

California Courts News Transcript

Title: New Juvenile Justice Campus in Fresno – Making a Difference

Date: 9/25/09

Community leaders in Fresno have been planning a replacement for the old juvenile court building for almost a decade. Built in 1973, it had become dangerously cramped and grossly overcrowded, with awful, makeshift courtrooms and poor security.

The groundbreaking for the new court building in the juvenile justice campus was two years ago.

On this sunny day in July, 2009, members of the community and justice partners got together to celebrate the grand opening. The crowd represented a unique partnership: the Fresno Superior Court, the county, and the Administrative Office of the Courts, known as the AOC. They all worked toward the common goal of consolidating juvenile justice facilities on one campus – for economy, efficiency, and to better serve young people in trouble.

Tamara Beard, Fresno CEO

“Everybody came together and put so much time and effort into this and it’s just outstanding we couldn’t be happier.”

The county and the AOC shared the project cost of about 56-million dollars, funded through county-issued lease revenue bonds. They’ll be co-owners in the first ever capital partnership between local government and the AOC.

On the first floor: probation, the District Attorney, the Public Defender, social workers, program coordinators, educators, mediators – 10 partners in all, focused on restorative justice.

Hon. David A. Gottlieb, Juvenile Delinquency Presiding Judge in office

“Being able to have the space to have all of our justice partners all in one building gives us the collaborative ability that we didn’t have before. This is a building where we can all meet on a moment’s notice, address issues, problems, new programs, on a much more efficient basis.”

On the second floor: 6 customer service windows, as well as the court clerk’s office. Finally, clerks have room to move – which will allow them to do better work quicker.

Mary Sierras, Judicial Assistant

“I don’t have to move any equipment, I just do my entry, move over to the left a little bit to write on my documents, it’s wonderful, I love it.”

Also available: victim/witness waiting rooms, and attorney/client visiting rooms. The 4 courtrooms look rich, but it’s not real wood, it’s plastic laminate.

Tim Wilson, Court Facilities Director

“You get a more durable finish and a longer lasting finish with pretty much the same appearance.”

Plus, it costs a lot less. And now that Juvenile Hall is the next building over, kids walk to court through a passageway. They won't miss a day of school. The county will save almost a million dollars a year in transportation.

They even planned for growth - with two unfinished rooms that can be transformed into courtrooms and support space.

Another remarkable feature is the art work; local images all donated by local artists – including employees. The court paid only for framing and installation.

This sculpture represents two adults hugging a child. The art is designed to provide inspiration and positive messages to youthful visitors – in contrast to the environment they may be used to. It also reflects the promise of what can be achieved here.

Hon. David A. Gottlieb, Juvenile Presiding Judge

“With this new building, and those that are working within that building, we have opportunity. And we will move forward in providing the best justice possible for our county youth.”

24-year-old Cynthia Toepfert assured them that their efforts are on target:

Cynthia Toepfert, Substance Abuse Program Graduate

“Judge Kams was my judge. That day he made a decision that changed my life forever. He sentenced me to the substance abuse unit. There I received the help I so badly needed. This year on May 23, exactly 6 years after I was released from Juvenile Hall, I graduated with a B.A. in social work from Fresno State. I'm sure at times it can be discouraging working with juveniles. You wonder sometime if you're making a difference. I'm here today to show you that you are. What happens in this building behind me matters. It shapes lives and saves them every day. Thank you all for making a difference.”

I'm Leanne Kozak reporting from Fresno for California Courts News.