

# Hayward accuses Alameda County of ‘deliberate indifference’ to child prostitution, drug use at foster center

The city filed a lawsuit Thursday against Alameda County seeking to immediately improve conditions at the facility

**By Jakob Rodgers**

The city of Hayward filed a searing lawsuit against Alameda County on Thursday, claiming the county allowed one of its foster centers to spiral out of control into a hotbed of child prostitution and rampant drug use after sheriff’s deputies were inexplicably removed from the facility.

The city’s lawsuit comes after months of warnings and calls for help from Hayward officials — once again raising questions about the leadership and administration of Alameda County’s Social Services Agency amid deep, systemic issues within its child protection and foster care systems. The agency has come under repeated fire — and faced multiple lawsuits — in recent years for failing to protect children who face abuse or neglect, or who enter foster care. The results have, at times, turned deadly.

Hayward officials say that cycle has continued, with county leaders appearing “deflective and lacking urgency, with no acknowledgment of responsibility for the human trafficking of children at the Center,” according to a recent letter by Hayward’s city attorney warning of the lawsuit.

“This current situation is untenable and must be addressed quickly,” wrote Mayor Mark Salinas, in a recent letter warning of the impending lawsuit.

Specifically, the lawsuit takes aim at the county’s “willful mismanagement” of its Child Assessment Center in Hayward. It serves between 80 and 150 people every month and is

used as a receiving center for children entering — or changing placements within — the county's foster system.

Problems began early this year, when county officials gave notice to Hayward leaders that it planned to remove sheriff's deputies from the building on Feb. 15. Deputies remained in place at the seven other social services sites that the sheriff's office was contracted to staff.

Instead, the county opted to hire security guards to ensure the safety of residents and staff at the Hayward building.

The results were disastrous, city officials alleged Thursday.

The facility quickly became a widely-used recruitment center for pimps and traffickers seeking to recruit children — some of whom were as young as 10 years old, the lawsuit alleged, citing observations by the CEO of the security company hired to oversee the place. One major contributing problem was the county's "hands off" approach to allowing foster children ages 10 and older to leave the building, the city claimed.

In one instance, a 12-year-old girl living at the building was beaten up by two teenagers, ages 15 and 13, after she refused to engage in prostitution while out trying to buy food one afternoon in April. Even though the two teens — and others like them — were known to routinely "assault other clients or staff, vandalize the (building), and otherwise break every rule the (building) has," they were nevertheless "allowed back into the facility to continue their predatory and criminal behavior," the lawsuit said.

Repeatedly, staff members also appear to have ignored blatant signs of child prostitution among clients at the center — breaking state laws in the process that mandate they report instances of human trafficking, the lawsuit alleged. Such reports are critical to ensuring children can find new placements and avoid predatory behavior.

In another instance, a security guard was found unresponsive and was hospitalized after coming into contact with a plastic bag containing fentanyl at the building, the lawsuit alleged.

In all, Hayward police officers received 321 calls for service about the center from Feb. 15 through June 7 — three-quarters of which were due to AWOL clients, the lawsuit said. Those calls led officers to spend about 750 man-hours responding to those AWOL children and young adults.

The lawsuit demanded the county reassign deputies to the foster center, change policies to limit clients from going AWOL and follow child welfare laws meant to keep children safe. The county even suggested shutting down the center or relocating it "to a more suitable location."

Also named in the lawsuit are WestCoast Children's Clinic, a nonprofit that manages the center, as well as Wolf Investment Co., which owns the building.

Sylvia Soublet, a spokesperson for Alameda County's Social Services Agency, declined to comment Thursday because she had not seen the lawsuit yet.

An Alameda County Sheriff's Office spokesperson did not immediately return a request for comment. Nor was an after-hours call returned by West Coast Children's Clinic. Wolf Investment Co. could not immediately be reached by this news organization.

In a letter penned June 14 that warned of an impending lawsuit, Hayward City Attorney Michael Lawson pilloried the county's "deliberate indifference and failure to act or intervene" in the safety and welfare of children at the building, adding that the county seemed "disappointingly passive" toward conditions there. He blamed "a disturbing and unacceptable use of discretion" in allowing deputies to be removed from it, which has led to a "cascade" of public health and safety issues there in recent months.

"Rather than providing a place of safety and security from a neglectful or abusive home, the absence of (Alameda County) deputies and unreasonable operational policies at the Center result in placing children into another harmful environment where they are vulnerable to sex trafficking, assaults, and illegal substances," Lawson wrote.

Lawson also specifically mentioned the death of Sophia Mason, an 8-year-old Hayward girl whose body was found rotting in a bathtub in March 2022. The grisly discovery came just months after Alameda County social workers had been repeatedly warned that she was being assaulted, neglected and sexually abused.

Multiple investigations by the Bay Area News Group later found that county social workers failed to properly respond to seven reports of abuse or neglect in the final 15 months of the girl's life, including two reports by East Bay pediatricians.

During one such report in September 2021, Kaiser Permanente nurses took pictures and documented widespread bruising on Sophia's legs and buttocks. Yet social workers quickly dismissed concerns about the girl's safety, despite never speaking to the physician or taking the girl in for a formal forensic interview, as is customary in such situations.

Her body was found decomposing five months later.

"The County does not need an embarrassing reminder of how this child ended up dead," Lawson wrote. "Nor do any of us wish to see something similar happen to any of the children at the Center."