

Juvenile group homes close after 25 years

Juvenile Delinquency
Dozens of kids,
workers displaced

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✓ WATSONVILLE — After 25 years in business, a local institution is closing its doors and leaving numerous workers and juvenile residents scrambling for a new place to work, live and continue needed counseling. McDowell Group Homes has 12 boys' group homes around Santa Cruz County, including two in Watsonville.

McDowell Group Homes Chief Executive Officer Shawn McDowell made the formal announcement Monday that the non-profit residential facilities will shut down.

Citing various reasons in mak-

ing the difficult decision, McDowell said the cost of running the facilities was outpacing the benefits and reason the program was established.

"Because of Senate Bill 933 that passed in January, there were just too many new regulations that we didn't think we could keep up with," McDowell explained. "Other similar facilities have had to close up and unfortunately, we're going to be one of the casualties."

Governed by Community Care Licensing, the McDowell Group Homes hosts male juveniles from throughout the state who are referred to them either through probation officers of Juvenile Hall in Felton, social workers, parents or homeless kids who are seeking

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— McDowell employee Mike Lopez

help for chemical or alcohol dependency.

Nearly 70 juvenile residents are expected to be phased out of the residential facilities over the next two weeks with the hopes they'll find equivalent care.

"A lot of these kids are going to have to be sent back to juvenile hall, or worse, they haven't completed their program yet and are sent back out to the streets," said a former McDowell employee who wished to remain anonymous. "I've been in total tears over this. All of my friends are out of work — people with master's degrees and years of education. It could have at least been sold instead of shutting it down outright without any warning."

Watsonville house-parent Mike Lopez, who also works alongside wife Maria, said "I've been here for two years and 10 months and since we've been parents, we turned around a lot of kids.

"But since the news broke, four of our six boys ran away and

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they're recovery people," Lopez said. "We see a lot of pain and anger here and I'm afraid they'll probably compensate for the pain and loss of this by going back to their old habits. They should have given us two or three months to counsel these boys and let them know what's going on."

According to Roger Bauman, a supervising deputy probation officer for Santa Cruz County Juvenile Hall, only one minor is currently placed in the McDowell program from the local juvenile hall.

"I'm searching for an alternative place to put him right now, but what should happen is the placing agencies that put most of the kids in the program from the state should transition them back to the

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counties where they come from," Bauman said. "They wouldn't necessarily end up in juvenile hall, but it's the agencies' responsibility to find alternative placement and they should be hustling to find places for them so they don't have to be taken back into custody if they haven't done anything wrong."

McDowell said the \$1,500 a month expense needed for one resident to live in a cottage on the premises was costly, combined with the needed counseling and support required from the many psychologists, counselors or house parents available.

Personnel problems are another reason the facility will close its doors, McDowell said, as wages and benefits the company could provide were becoming archaic.

"We can't compete anymore in the area of wages and benefits," McDowell said. "Workers could go and work at Burger King or Taco Bell and get more."

McDowell added that keeping up with the mass training needed for employees and longer processes implemented by government to receive house licensing supported the decision to close.

Of the 80 staff members employed throughout the county, 36 staff members were laid off Monday, McDowell said, with the rest expected to be laid off in the coming weeks.

Lopez said many of the employees had a feeling the facility would close after original facility owner Mary Ann McDowell died last year and her son took over.

"It was a big surprise to everyone, but I think everyone knew it would happen after Mrs. McDowell passed away," Lopez said. "The Reno offices closed and then a few housing facilities closed here — so it was obvious it was coming, but I just got the bombshell Friday."

Fortunately, Lopez and his wife both found new jobs, but he said many of the older employees are scrambling for new jobs.

"It's really heartbreaking and sad to see everyone go on their way," McDowell said. "It's just sad and unfortunate."