

Sonoma County Juvenile Justice Commission

Annual Report 2014

BACKGROUND

Section 225 of the Welfare and Institutions Code requires each county in the State of California to have a Juvenile Justice Commission. The role of the commission is set forth in Sections 229, 230, 270, and 271 of the Welfare and Institutions Code. Each commission is enjoined to inquire into the administration of juvenile justice in its county.

The law mandates that the Sonoma County Juvenile Justice Commission inspect Juvenile Hall and all institutions used by the county for the confinement of minors and report its findings annually to the Juvenile Court and the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation.

The commission consists of between seven and fifteen members appointed by the Juvenile Court Presiding Judge. Commissioners are not paid for their services to the county.

MISSION STATEMENT AND DUTIES

The mission of the Sonoma County Juvenile Justice Commission is to advocate for and protect the safety and well being of dependent and delinquent youth in Sonoma County.

Commission responsibilities include:

- Inspecting juvenile facilities including detention facilities and group homes used for the placement of minors in Sonoma County.
- Conducting investigations into complaints brought to the commission concerning the welfare of children in the Juvenile Justice System.
- Conducting hearings on matters relating to juvenile law in Sonoma County.
- Advocating for needed services for youth in the justice system.

COMMISSIONERS

Gayle Ballinger
Michael Charpiot
Mary Cone
Jody Edwards
Manuel Lopez

Hank Mattimore
Richard Miller
Susan Moreno
Jim Weathers
Eric William

Anastazia Zita

INSPECTIONS

The Juvenile Justice Commission conducts annual inspections of Juvenile Hall, the Probation Camp and Valley of the Moon. Additionally, the commission is mandated by law to inspect any jail or lockup within the county that is used for the confinement of minors and report the results to the Juvenile Court.

The Sonoma County Juvenile Justice Commission also inspects group homes housing dependent or delinquent juveniles within the county and reports the results to the Juvenile Court, the Probation Department and to Community Care Licensing.

Two commissioners normally conduct inspections of group homes. Facilities are notified in advance that they will be inspected on a designated date and are required to fill out a pre-inspection report prior to the Commissioner's visit. This form contains relevant information such as the number and ages of youth served, average stay, staff training requirements, grievance procedures, etc.

The actual inspection includes a session with house staff and private interviews with house residents. Emphasis is placed on whether the residents judge they are safe and being treated fairly. Commissioners also look into safety procedures, educational and recreational opportunities for the residents, maintenance of the facility, and anything else relevant to the fair and safe treatment of the youth.

During the year 2014, one or more commission members inspected the following group homes:

- The Children's Village of Sonoma County
- Family Life Center
- Greenacre Homes
- Hanna Boys Center
- Plumfield
- R House
- Sierra Girls' Center
- TLC Child and Family Services
- Victor Treatment Center
- Valley of the Moon Children's Home

Additionally, commissioners inspected the following police stations:

- Cloverdale Police Station
- Cotati Police Station
- Sebastopol Police Station

These reports can be found on our website at www.juvenilejusticecommission.org

SERVICES AND ACTIVITIES OF THE COMMISSION

Telephone Grievance Line

The Juvenile Justice Commission operates a grievance telephone line for youth in the facilities served by the commission. Youth are encouraged to handle their own grievances in-house but, if they feel that they have not been treated fairly, they can call our hotline at 707-565-8164. The commissioner assigned to the particular house will talk personally to the person with a grievance and consult with appropriate staff to reach an amicable solution. All the phone calls received from youth this year were taken care of promptly and with ease.

Investigations prompted by phone calls or email

This year the commission received a few complaints from the community, which were investigated by a committee of commissioners. One complaint had to do with the quality of education provided at juvenile hall. This was looked into and found to be unsubstantiated.

Another was from a mother who was very concerned about her daughter's treatment at a group home. A number of commissioners spent quite a bit of time interviewing the mother, meeting with the mother, and subsequently meeting with the group home staff. The commission investigated the entire event. Although the mother was not happy with how her daughter ended up in juvenile hall, she did acknowledge that proper procedures were followed. The mother was sincerely thankful for the time and energy the commission spent on her daughter's case.

The Juvenile Justice Commission was sent an "Opinion Paper" on September 1, 2014. This was a lengthy document that had been prepared and written by members of the Foster Change Coalition and forwarded to us through our website. This Paper contained serious and disturbing statements regarding the operations, policies, and procedures at The Valley of the Moon Children's Home. The commission immediately forwarded it to the Department of Human Services. Their response was to take it very seriously, forward it to state level organizations, the Sonoma County Board of supervisors, and immediately begin an internal investigation. The commission reviewed the internal investigation completed by the Department of Human Services. Then met with the various parties and completed our own discussions. We completed our investigation and determined that all organizations are working appropriately. While this took many volunteer hours to complete, we were thankful the authors sent us the original report, as we are very concerned about the dependent children in Sonoma County. It has resulted in a change of how we inspect the Valley of the Moon Children's Home. We have added a monthly review of incident reports and we have added interviewing first line staff to our annual inspection.

Youth Essay Contest

The Juvenile Justice Commission agreed to continue with our annual essay contest begun almost ten years ago. We had fewer funds to use as we had dedicated quite a bit to improving our website so we did not hold a common celebration. Instead we asked each facility to honor their winners in a way of their choice. We had 131 youth participate and as usual there were three winners from each group home and two overall winners. Participation certificates are awarded to every youth submitting an essay and special gift cards and certificates are awarded.

Academic Awards for Youth

The commission presents annual cash prizes to youth in Juvenile Hall and the Probation Camp who have earned their GED or high school diplomas. The awards are made to the individuals in person by a commissioner and, if possible, in the presence of the youth's peers. The commission presents these awards to group home residents as well.

Revised Commission Documents

The commission revised, reviewed and adopted the Inspection Procedure document as well as the Interview Questions for Commission Candidates. We also came up with a document entitled Commissioner Responsibilities.

ACTIONS TAKEN DURING THE YEAR 2014

- Recruitment of New Commissioners: The commission had 8 candidates who applied as a result of newspaper advertisements and five were selected to join.
- The commission contacted Dr. Joan Petersilia, Faculty Co-Director, Stanford Criminal Justice Center, to inquire as to a possible interest on her part to use Stanford Law School students to look into the ramifications of AB-74. Our concern was that there are predictable results when abuse and or neglect is of a certain magnitude also foster youth with significant emotional and behavioral challenges require specialized care and a more supportive environment than relative, foster or adoptive homes are able to provide.

The commission hoped that the law students would choose this topic to look into this year. Unfortunately, the in-depth study had already been chosen.

- AB-74: The commission wrote a letter to all Juvenile Justice Commissions throughout the state of California stating our concerns about AB-74 (a bill attempting to close group homes). We stated that group homes serve an important purpose in the social safety net of our county. They often take in those children who have been in and out of various foster homes and those whose upbringing has left them with serious problems that caring families alone cannot handle. These

children need the more specialized care that is offered in the therapeutic environment provided by many of our group homes. Placing deadlines on the amount of time children can spend in these group homes because of a misguided notion that foster homes are “better” is a plan without merit and without input from commissioners that are appointed in every county in the state.

- Close to Home article in the Press Democrat: The letter the commission wrote to other commissions also appeared in the Press Democrat.
- Inbound Education: The commission agreed that we must educate ourselves to ensure we are knowledgeable about juvenile justice issues in the county. Speakers over the course of the year included:
 - Nick Honey, Department of Social Services
 - Jennifer Rodriguez, ED of Youth Law Center
 - Bob Oches, Sonoma County Probation Department Chief
 - Panel of Five Youth in transition
 - Jill Ravitch, Sonoma County District Attorney
 - Gayle Ballinger on Foster Homes and FFA’s and the structure of support in the county
- A PowerPoint presentation was created to educate others as to the responsibilities and work of the Sonoma County Juvenile Justice Commission.
- Outbound Education and Speakers Bureau: The commission agreed that most Sonoma County Community members are unaware that a Juvenile Justice Commission exists and the need existed to do outreach to civic groups in Sonoma County. Over the course of the year commissioners presented the above-mentioned PowerPoint presentation to the following groups representing approximately 375 people.
 - The Rotary Club of Glen Ellen Kenwood
 - The Rotary Club of Russian River
 - The Rotary Club of Healdsburg
 - The Valley of the Moon Rotary Club
 - The Rotary Club of Sebastopol Sunrise
 - The Rotary Club of Rohnert Park-Cotati
 - The Rotary Club of Sonoma Valley
 - The Rotary Club of Windsor
- Website: Improvements to our website were to include all of our inspection reports so that the public may read our results and to have our blank reports available to commissioners online.
- The commission accepted resignations of Sarah Rappensperger and Pat Veeninga and welcomed new commissioners Jim Weathers, Richard Miller, and Michael Charpiot who bring a wealth of experience and knowledge.

- The commission came up with a questionnaire to the plenary asking about current meeting length and structure, communication among members, experiences at assigned liaisons, and focus for 2014.
- The commission reviewed the Welfare and Institutions Code pertaining to JJC's and JJDPC's and concluded that we are a Juvenile Justice Commission as opposed to a Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Commission.
- The commission lost our AA, Cindy Browning Bagala but was fortunate to find an excellent replacement in Sarah Reid. At this time we came up with a detailed Administrative Assistant job description.

Respectfully submitted on February 21, 2015 by

Mary Cone

2014 Chairperson