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Hayward sues Alameda County over failure to protect foster children at transitional center

HAYWARD, Calif., June 22, 2023— The City of Hayward filed a lawsuit today asking a judge to intervene to protect children at an Alameda County transitional center where foster children frequently go missing and are knowingly being exposed to and/or coerced into drug use, assaults and other forms of violence, sex trafficking and prostitution.

The suit was filed after multiple attempts by city officials to convince Alameda County and its Social Service Agency to take steps to restore a measure of control at its Assessment Center in Hayward, which receives children pending placement in the foster care system after being removed from their homes for a variety of reasons.

“As a consequence of the County’s deliberate indifference and failure to act or intervene, the City has deployed officers from the Hayward Police Department (HPD) on hundreds of occasions since mid-February to investigate complaints of missing children, drug overdoses, assaults, human trafficking and sexual exploitation of children within the Center and in the surrounding neighborhood,” City Attorney Michael Lawson wrote in a [June 14 letter](#) putting the County on notice of the pending lawsuit. Lawson reminded the County of the death of Sophia Mason, the eight-year-old child whose homicide last year highlighted the mishandling of at-risk children by social service administrators.

Conditions at the Assessment Center spiraled following the inexplicable withdrawal on Feb. 15 of Alameda County Sheriff’s Office deputies who had provided security for the Center.

Since the deputies’ departure, calls to Hayward police and firefighter-paramedics related to the Center skyrocketed—including for AWOL children as young as 10 years of age, drug overdoses,

assaults on staff, and sex trafficking of children by older youth in the Center—and have resulted in more than 750 police-officer-hours spent responding to, following up on and investigating Center-related calls and incidents.

Since mid-February, Hayward police and city administrative and elected leaders have made multiple contacts and pleas for Sheriff's deputy staffing to be restored and for the County to implement other changes—including offers to partner with the County to find a new location and operating model for the Center elsewhere in Hayward.

These contacts and pleas included a [May 26 letter](#) from Hayward Mayor Mark Salinas to the Alameda County Board of Supervisors and County Sheriff Yesenia Sanchez that recounted harrowing details shared with Hayward police by overwhelmed and alarmed personnel for a private security company eventually brought in to work at the Center after Sheriff's deputies were removed.

“The security company representative expressed frustration with the AC (Assessment Center) staff and could not believe juveniles were being allowed to engage in conduct they were witnessing,” Mayor Salinas wrote. “In addition to assaults between juveniles, assaults on staff and ‘AWOL’ juveniles who were allowed to walk out of the building freely, security company staff witnessed the recruiting and grooming of ten (10) to thirteen (13) year-old girls by other older, more sophisticated juveniles for the purpose of human trafficking.”

Yet, to date, the only official action taken since by the County has been a perplexing vote of the Board of Supervisors on June 6 to renew, without competitive bidding, the contract of a consulting group currently managing the facility, WestCoast Children's Clinic.

The City's [lawsuit](#) was filed in Alameda County Superior Court. It names as defendants the County of Alameda, property owner Wolf Investment Company, LLC, and WestCoast Children's Clinic and asserts violations of the County's legal responsibility to protect minors in its care and the flouting of a variety of state and local nuisance and anti-prostitution laws and statutes.

Specifically, the suit asks the Court to order the County to cease operations of the Center until procedures and policies can be put in place to protect and ensure to the extent practically possible the health and safety of the children and youth in the County's care.

According to City Attorney Lawson, Hayward will move for court intervention as soon as the County is served with the lawsuit and a judge is assigned, which could be as early as next week.