

✓ Charges fly over methadone program

By ROBIN MUSITELLI
Sentinel staff writer

3-18-92
SANTA CRUZ — Teri King relies on a drink of flavored methadone, administered under a county license, to break the grips of heroin addiction.

Whether that dose is proper drug treatment and who should administer it to King and about 130 methadone clients were debated Tuesday by Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors to determine who should be awarded a contract for services.

The supervisors voted 4 to 1, with Supervisor Ray Belgard opposed, to grant the \$71,650, three-month contract to Triad Community Services of Scotts Valley.

In doing so, they rejected Santa Cruz Methadone Clinic-AWARE, which has administered the drug on behalf of the county for the past six months.

The supervisors agreed to take another look at the program, including whether or not to be in the business of providing methadone as a drug-addiction treatment, during budget hearings this June.

The methadone bidding war, however, went far beyond the approximate \$200,000-a-year contract.

Supervisors Tuesday heard bitter charges relating to the administration of the program including:

- Accusations that previous providers had filched up to \$1.3 million;
- Charges that county administrators tried to cover up the extent of fiscal mismanagement; and
- Charges that employees involved in providing the methadone were involved in group with ties to a cult.

Problems with the methadone program span several years and involve two different providers.

In late 1991, county Health Services Agency learned of fiscal and adminis-

The supervisors agreed to take another look at the program, including whether or not to be in the business of providing methadone as a drug-addiction treatment, during budget hearings this June.

trative problems with the then-contractor, California Health Associates of Concord, said Bill Manov, the county's alcohol and drug program administrator.

Those concerns were later confirmed in a county-requested audit of California Health Associates. Although a final audit report has not been issued, Manov said an estimated \$44,000 was mismanaged and that the state will ask the return of that amount for 1988-89.

The county last May requested that California Health Associates surrender the methadone contract. They agreed, but threatened to close the doors of the clinic unless the county paid for equipment and maintained cash flow for the clinic, said Manov.

Faced with cutting off the daily dose of methadone for up to 130 clients, the county largely took over the daily management of the operation. The county simultaneously applied for a license to operate the program, said Manov.

Six months ago, the county selected AWARE as an interim contractor to operate the clinic in conjunction with the county under the county's license until a permanent provider could be selected.

Manov said he soon regretted the relationship. He maintained his confidence in AWARE "very rapidly evaporated" in the face of communication

problems, disputes over contract compliance and arguments over whether the county had the authority to exercise control over the operation.

"I could not recommend them to day," Manov said of AWARE.

In addition, at a public hearing in February, AWARE was accused of being linked to a Drug Abuse Prevention Center, founded by Gene Dawson, which critics charge has cult-like leanings.

On the flip side, AWARE program director Cameron Jackson accused Manov of neglecting the methadone operation while California Health Associates padded its billings.

Since then, Jackson charged, Manov has tried to cover up the extent of fiscal mismanagement, which could amount to \$1.3 million over eight years.

Jackson maintained that her attempts to hire competent licensed supervisors and fire unethical ones have been frustrated by the county's requirement to approve all hirings and pay. She maintained AWARE has saved the county \$80,000, and added clients and group meetings such as Narcotics Anonymous.

She charged that she had been the "whistle blower" on the extent of problems with the previous provider. Her

allegations, she said, "have largely fallen on deaf ears."

Until the county understands understands the depth and array of problems with California Health Associates, Jackson urged supervisors not to switch providers.

Manov also came under fire from Carol Meilicke, AWARE's bookkeeper. "I don't trust him further than I can spit," she said.

Manov denied the accusations.

King, a client of AWARE, said AWARE enjoyed the support of most of the clients. With Triad, she said, "I see we'll have to jump through more hoops. Please listen to the clients."

That opinion was not shared by Barbara Wessel, an AWARE clinic counselor. Wessel urged that the contract go elsewhere, saying the last six months had been "the worst six months of my life."

"It's been a very unhealthy atmosphere," Wessel said.

The process of deciding who should get the contract was defended by Susan Wells, chairwoman of the county Drug Abuse Commission.

Wells said, however, the drug commission will research whether methadone treatment itself is beneficial.

For the county to take over the operation would cost between \$22,000 to \$50,000 a year more, primarily because county employees are paid more, said Elinor Hall, Health Services Agency administrator. Supervisors endorsed the recommendation from the drug commission and Hall to award the contract to Triad, a Scotts Valley firm which also provides drug prevention programs in school districts.

But the supervisors also directed Hall to report back in June with recommendations on whether to continue, and if so, how to better manage the program.