

Sonoma County Juvenile Justice Commission Facility Inspection Report

Facility Name:	Valley of the Moon Children's Home (VOMCH)
Address:	On File
Phone	On File
Contact Person	Leslie Winters Section manager

J.J.C. Inspector(s)	Jody Edwards and Hank Mattimore
Date of Inspection	April 9, 2015
Date of Last Inspection	April 15, 2014
C.C.L. Contact	Pauline Muntzer
Date of Last C.C.L. Inspection	?

**S= Satisfactory or exceeds N.I. = Needs Improvement/corrective action*

INSPECTED	S	N.I.	Comments
Grounds	X		For this inspection we focused on interviewing first line staff, interviewing youth and getting our many questions answered by the section manager. We only did a cursory inspection of the facility. Yet as we walked through we saw a spotless facility with well-maintained and attractive grounds.
Building Exterior	X		There are two buildings on site, the administrative building and the children's home building. Both were built within the last seven years and are in great shape.
Living Room	X		We viewed both the girls and boys wings and the central living area is comfortable, well equipped with books, games, tables, and comfortable chairs. There is a central desk area where a staff member sits and monitors what is happening in the central area as well as any other place where there are computer monitors. We observed staff interacting 1-1 with youth, for example playing chess, talking to a youth who had just arrived.
Kitchen	X		
Bedrooms	X		
Bathrooms	X		
Fire Safety -Extinguishers -Smoke Alarms -Evac. Plan ?	X		
Food	X		We observed large bowls of bananas, apples and oranges sitting on the central desk available for youth any time. We asked about food and do the kids get enough? The chef follows all the FDA guidelines and in general kids get more than enough to eat, but Leslie said they are in process of reviewing their menus and making decisions about what to allow for seconds and thirds. For example if the child has eaten nothing but tater tots, do they allow seconds and thirds on tater tots? Healthy snacks are always available to the youth. Leslie invited us to join them for dinner any night, dinner is always from 5-6.
Health Services	X		During last year's inspection we learned that at admission, the child is screened for overall mental health. Because of the temporary nature of the child's stay, they are not given a treatment plan from the clinician. If they started therapy and then the child is placed, therapy would start again with someone new and that can be disruptive. The Katie A lawsuit has changed things such that today the Mental health services are better

			than in the past. We have a full time Mental Health provider named Jennifer Morehouse who screens each child for his or her level of need. If they qualify for Mental Health services, she passes the child on to one of her six co-workers/Mental Health clinicians who then complete a full assessment. Then they begin providing the services. They don't stop like they did before. Unless a child is placed outside the county, that same clinician follows the child to their next placement and continues to provide services. As a result of this change we have seen an increased level of investment from Jennifer and providers. For example they participate in multidisciplinary meetings each week, they collaborate more with their coworkers, they are offering to staff members who are responsible for child's care how they might interact more effectively with them. Leslie is also noticing more team meetings for kids about placement, removal, challenges and the clinicians seem to know so much more about the child, they know their family, their extended family, how the child is at school etc. The child who is determined to need therapy receives it at least two times a month and sometimes weekly if they are in crisis. It's far more comprehensive than in the past. Leslie would like to see more.
Medications	X		There were 41 children on psychotropic drugs from 1/1/15 to 4/1/15. This is approximately 20% of the youth and sounds about right to Leslie. The majority of brand new kids are not on psychotropic drugs, they may be on inhalers or ADHD drugs, but these are not psychotropic.
Recreation (on site)	X		
Outings (off site)	X		According to the floor staff we talked to, "VOMCH does a great job planning events, going on outings, taking kids to the movies, going out to dinner, to the park to make it seem like a normal childhood."
Education/ Classrooms	X		Last year we learned that the on-site school had closed and they were sending the youth to their school district of origin. We asked how that was going. Leslie said it is doing great, it keeps kids connected to their communities, it keeps them with the teachers who know and loved them. Sometimes teachers will call us and tell us how different it is; that the child comes to school clothed and fed. If the child is from out of county, we have examples of driving them to Lake county every day to go to school. We use a "Best Interest Checklist" and one of the factors to consider is transportation time. When they are out of county, we can't get the school district to bus them so we have to do that.
Mail/Phone	X		
INSPECTED	S	N.I.	Comments
Family Contact	X		
Discipline	X		There are four levels the child can achieve. They get points and can turn in those points for toys. They use the Boys Town Model which includes a detailed positive reward system.
Library	X		We observed large libraries in each of the two main central living areas.

ADDITIONAL NOTES

In September of 2014 the JJC received an Opinion Paper authored by a group called the Foster Care Coalition. This hundred page document accused VOMCH of many inappropriate actions. There were several investigations into this including our own and at the completion of those investigations we agreed that there were no inappropriate actions being taken by VOMCH. However, as a result of the Opinion Paper we decided to add two things to our JJC inspection responsibilities. The first is a monthly review of the Incident reports, not all, but some random sampling and the second is during the annual inspection, interviewing the first line staff whose job it is to provide care directly to the youth.

Beginning Jan 2015 this commissioner has been reviewing incident reports monthly. Since 1/1/15 to 4/6/15 there have been nine containments where they used restraints on a child. I asked Leslie if she considered that normal. She said no because 6 of those restraints were on the same child and two were on a different child. I had read that for this particular difficult child, he seemed to be agitated by female staff and had issues with his mother. I asked if she made any effort to ensure he was only cared for by male staff. She said they seldom limit staffing to one gender but in his case, if we would have had him longer, we may have had to change something there. He has gone to a level 14 group home.

What follows next is a summary of our interviews with staff. We selected one particular staff member because his name appeared several times as being involved with the use of restraints when reviewing containment incident reports. He has been at VOMCH for 12 years and appears to be a thoughtful, caring individual. Here are some of his comments:

- We asked how VOM has changed over the years – one thing that has changed since we got to this facility is we do less containments, ie, we use less restraints. It used to be about having control of the situation. Now we want to ensure everybody's safe and make a better effort to connect to the kids and with teens we don't go hands on if running away unless they are a risk to themselves or others.
- We asked about using restraints – if we have enough staff, we can stand back and see how far the child is going to go without putting hands on. As staff get more seasoned, we calm ourselves down, worry less about what will happen if the kid throws something, and we use less when we know the kid and know that we can outrun them. If a child can get himself in control it's 100% better than if we have to do it. Over the years I've learned the value of just waiting.
- We asked if the child's volatility is more kid against kid or kid against staff – with teens they assert themselves with staff. With boys in our up to age 12 wing, there are eight year olds that bother 12 year olds and sometimes that is an issue. We work with the 8 year old to say, you don't say that kind of stuff to a 12 year old and we work with the 12 year old to say, come on, he is just 8.
- He feels he has a great job with a great opportunity for me to learn. "I always learn when working with the kids. I try to understand how they see the world. I'm learning how to teach the kids, to help them be ok with how they are, to help them integrate. They bring difficult issues; they have love and concern for their family."
- He says it's harder on the teens to be taken out of their homes, they've gotten used to surviving the way they do, they've been independent, and it's harder for them to understand we're trying to help them. For the younger kids, it's a breath of fresh air to come here, especially for those that have been socially isolated; they thrive here with lots of instant friends and lots of safe adults.
- We're a community taking care of the kids. It's public here, there's no place for weirdness.
- We asked if he had anything else to tell us – he said that report, referring to the opinion paper by the Foster change Coalition – what a lot of nonsense, I really feel bad for the kids who are being approached by those people. He also said it would be great if we could be more creative about repairing the families and keeping them intact.

Here are comments from the second staff member we spoke to:

- She had worked at a different Sonoma County group home prior to VOMCH.
- We asked her to compare the different places of work - She described there being a lot more training here and lots more protocols here. She compared the past place of work by saying it was an actual home but here we try to make the kids feel comfortable and decorate for all the holidays. VOMCH does a great job planning events, going on outings, taking kids to the movies, going out to dinner, to the park to make it seem like a normal childhood.
- She said everything is always 'to the T' around here, repairs are made quickly. Kids go in and out of here quickly, that is different too, we used to have time to make relationships with them. Here it is sad to see when a youth goes back home and then comes back days or weeks later.
- We asked if she is able to make relationships with the youth here - Some kids are jaded, like the teens, they don't want relationships but I always try to build relationships with them. I have my MS in counseling and I use that education as I try. I stick with the program (giving points for good behaviors) but focus most on interaction, it is important for them to have positive relationships with adults.
- In my past group home there were younger kids and we didn't allow them to run. Here we have runners, it's very concerning, it takes away our power to keep them safe.
- We asked if she has used restraints here – she said she has not needed to do that here, yet if a child cannot keep themselves in control, she has seen that sometimes the use of a restraint actually can calm a child
- We asked about affection with a child – she said we are allowed to hug children, but only side hugs. We try to keep appropriate boundaries, but kids need that affection, especially little kids.
- I really like working here, it is a good place. Sometimes it can be frustrating to watch how long a social worker will take to get back to kids. They feel forgotten. From kids reports, they have said it can be two weeks even when they have called and called their social worker. These kids feel abandoned by their situation and then they say, "Even my social worker won't call me back." I support the social worker by telling them they have big caseloads and they are working on your situations, sometimes I even make a call to the social worker to try to get them to call back but that is a tough part about working here.
- We empathized about the social workers by saying that must be hard, it seems like there needs to be more social workers or more skilled ones. She said especially with teens, sometime they go AWOL because they don't get the return calls, they don't understand what's happening with them or they don't get those return calls and they run.
- How are the rest of the staff – My peers are excellent, I learn from them all the time
- How is your supervisor – I feel really supported by my supervisor, she's there for me and helps defuse situations. I can talk to her about concerns. As a team we try to think about changes that will make a child's situation better. She is open to talking to her boss about making those changes.

- What do you think about the mental health services – we can do mental health referrals. I wish every kid that came here could get therapy. Imagine the stress they have gone through just to be taken to this facility, the abuse or neglect at their home and then the police ride here, they all need therapy. I try to do as much milieu therapy as I can, doing therapy with them just as I care for them.
- We asked if there was any opportunity to be inappropriate with a child as a staff member – she said there are lots of protocols to protect kids and staff to ensure nothing inappropriate happens. We are not alone with kids when other people can't view us, for example, we read stories to kids at bedtime, but we do it at the door of their rooms, not in their rooms. Yet if someone really wanted to... I guess where there is a will there is a way.

We talked with Leslie Winter, the section manager and lead staff person and learned the following:

- We asked about the 80 hours of training and three days of shadowing trained staff. Is all this required before they work with the kids? Leslie said it is all required before they supervise kids on their own. If they have done part of the trainings they can be with another staff and working. That situation would occur to maximize the training load. Specifically, a staff must have 8 shadow shifts with another staff before working the floor alone with a youth. They must also be signed off by the program manager before being alone with the youth.
- We asked about runaways. There are 4-8 runaways at a given time. For example, if they have 40 kids, in a month, four to eight of them might runaway.. Today, four youth are considered AWOL and we don't know where they are. There are 4-8 unique children, not the same child who left, came back and left again.
- Social worker issues. The caseload is an age old problem; we have no authority about the social workers. I sometimes reach out to them and create group meetings about a child as necessary. The other problem with social workers is that the social worker who picks them up from their home is not the same one as who is their social worker once they are here, and that is not the same one as a couple weeks later. So in just a few weeks, the child's social worker changes three times.
- How many are 1-1 care? Of the 20-25 kids, one or two at a time are 1-1 care.
- What is happening about human trafficking and the initiatives there? In November you told us about CSEC, Commercially Sexually Exploiting Children, there is a lot of attention at the state level about this. As of January 2015 we can file on these children. There is a new 300 code and new training about this. It is not a good mix to have these CSEC children at VOMCH because we have experienced where they have rounded up a couple of our kids and runaway taking these innocents with them. Since January we have not had any youth enter VOMCH that have this new code, but we have had kids here that we thought had been trafficked. We have opted in to CSEC which means we have been given training fund for training the staff about this. As a county we are working on a protocol for action taken when one of these children shows up. This will be completed by July and then the county will fund a half time social worker position to do this work. One of the decisions to make is where do we want them to get safe housing; it may not be with the innocents here because of what they might get talked into. We think the best place to get counseling for them is from survivors and they are brainwashed from an early age about this. This issue is not so much VOMCH it is the entire county.

Youth Interviews

TOPICS	S	N.I.	Comments
Evaluation of Program	X		One youth said it was fine here and better than at the hall
Counseling/ Therapy	X		
Physical Education	X		
Health Services	X		
School	X		He mentioned that he hasn't been to school for the five days here. He just signed up today to attend Mario Carillo. He is nervous about going to school
Food	X		We asked what the youth thought of it here and he said the food portions are not good enough. He is underweight because of a car accident he had and lost 40 pounds. And he says he is not getting enough food. There is only one snack a day. When I said I thought there were snacks available all the time, he pointed at a large bowl of bananas, apples and oranges and said, yes, there is that.

Snacks	X		
Library	X		
Chores	X		
Money	X		
Mail / Phone	X		
Levels (privileges)	X		
Laundry	X		
Grievances	X		The boy who had been here longer offered that there are a lot of rules. He mentioned that there were a lot of rules, he couldn't even eat lunch with the girl he had ridden with when she signed up for school that same day with him.
Activities & Entertainment	X		
Program Length Understood	X		
Staff evaluation	X		Both said they have been fine here. One was observed playing chess with a staff member and when the staff member got up to let us interview the boy, the staff said he has won several times and I've only won twice. Then when we left he wanted to play again with that staff member.
Discipline	X		
Allowance	X		
Clothes	X		
Medications	X		
Drugs/Alcohol			
Probation officer			

ADDITIONAL NOTES & SUGGESTIONS BY YOUTH

of Youth Interviewed: 2
Ages of youth interviewed: 1) M age 15 2) M age 17
Length of time at this facility: 1) 1 day 2) 5 days

Both commissioners are seasoned commissioners and were surprised about the fact that the boys we interviewed today had come from the juvenile hall. Their additional comments are below. We asked about the kids we interviewed coming from juvenile hall to VOMCH. She told us that if a child commits a crime and then they realize the family situation is not good, we do an assessment. The parents have to have committed a crime of abuse or neglect for the youth to be considered victims of something and they have to be victims to be here.

First Boy:

- He had just spent 9 days in juvenile hall
- He told us that he had been brutally beaten by his father and that while he was at the hall, his girlfriend had gone into labor and birthed his child who died because the umbilical cord had been wrapped around his neck. He had been unable to speak to his girlfriend yet, but was told he would be able to today.
- He is waiting for his grandmother to find a place for the two of them to live

Second boy:

- He was in the Juvenile hall for 41 days. The he was here and is waiting until his mother can get a stable environment.
- He was booked into the hall for fighting with his sister, she is also at the hall, but won't be released here because she has an established history as a runner
- He feels safe here, but not comfortable. He is not comfortable because his family is in southern California.

The Valley of the Moon Children's Home is Sonoma County's only emergency shelter for children who have been removed due to allegations of abuse, abandonment or neglect. Stays are temporary by design with a goal of 30 days or less to find the right placement for the child or youth. They are not a treatment program. The facility is considered a group home for all levels and of the kids in residence, Teens (ages 13-18), pre-teens (ages 6-12) and children under age six are in separate programs. Capacity is 72 in the east and west wings. This does not include the bamboo child section where the capacity is eight.

The Valley of the Moon Children's Home provides a beautiful, spacious home for children in transition. The staff members we met appear to be caring and highly competent. The children who come in crisis are immediately given blankets and stuffed animals for comfort as they get evaluations of their needs and get those needs met.

Mental health has improved since a year ago, but neither Leslie nor the staff thinks it is enough. We encourage VOMCH to be leaders in this area and somehow gain the funding to have mental health therapy for every child who enters the home.

Social worker caseloads - This is a problem and while it is not in the purview of Leslie and the VOMCH, we must enable our children in the system to be heard. A child who calls his social worker again and again and does not hear back from the social worker will never be heard in the system. We support and encourage VOMCH to actively push on this issue by having floor staff makes calls to social workers when a child is waiting to hear from them. We encourage Leslie and staff to continue their action of requesting and making more team meetings about a child where the social worker must attend. The children's voices must be heard.

Jody Edwards

Inspection

Signature of Commissioner

Next Inspection Recommended: _____ or X **Annual**

Date

Chair, Juvenile Justice Commission

cc: Honorable Judge of the Sonoma County Superior Court
Commissioner of the Juvenile Court
Probation Department, Chief of Probation
Department of Social Services
State of California, Community Care Licensing
Juvenile Probation Director
Facility Inspected