

San Carlos, Redwood City, Menlo Park, Redwood Shores

THE INDEPENDENT

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Let's keep our kids close and cared for

I want to tell you about 16-year-old Clara (a pseudonym). Clara had a long history of severe emotional problems, behavioral problems in school, and learning disabilities. She moved in and out of several group homes. While it would have been best to place her in San Mateo County, near her family and her community, no facilities existed at the time to meet her needs. Clara was placed so far away that her parents couldn't visit her often or fully participate in her treatment.

Senate Bill 679, authored by State Sen. Joe Simitian, D-Palo Alto, and which just passed in the State Senate, was written to help keep young people like Clara where they belong — close to their families and communities.

Families and local governments struggle to ensure effective services for our most seriously emotionally disturbed youth. At times, residential treatment is required to avoid hospitalization or placement in juvenile detention facilities. Unfortunately, many counties do not have local intensive, 24-hour residential treatment programs for young people in need of care. Existing residential facilities may be unable to accept youth with serious emotional and behavioral problems. As a result, these youth experience multiple placement failures and are

GUEST OPINION

Jerry Hill

housed in facilities far from their communities — sometimes even out of state.

Simitian's legislation, SB 679, would provide counties the option to directly operate small group homes to serve high-need seriously emotionally disturbed youth who might otherwise be placed outside of their communities. This common sense legislation provides an opportunity for increased coordination and collaboration among various public agencies serving high-risk youth. Social services, juvenile justice, education, health and mental health resources can be organized to create the network of services that a young person needs in a group home.

Publicly operated group homes can work. San Mateo County has been operating the Canyon Oaks Youth Center for two years under an administrative waiver to pilot the viability of a publicly operated group home. Canyon Oaks has been able to help families participate in their child's treatment. It has reduced the amount of time youth remain in out-of-home care. It has increased cross-agency collaboration to meet youths' needs. In addition, its location in our community has enabled

youth to use Canyon Oaks's proximity to transition back to families and/or lower levels of care with the knowledge and comfort that Canyon Oaks is nearby.

Clara was one of the first clients at Canyon Oaks. Because the facility is so close to Clara's home, her family could visit her weekly. After participating in weekly family therapy sessions, she started having weekly home passes. She successfully participated in a vocational training program at Canyon Oaks and began attending local Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. Several months before she was discharged, Clara began attending a special education/vocational program in her home community. After 11 months at Canyon Oaks, Clara was able to successfully return to live with her parents. Nine months after discharge, Clara is off probation, has a job and is in school.

Families and counties need the option to directly operate small group homes, so that Clara and other young people can live closer to the families and communities whose support they need. Let's hope the Legislature passes SB 679, and that the governor signs it into law. Clara, and others like her, need their support.

Jerry Hill is a member of the San Mateo County Board of Supervisors.

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New law to allow for local homes for disturbed youth

By T.S. Mills-Faraudo

STAFF WRITER

A bill allowing San Mateo County to operate group homes for emotionally disturbed youth was signed by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger Tuesday.

Senate Bill 679, backed by state Sen. Joe Simitian, D-Palo Alto, will allow the county to care for youth with mental problems in local out-of-home facilities so they aren't sent to homes far from their families.

Current law only allows private, nonprofit providers to operate group homes and receive Department of Social Services foster care funding. But since there are no local providers, children in the county have been sent to homes far from their families, sometimes even out-of-state.

The county received a waiver that allowed it to open a home a



SIMITIAN

taking them away from their family," Simitian said.

Keeping these kids close to the families, Simitian said, will end up costing taxpayers less. When these children are moved into homes far from their families, county officials have said they often end up with more emotional problems.

In fact, initial findings show that the time children have spent in the county home that's

couple of years ago, but that waiver is expected to expire next year.

"If you're talking about severely emotionally disturbed kids, what could be worse than

been running under the waiver is less than that spent in homes out of the area.

Furthermore, proponents of the bill say it will also allow multiple agencies in the county to work together to serve these children.

"I am very pleased with the passage of SB 679, which is the culmination of over three years of work to provide high-level, residential mental health services for San Mateo County's youth," said County Supervisor Jerry Hill in a statement. "Sen. Simitian's efforts will enable San Mateo County to retain critical mental health services in our community where they are needed."

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