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Kate Rickord
Diane Stang

March 17, 2023

Via Email and U.S. Mail

Michelle Callejas, Director
Child, Family, and Adult Services
Sacramento County
9750 Business Park Drive
Sacramento, CA 95827
DCFASDirector@sacounty.net

Re: Demand to Cease Operation of Unlicensed Facility at Warren E. Thornton Youth Center and to Develop Individual Transition Plans to Appropriate Placements for Children Currently Housed at the Unlicensed Facility

Dear Director Callejas:

We are writing to demand that Sacramento County take immediate action to stop children from being housed at the Warren E. Thornton Youth Center (“Thornton”), an unlicensed facility that served as the County’s juvenile hall until its closure in 2009. For months, the county has been operating this unlicensed facility providing care and supervision to children in the custody of the County in violation of state and federal law. If the County does not (1) cease its practice of placing children at Thornton, and (2) develop appropriate individualized plans to transition each of those children who are currently housed at Thornton to legal and appropriate settings within a defined timeline, Youth Law Center is prepared to seek court intervention.

The County has long been aware that operating an unlicensed facility to house children in foster care violates the law, and yet has continued to place children in unlicensed settings. In February 2016, the California Department of Social Services (“CDSS”) cited the County for operating an unlicensed community care facility and ordered the County to stop housing children in the Centralized Placement Support Unit (“CPSU”) office, where children of varying ages were sleeping on the lobby floor and in waiting rooms. The County failed to remedy that situation for more than 17 months, and on August 14, 2017, Youth Law Center sent a letter to the County demanding that it cease using the CPSU as an unlicensed community care facility. We are once again demanding that the County cease operating an unlicensed community care facility – this time, by housing children in a former juvenile hall setting. This practice is unacceptable, harmful, and must be remedied immediately.

As an unlicensed facility, Thornton is simply not equipped to meet the needs of children in foster care. It is a former juvenile hall, with cells instead of bedrooms, toilets with makeshift privacy screens instead of bathrooms, and dangerous extension cords running down hallways instead of individual electrical outlets. The lack of basic necessities makes Thornton grossly inadequate as a placement for any amount of time, but especially for periods of weeks or months as some children have experienced. In addition, law enforcement has been called to the facility multiple times, demonstrating that children are failing to receive the necessary care and supervision they desperately need, and that they are being subjected to additional trauma.

Youth Law Center insists that the County *immediately*:

1. Stop new placements of children at Thornton.
2. Convene transition team meetings, no later than one week after the receipt of this letter, for each individual child currently housed at Thornton. Those meetings must:
 - a. Include the attorney for the child if one has been appointed by the Court and/or retained by the child;
 - b. Include the child's mental health support team or, if for some reason the child has not been provided a mental health support team, a representative from the County's Youth Behavioral Health Services Department; and
 - c. Be held according to the Child and Family Team principles outlined in state law and policy.
 - d. The transition team must develop a plan to transition the child from Thornton to an appropriate, legal placement as expediently as possible.

If we do not receive your written assurance by March 31, 2023, that you will take immediate action to stop the operation of this unlicensed facility, and that you will take the necessary actions to transition these children to more appropriate settings within an appropriate timeline, we will seek court intervention. Please provide us with the specific actions, policies, and procedures that the County will implement, including a precise timeline when all children will be transitioned to legal, appropriate placements, to ensure compliance.

We are prepared to meet with you to discuss the concerns raised above and are hopeful that the County is willing to work with us and others to identify long-term solutions to remedy the problems. As a first step, we request that, in collaboration with Youth Law Center, the County convene meetings with community stakeholders to develop a new plan for housing foster children when immediate placements are not available so that this illegal practice of using unlicensed facilities, which the County has been engaging in since at least 2016, does not continue to reoccur.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Brian Blalock, Senior Staff Attorney

Chris Middleton, Legal Fellow

CC: Kim Johnson, Director, California Department of Social Services,
Kim.Johnson@dss.ca.gov;
Tory Schwab, Chief Counsel, California Department of Social Services,
Tory.Schwab@dss.ca.gov;
Angie Schwartz, Deputy Director, Children and Family Services Division, California
Department of Social Services, angie.schwartz@dss.ca.gov;
Kevin Gaines, Deputy Director, Community Care Licensing Division, California
Department of Social Services, kevin.gaines@dss.ca.gov;
Chevon Kothari, Deputy County Executive, Sacramento County,
kotharic@saccounty.gov;
Lisa Travis, County Counsel, Sacramento County, lisa.travis@saccounty.net;
Robert Parrish, Deputy County Counsel, Sacramento County, parrishr@saccounty.net.