally restrictive centers. The new approach will center on therapy and health services, vocational education and community support. So whatever supervisors choose in connection to the closure or restructuring of the juvenile hall, those elements must be kept in mind according to the state's order. If they close entirely, it's unclear what level of service they may be required to offer which may go into the thinking, however most Supervisors stated a preference for continuation of services for youth.

