

Crisis nursery supporters take their case to county supervisors



Supporters of the Yolo Crisis Nursery watch a video presented by Katie Villegas, executive director of the Yolo County Children's Alliance, during a Yolo County Board of Supervisors hearing Tuesday. Fred Gladdis/Enterprise photo

By Anne Ternus-Bellamy

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WOODLAND — One by one they approached the speaker's podium in the Yolo County Board of Supervisors chambers on Tuesday to voice their support for saving the Yolo Crisis Nursery.

There were nursery volunteers and representatives of the Friends of the Yolo Crisis Nursery; interested community members as well as many foster parents who utilize the nursery for respite care.

But there was also a steady stream of Davis professionals testifying to the critical role the crisis nursery plays in preventing child abuse and neglect — abuse and neglect that often manifests itself in later years, when these toddlers and preschoolers have become teens.

That's when Trease Petersen is likely to run into them. Petersen is the youth intervention specialist for the Davis Police Department and the one on the front line when youths get into trouble.

The crisis nursery, Petersen told county supervisors, “plays a vital role in preventing abuse and neglect.”

“Law enforcement budgets depend on prevention efforts, and the nursery has a proven record,” Petersen said in urging supervisors to do their part to save the facility.

The nursery, located on a quiet residential street in Davis, has been credited with saving hundreds of children from abuse or neglect during its 13-year history by providing emergency overnight care and day care — among other services — to parents who find themselves unable to care for their children. Last year, the nursery served 265 Yolo County children under the age of 5.

“It is the most meaningful child abuse prevention we can offer,” Heidi Kellison, president of the Friends of the Yolo Crisis Nursery, told supervisors on Tuesday. “We are serving people who are literally on the brink of leaving their children in unsafe situations.

“We are absolutely core to the mission of child abuse prevention in this county,” she added.

But EMQ FamiliesFirst, which operates the nursery, announced in March it would cease operations June 30. The cost of running the facility — more than \$600,000 a year under EMQ’s management — as well as fallout from issues at EMQ FamiliesFirst’s group home on Fifth Street last year, prompted the agency’s decision.

Since then, community members, as well as the Friends of the Yolo Crisis Nursery, have been scrambling to find a new host agency for the nursery as well as to raise private funds to keep it operating. The Friends believe the nursery can be run locally with a budget under \$400,000 annually.

A fundraising campaign launched just five days ago already had brought in \$37,000 by Monday evening, and at Tuesday’s Board of Supervisors meeting, the Davis firefighters union added another \$10,000, bringing the Friends almost to the halfway mark of their \$100,000 goal.

Kellison said the group is also pursuing grant funding from various foundations and is on the brink of securing a \$50,000 donation from one.

Meanwhile, state Sen. Lois Wolk, D-Davis, is pushing for state funding of a pilot project that would provide \$2.4 million over two years to keep both the Yolo Crisis Nursery as well as two Sacramento-area crisis nurseries in operation while studying the impact crisis nurseries have on reducing child abuse and neglect.

On Tuesday, county supervisors voted to support Wolk’s efforts.

But whether county funds also will be used to keep the Yolo Crisis Nursery open long-term remained unclear on Tuesday.

Supervisor Jim Provenza of Davis urged his colleagues to pledge up to \$100,000 to that end, saying, “some money from the county is important to convince the state that we’re serious about this and to convince foundations that are considering (donating to the nursery). I would like to include some funding today so we can move forward.”

But Supervisors Don Saylor of Davis and Oscar Villegas of West Sacramento both expressed some reluctance, with Saylor noting that many of the services provided to children in Yolo County are endangered fiscally “and this presupposes that this is the highest need.”

Indeed, First 5 Yolo, which funds many of those children’s programs, is expecting a significant drop in funding next year due in part to declining tobacco tax revenues.

“I’m not diminishing anything we’ve heard here,” Saylor said, “but I’m not ready yet to commit county funding. ... There are many other needs.”

Villegas, too, expressed an interest in looking at funding for the nursery within the context of all services provided by the county.

“It needs to be a larger conversation,” Villegas said. “(I) want to make sure we’re not losing sight of all the priorities we have. There’s a small amount of money with a lot of need.”

Both Villegas and Saylor also voiced confidence in the private fundraising efforts already underway.

“I’m very confident that we’ll be able this year to raise sufficient funds to keep this alive in some fashion,” Saylor said.

Nevertheless, after some discussion, supervisors ultimately agreed to direct county staff to come back next month with a plan for directing funds to the crisis nursery. Saylor, Provenza, Villegas and Supervisor Duane Chamberlain all voted in favor of the motion. Supervisor Matt Rexroad of Woodland had recused himself from the entire discussion and vote because of a conflict: He and his wife are foster parents and use the Yolo Crisis Nursery.

The role the nursery plays for foster parents was a key point stressed by supporters on Tuesday.

Because the nursery is a source of child care for foster parents, “there is concern that if that program goes away, it may be harder (to recruit foster parents),” said county analyst Tracey Dickinson.

Several foster parents echoed that concern.

“I’m a full-time worker,” said Sallie Houston, “and so is my husband, so the nursery has been critical.”

“I’ve fostered six children, four of whom have used the nursery, one of whom is there now,” she said, adding that she also has used the nursery for visitation with her foster children’s birth parents, another service at risk if the nursery closes.

Others speaking in support of the crisis nursery on Tuesday included former Supervisor Betsy Marchand; Rosemary Younts, representing Dignity Healthcare; Davis family law attorney Brian Pakpour, who said virtually every family law attorney and judge in Yolo County has encountered people who depend on the nursery; University Honda owner and longtime nursery supporter Liz Malinoff; Bobby Weist of the Davis Fire Department; and Sonia Jimenez, director of Empower Yolo’s battered women’s shelter.

Donations to the Friends of the Yolo Crisis Nursery can be made at <https://donatenow.networkforgood.org/friendsofYCN>.

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