

Nursery supporters push for ARP funding

By Anne Ternus-Bellamy

The Yolo County Board of Supervisors heard from about a dozen people on Tuesday — including a handful of local physicians — urging them to use American Rescue Plan funds for expansion of the Yolo Crisis Nursery.

After operating out of a 1,400-square-foot rental house in Davis for more than 20 years, the nursery has been deeded an acre of land on which to build a larger facility that would provide triple the number of beds for emergency respite care for young children and thousands of additional square feet of space for programs and wraparound services.

The need for those services continues to grow, never more so than during the pandemic as many families found themselves in crisis and turned to the nursery to care for their young children. The nursery provides free, overnight care for children under the age of five, many of whom are at risk of abuse or neglect because of the crises their families find themselves in.

In fiscal year 2021, the nursery served 67 percent more families than the year prior.

“Last year alone, they served over 1,000 children, more than ever before in their history,” said former Yolo County Supervisor Betsy Marchand.

While the nursery is located in Davis, about 60 percent of the families served come from Woodland and West Sacramento, according to Heidi Kellison, founder of the Friends of the Yolo Crisis Nursery. Last year about 30 percent of families were from Davis and the remainder from unincorporated areas of the county and the city of Winters.

“When a family comes to the crisis nursery, we provide respite care to keep the children safe from harm while we identify and address the underlying problems that brought them to our doors in the first place,” said Heather Sleuter, executive director of the nursery. “We serve families that have nowhere else to turn to and experiencing a crisis.”

Now, she told county supervisors, “we need the county’s help to continue to do so. We want to build a larger facility to meet the needs of more families in our county.”

Back in November 2020, the Davis City Council approved plans for a housing development in South Davis — Plaza 2555 — which included that land deed for an expanded crisis nursery.

Since then, more than 50 percent of the funds needed for construction have been raised, according to JoEllen Welsch, past president of the nursery, and now county funds are being sought to “take us to the finish line.”

The crisis nursery is seeking \$1.1 million of the county's \$43 million in ARP funds to reach that goal.

The Board of Supervisors previously set aside \$2.2 million in the ARP category of child, youth and family services specifically for child care, and funding for an expanded crisis nursery was one of nine proposals received by county staff.

But the nursery was not one of the proposals recommended for those funds in a presentation to the board on Tuesday. The workgroup tasked with vetting those proposals support the expansion project but felt the crisis nursery has more of a child-abuse-prevention focus than a child-care focus.

The loss of about 1,000 child care slots in Yolo County over the course of the pandemic made that category a priority for the county.

But Becky Heard who is fundraising for the nursery, said, "the crisis nursery does provide child care."

"We provide child care 24 hours a day, 365 days a year and up to 30 days for children who are tremendously traumatized. I don't believe there is any other resource in Yolo County that provides this service," she said.

In her 20 years working with the nursery, Heard added, "I have seen hundreds, if not thousands, of traumatized children transition to becoming healthy and thriving. I have seen broken families mend and stay intact through the incredible work of our dedicated and specialized staff.

"We serve some of Yolo County's poorest, underrepresented communities and we reach every corner of the county. Ninety-five percent of the families we serve are low-income, MediCal-eligible families, headed by single parent, usually a female parent. We need your one-time support for a larger facility to continue to meet the ever-growing need," Heard told the board.

County supervisors — including both Jim Provenza and Don Saylor of Davis — indicated support for the idea of using funds for the nursery expansion and asked county staff to return with more details as well as a recommendation on whether to establish a child-abuse prevention category for ARP funds.

Interim County Administrator Chad Rinde said staff would return at the April 12 board meeting with additional information "and we'll be revisiting a broader ARP plan at that time."

"My interest, when we get to the point of making decisions, is to really look at one-time expense and ongoing transformational benefit," said Saylor, referencing the ARP spending guidelines adopted by the county over a year ago.

Said Provenza, "If we want to consider the crisis nursery as child care, we can, or we can consider it child-abuse prevention. That's fine. I don't think we should worry so much about the categories."