

Children's Village hits numbers slump—but is it permanent?

By Kathy Parrish
Staff writer

It's hard to plan when you don't know how many are coming to dinner. That's the way it always is in Children's Village, where Oakland County Probate Court houses its youthful wards.

"A police car could come around the corner any minute with a family of four," said Barbara Consiglio, manager of foster care and institutions for the court.

"We never know what to expect." Never sure how many abused, neglected or delinquent kids will be sent by the court, Children's Village tries to be ready for all comers.

As many as 193 children can be treated in its nine different programs on 50 wooded acres across Telegraph Road from the county complex in Pontiac.

Right now only 127 young people are there, so one boys' building has been closed and staff reassigned to other areas. But administrators expect numbers to pick up soon, calling it a "cyclical" drop.

OAKLAND COUNTY Executive Daniel T. Murphy does not share the "cyclical" argument and is using in circuit court for administrative control of the facility. His 1984 budget asks county commissioners to cut eight staff members from Children's Village until the unit reopens.

"We've been concerned for some time about declining enrollment while staffing increased," said Leroy Volberding, county director of institutional and human services.

"The building closing just brought it all to a head."

Those who operate the village strongly oppose cutbacks, asking instead for an additional counselor. They contend ideally the complex should add four counselors — giving them one for each of the nine child treatment programs.

"We're running a good ship and a tight one, but it's expensive," said Children's Village superintendent Donald W. Rolph.

"If you want a Class A operation you've got to be willing to pay for it."

OPENED IN 1929, the county juvenile home served mainly as a "holding tank" for troubled youngsters. There was little attempt at rehabilitating youthful offenders.

In the 1960s, operating under a philosophy geared more to treatment, a three-phase modern building program was started.

In 1979, a new school completed the complex, which includes an administration building, central kitchen, medical infirmary and nine separate but related child care sites.

Residents range from babies beaten by their parents to teens waiting trial on charges of murder, armed robbery, felonious assault and rape.

The Children's Village population always has been up and down. Because judges send kids as they come through Probate Court, the count changes daily and sometimes even on the half-hour.

And there's no way of knowing what time of problems will come in the door. Since youth stay just a few months, some programs will boom and others fall off.

While there is some attempt to double up on space, there are problems with mixing kids with different kinds of problems. "It's like mixing oil and water," said Consiglio.

Particularly in summer, buildings have been closed for a while when numbers were down. But administrators admit the latest dip — which closed two buildings and now keeps one shut — is unusual.

"It's like trying to predict the weather a month ahead," explained Consiglio. "But we're hit a real slump this period of time, and it's hard to know why. We view it as temporary, but at the same time we're being very prudent and responsible."

SOME OF THE dip is credited to the drop in Oakland County's child population. But Children's Village administrators think some of their own policies have cost them residents.

Concerned about children being tied up in the legal system, there has been pressure to get juvenile cases processed quicker. The legal system also has been moving kids to regional detention centers or the state training school faster.

"The more successful we are, the more we do ourselves out of business," said Consiglio.

BOTH PROBATE Court and Children's Village oppose cutbacks, saying the displaced workers are needed in other areas of the complex. Rolph intends to document for commissioners how he has been utilizing the children's supervisors since B building closed.

And they will continue to ask for counselors for programs like shelter

care which doesn't have one.

"There are those who want to draw some fast, very simplistic answers, but this is complicated," said Rolph, a Beverly Hills resident who has headed the program seven years. "I think we're very self-critical."

Rolph believes that the program is one of the best in the country. And he wants it to stay that way.

"It's expensive to be a treatment facility, and the judges recognize that. But when you remove kids from their homes you accept a heavy responsibility to provide what the parents should provide," he stressed.

BUT MURPHY contends Children's Village could be run more efficiently and still be an asset to Oakland County.

On Wednesday, Oct. 26, Volberding will ask the commissioners' finance

committee to boost the facility's budget from \$3.9 million to the \$6.1 million which the agency requested.

With that, he recommends deleting eight authorized positions, chiefly because B building's seven staffers are no longer needed. The eight positions would be eliminated by attrition.

The director of institutional and human services said capacity at Children's Village is 217, but its population runs between 94 and 108. And staff has grown from 119 in 1980 to 132 this year.

Many, particularly child supervisors, work in three shifts seven days a week.

"I share the perception that Children's Village is, and must continue to be, a quality program," said Volberding. "What I don't share is the feeling that there can't be greater efficiency there."



Children's Village residents range from babies beaten by their parents to teens waiting trial on charges of murder, armed robbery, felonious assault and rape. Above: the unused B building.



Arthur Stewart III, teacher and coordinator of the outstudent program, plays chess with one of his students, a girl who lives at home but attends school at the village because of problems



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