

County juvenile hall cuts use of force, beefs up education in lawsuit's wake

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Published Saturday, Jul. 27, 2013

Sun shines through the skylights and tomatoes grow on the outdoor patios. Staff members smile and chat people up. Modern three-dimensional artwork decorates the walls.

Lines of kids walking single file and looking straight ahead give away that it's a correctional setting, but even at that, the Sacramento County Youth Detention Facility – juvenile hall – is a calmer, cooler place these days.

Seven years ago, the Prison Law Office in Berkeley had considered the facility a disaster area for juvenile detainees and filed a lawsuit to fix it.

The county agreed to make some changes in 2009, and four years later the remarkable has occurred – those very same critics now hail the jail's turnaround.

In December, the Prison Law Office declined to extend the 2009 consent decree it had with Sacramento County, a rarity in corrections litigation. The decision means the hall has succeeded in limiting its use of force on the kids, reducing the time it keeps them isolated in their cells and improving its mental health and education programs.

"They had transformed the juvenile hall from a place of pain and suffering into a place that provides rehabilitation and treatment to juvenile offenders," said Don Specter, director of the Prison Law Office. "They weren't breaking arms anymore. The kids were happy."

Specter's group sued in 2006 on grounds that probation employees who staff the hall routinely pummeled the young detainees for minor rules violations. The suit also alleged the county had subjected offenders to prolonged isolation times, which in turn ratcheted up their anxiety levels, leading to more misconduct.

To fix the problem, Probation Department officials changed the culture of the hall, which has an annual budget of \$41.5 million, is staffed by 212 sworn employees and on Thursday housed 205 youths either serving time or awaiting trial in juvenile and adult courts. It is located in the unincorporated area of Rosemont.

In any correctional system, the employee culture is mainly about safety and protecting one another from danger. In the environment of youth corrections, Sacramento County's new probation chief, Lee Seale, said the culture change meant finding better ways to achieve safety

than smashing kids' faces into the floor, one of the accusations made against the hall's staff in the 2006 lawsuit.

"Conventional wisdom might be that reducing staff force would somehow enable or permit a greater number of incidents of violence by the youth," Seale said. "But what we've seen is exactly the opposite, that in fact making the Youth Detention Facility safer for the youth has also resulted in less incidents on staff, less assaults on staff. The two things go together."

The numbers show a striking result. In 2010, the staff used force in 704 incidents. In 2012, the number fell to 347 – a 50.7 percent drop. When adjusted for a lower average daily population, the figures still showed a 34.8 percent decrease in the number of incidents resulting in force, according to Probation Department statistics.

Reduced confrontation means the employees who staff the hall are less likely to get hurt. Over the two years, staff injuries fell from 42 to 15 annually, and by a rate of 47 percent when measured against the average daily population.

As probation officials analyzed force incidents and incorporated the new knowledge into new training programs, they also decided to come up with a more interesting program for the kids.

"We've recognized that the educational component needs to be something that is meaningful and valued by the kids in order to get them to effectively participate," said Mike Shores, the Probation Department's institutional services division chief.

Along with school programs, the hall has gone heavy on sports, mainly basketball and soccer, with volunteers coming every day to coach and teach. More volunteers help youths with their reading. The National Guard twice a month runs a ropes course. Other volunteers teach yoga and religion. And there are some who don't teach anything – they just talk to the kids and listen to them.

Saturday is barbecue night, and young detainees from the city's assorted gang sets put their differences aside while they chomp on ribs and chicken.

"As of today, this place has changed," said one young offender whom authorities allowed to speak on condition that he not be identified. "When I first entered this place (more than two years ago), it was nothing but gang stuff going on – constantly, every day, and people refusing to take it down. People are now having the same vibe with each other, not causing as much trouble. I don't have to worry about as much stuff."

Greg Turner, a deputy probation officer who works the hall, might represent the face of culture change. The silver rings in his earlobes are fairly uncommon in traditional correctional settings. He now views his job from a different perspective.

"Instead of focusing on the problems, we look for the causes of the problems – dealing with this, fixing that, helping with that, the issues that lead kids to getting in trouble in general," Turner said.

A 13-year department veteran, Turner still sprints down the hall when the emergency lights flash, signifying an incident in a housing unit that needs backup. These days, the incident is more likely to be met with a response short of a takedown.

"Instead of focusing as law enforcement, we now focus more, I hate to say, as counselors," Turner said. "We talk to these kids a lot more. And they've opened up to us more than they ever did before."

Greg Stuber, president of the Sacramento County Probation Association, said "there is no doubt" more training and new policies have forced the rank and file to change. But in welcoming the expiration of the consent decree, Stuber noted that people being hailed now for their enlightenment are the very same staffers pilloried in past lawsuits.

"They were great staff before this," Stuber said. "They are fantastic staff now. They have not changed as people."

In the past, once state and federal judges in California appointed special masters or receivers or put consent decrees into effect in correctional facilities, the oversight has typically lasted years – decades, in some cases.

Specter, the lawyer whose Prison Law Office brought the suit that forced the change in Sacramento's juvenile hall, credited Seale's predecessor, Don Meyer, with carrying it out. He also gave Shores top grades for transparency.

"It was really a good experience for us," Specter said.

Seale, who didn't take over the job until the problems were addressed, still knows about court oversight of corrections. In his previous job with the state prison system, he oversaw the discharge of a 20-year Prison Law Office suit that governed the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation's internal affairs operation and its policies on use of force at Pelican Bay State Prison.

Now, at the Probation Department, his job is to make sure the culture doesn't change back.

Twice a day, he gets emails giving him statistical updates on use of force and other key metrics in the hall. Then he acts on the findings.

"Managers know they're being asked questions about those numbers," Seale said, "and then it gets pushed down the chain, and then there becomes this kind of institution-wide understanding."

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