

Political pressure from local leaders, charities kept shelters open

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Photo: Leah Millis, The Chronicle

Nick Honey, Sonoma County Family, Youth and Children's Division director, leads a tour of the Moon Children's Home in Santa Rosa.

At a La Jolla hilltop estate in June 2014, philanthropists and dignitaries gathered to fete the 20th anniversary of San Diego County's shelter for foster children. The fundraiser, featuring a sunset cocktail reception, dinner of ale-braised short ribs and entertainment by Grammy Award-winner Kenny Loggins, netted \$750,000 and demonstrated the deep-pocketed affection for the local institution.

A few months later, the powerful alliances on display that night would mobilize again, along with other shelter boosters around the state. This time, their goal was ensuring the survival of California's shelters for abused and neglected children, as lawmakers and top child welfare officials moved to close the institutions they considered outmoded and inappropriate.

County supervisors, philanthropists and other shelter proponents met with state lawmakers, wrote letters to legislative committees and deployed lobbyists to make their case for retaining the 10 shelters, which include some of the state's largest foster care facilities and serve as a first stop for thousands of children just removed from abusive homes and those between placements.

Though child welfare experts and youth advocates have long decried shelters as orphanage-like institutions hazardous for children who need secure attachments with parental figures, supporters have fought to keep them open, arguing they give social workers more time to find the best homes for hard-to-place children and help keep large sibling groups together.

“To me, these kids’ lives were at stake,” said San Diego County Supervisor Ron Roberts, referring to the foster children at the county shelter and a nearby residential high school. “I would have hired the governor if he was available.”

In the end, the collective pressure led the Legislature to dial back proposed restrictions on shelters. Under AB403, authored by Santa Cruz Democrat Mark Stone and passed in 2015, shelters will have to limit children’s stays to just 10 days. But they were exempted from regulations requiring more than 750 other residential foster care facilities to shift to short-term, specialized therapeutic programs or shut down.



Photo: Leah Millis, The Chronicle

Jennifer Rodriguez, executive director of the nonprofit Youth Law Center in San Francisco, chats with Assemblyman Mark Stone, D-Santa Cruz, at a Sacramento hearing on youth in foster care.

The California Department of Social Services, the sponsor of Stone’s legislation, maintains it did not compromise on its greater goals. Instead, after hearing from counties concerned about losing their shelters, the department allowed them more time to shift away from that model toward home-based care. Under new licensing standards issued in April, the counties must submit plans detailing how they will find placements for children as quickly as possible, and how they will transition shelter facilities to other uses. In 2021, the department will

evaluate the number and types of children still in shelters, and whether they should continue to be licensed.

CHRONICLE INVESTIGATION

California's foster care shelters are supposed to serve as a refuge for vulnerable children. Instead, they have funneled hundreds of kids into the criminal justice system. [Click to read our investigation.](#)

Shelter supporters have pushed policy makers beyond California, in states including Nevada, Arizona and Florida, said Carole Shauffer, a senior director with the nonprofit Youth Law Center. The involvement of big-name backers, such as tennis star Andre Agassi and legendary 49ers quarterback Joe Montana, has amplified the cause.

“In California and in other states, the private philanthropic groups that support these shelters have been a huge force in maintaining them and developing new shelters, even beyond the time when research told us shelters were not the way to go,” Shauffer said. “It’s the system putting the needs of prominent community members and those of the bureaucracy over the needs of the children — and legislators who give in to that are basically doing the same.”

California’s shelters have come under scrutiny again, following a recent [Chronicle investigation](#) that found hundreds of children in shelters have been arrested after emotional outbursts and minor scuffles. The state attorney general’s office is looking into law enforcement activity at the facilities, and some critics have [renewed calls for their closure.](#)

The 10 county shelters operating in 2015 and 2016 called law enforcement more than 14,000 times to respond to reports of runaways or alleged crimes, resulting in hundreds of detentions at juvenile halls for relatively minor offenses, the investigation found. Foster children as young as 8 were funneled into the criminal justice system after calls from shelter staffers, who at times recommended criminal charges against the traumatized children entrusted to their care.

Most of those juvenile hall bookings, about 200, followed incidents at the Mary Graham Children’s Shelter in San Joaquin County. Bookings from other shelters were far less frequent — including 32 in San Diego County, 13 in Sonoma County and 11 in Orange County — but they still concerned child advocates. And constant calls to police regarding

runaways from many facilities, they said, indicated children were fleeing environments they considered unsafe.



Photo: Leah Millis, The Chronicle

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San Joaquin County sheriff's Deputies Stephen Mitchell (center) and Irene Shelvay (not seen) respond to a call of a returned runaway at Mary Graham Children's Shelter in French Camp.

Shelter directors said the arrests of foster children were a result of emergency situations they could not handle without law enforcement backup. But The Chronicle found that most of the bookings resulted from behavior expected from traumatized children in shelter settings — conflicts that escalated from things like food fights and board game disputes.

California has been shifting away from shelter care for foster children for more than a decade, as a growing body of research has shown that housing groups of vulnerable children together can lead to poor outcomes, including increased criminality and educational failures. Shelters serve a broad mix of children, some entering the foster care system for the first time and others hardened by years of multiple moves between group homes.

Shelters in Los Angeles, Santa Clara, San Luis Obispo, Fresno, Placer, Ventura and San Mateo counties have closed or plan to close by next year, mirroring a national trend. In most of California, children taken from their parents are placed directly with relatives and foster families, or spend just 24 to 72 hours in a receiving center.

Yet a handful of counties, some backed by wealthy and well-connected donors, have remained committed to the outdated shelter model,

lobbying to keep them from shutting down and investing millions of dollars in building new campuses and upgrading the facilities.

In Orange, San Diego, Sonoma and San Joaquin counties, local shelters are equipped with amenities, including on-site dental and medical clinics, swimming pools, state-of-the-art kitchens, schools and libraries — all partially paid for by nonprofits that have supported the longevity of the institutions.

The Mary Graham Children’s Foundation was established in 2000 with the goal of replacing San Joaquin County’s former children’s shelter — a stark, brick barracks built during World War I. The foundation raised \$1 million toward a new \$9 million complex of playfully angled, pastel cottages completed in 2003.

The fundraising continued even as youth advocates pushed to shut down Mary Graham for its heavy reliance on law enforcement and lack of mental health services — problems that have persisted there.



Photo: Leah Millis, The Chronicle

Mary Graham Children’s Shelter in San Joaquin County had 200 juvenile hall bookings in 2015 and ‘16, the most among the 10 shelters.

The Valley of the Moon Children’s Foundation — which has a former congressman, a district attorney and a bank CEO among the community leaders on its board — raised nearly \$6 million to help build a \$25 million shelter in Sonoma County. The sprawling facility set in a lush valley was completed in 2009.

Like other foundations supporting shelters, including the Mary Graham Children’s Foundation, the nonprofit funds broader services for foster youth, such as college and trade school scholarships. But at Valley of

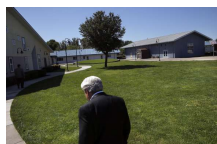
the Moon, a central focus remains providing a richer array of activities for youth at the shelter.

“We make sure children have a garden, play structures, computer labs, art programs, Christmas parties — things you don’t get at a normal, institution-type children’s home,” said Laura Colgate, the foundation’s president.

Such substantial investments and upgrades have helped cement shelters’ continued existence throughout California.

When donors visit shelters, “the young children run over to them, they hug them, they want to be read to and played with, and that must gratify their egos,” Shauffer said. “But I don’t think they think through what the child’s experience is. Would it be great for your child to be living with no parent whatsoever?”

MORE



Chronicle investigation spurs calls to close foster care shelters

In January 2015, after three years of study, state child welfare officials concluded that foster care shelters should eventually be phased out. In a report to the Legislature that laid the groundwork for Assemblyman Stone’s legislation, the California Department of Social Services stated that “although these counties have invested significantly in shelters,” their continued use is inconsistent with the state’s “principles and goals.”

Counties quickly challenged the recommendation. Orange County Supervisor Todd Spitzer wrote to Stone in April 2015 saying his board would oppose the legislation unless it was amended to allow the county to continue operating its Orangewood Children and Family Center. Phasing out Orangewood, Spitzer wrote, would “detrimentally impact” children who are difficult to place, a concern echoed a few months later by Assemblyman Matthew Harper, R-Huntington Beach (Orange County), before a floor vote.

A representative of the Orangewood Foundation, which raised more than \$8 million to build the county shelter on a 10-acre campus in 1985, also said in a public meeting that the nonprofit would oppose Stone’s bill if it was not amended.

The foundation board is composed of prominent community members, including the vice president of Disneyland Park and the chief operating officer of the Anaheim Ducks hockey team. It was founded by retired Gen. William Lyon, a major philanthropist and real estate developer who, along with his home building company, has donated millions to political candidates and committees in statewide elections.

The chief executive officer of the Promises2Kids organization, which raised \$12.8 million to build San Diego's A.B. and Jessie Polinsky Children's Center in 1994, also weighed in. Tonya Torosian traveled to the state capital with a former foster youth to meet with elected officials and advocate for the county's shelter.

Promises2Kids has long served as a charitable cause for business leaders, and has employed several former public officials over the years, including a San Diego mayor. In Southern California, the nonprofit is well known for its annual concert fundraiser, hosted by Joan Waitt, a local businesswoman, philanthropist and former wife of Gateway co-founder and billionaire tech tycoon Ted Waitt.

The event raises money to help foster youth pursue higher education and attend camp with siblings, in addition to programs at the shelter, such as screenings for developmental delays and pet therapy.

"I believe strongly that Polinsky should not close," Torosian said in a recent interview. "There are not enough places for children in foster care. I would much rather see a child who needs an immediate placement served by Polinsky versus the potential of moving between multiple families."

Adding still more pressure, San Diego County's lobbyist, James Gross of Nielsen Merksamer Parrinello Gross & Leoni, also advocated for the foster youth school and shelter.

In an April 22, 2015, letter to the Assembly Human Services Committee chair, Gross warned against a "one size fits all" approach to foster care reforms, asking lawmakers to exempt the two San Diego County facilities he described as "vital to the success of some of our most vulnerable youth."

Those concerns were ultimately heard. Under amendments to the resulting legislation that drew overwhelming support, shelters will continue to serve a mix of children, from newborns through age 18. In four years, the state will review how they have performed with the new 10-day limit on children's stays — a marked change from the weeks and months children often spent in shelters in the past.

In response to The Chronicle's investigative report, Assemblyman Stone said: "Even though shelters were allowed to stay open in this reform, we are looking closely at how kids are being treated when in the shelters. We will continue to evaluate their use, especially if they don't respond to the problems found in this report."

Leland Collins, recently retired director of the San Luis Obispo Social Service Department, said he understands that political compromises had to be made, but he laments that children paid the price.

In 2003, Collins said, he made the "very unpopular call" of shutting down his county's small shelter. The facility was convenient for social workers and its staff was well-meaning, he said, but it failed the children it was supposed to serve.

"What happens when you place a lot of hurting, angry, frightened children together in a facility?" he said. "The big ones tend to take out their hurt on the smaller ones. The smaller ones run, and I don't blame them, because you would, too. Youth can get out of control, and efforts by staff to control them can lead to twisted arms and broken stuff and calls to the police."

Collins said expanding the ranks of foster family homes to replace the shelter beds has been a constant struggle, but well worth it. There are far fewer runaway youth, police calls and violent incidents, he said.

"Let's face it, a shelter is nothing more than a processing center, no matter how you dress it up with medical staff and toys and backpacks," he said. "There are residents and staff, not children and their foster parents."

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