

Juvenile Justice Commission
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SANTA CLARA COUNTY JUVENILE JUSTICE COMMISSION

FY 2025–2026 Dependency System Report and Recommendations

The Juvenile Justice Commission of Santa Clara County (JJC) is a state-mandated, court-appointed authority. The Commission's broad statutory mandate is to inquire into the administration of juvenile court law within the County and to promote the effective functioning of both the juvenile justice and juvenile dependency systems. The JJC is committed to ensuring that these systems operate in a manner that reflects credibility, dignity, equity, safety, and respect for all children and youth in Santa Clara County.

In accordance with California Welfare and Institutions Code Sections 225 and 229, the Commission is required to inspect local facilities that house juveniles, including juvenile detention facilities, county-operated programs, law enforcement holding facilities, group homes, and youth-serving institutions. These inspections may be announced or unannounced and must occur at least annually. In addition to facility inspections, the Commission monitors the provision of medical care, mental health services, educational programming, and related youth services.

The Commission carries out its responsibilities through annual inspections and through its standing committees, including the Continuum of Care Committee, which focuses on dependency-related systems, which promotes transparency and system-wide visibility of outcomes affecting youth across juvenile justice and dependency systems.

Introduction

The Juvenile Justice Commission (JJC or Commission) is required by Welfare and Institutions Code §229 to inspect facilities situated within Santa Clara County that the Juvenile Court Law permits to hold youth under the age of 18, at least once a year. To fulfill this requirement, the Commission visited the sites discussed in this report.

Report Findings and Recommended Actions

The Juvenile Justice Commission presents the following findings and recommended actions regarding Santa Clara County's continuum of care for dependent youth, including the Transitional Shelter Care Facilities (TrSCFs) at McKee, Almaden, and Riverview, and The

Welcome Center (TWC) operated by Seneca Family of Agencies. To fulfill this responsibility, the Commission conducted site inspections during February at McKee (Commissioners Deryk Clark and Stephen Betts), The Welcome Center (Commissioners Deryk Clark and Victoria Burton-Burke), Riverview (Commissioners Andrew Cain, Marcie Bellicitti, and Victoria Burton-Burke), and Almaden (Commissioners Nora Manchester and Penny Blake).

The Commission recognizes and commends the County and its partners for the meaningful progress made since prior inspections and the Commission's December 2024 "Call to Action" regarding scattered site placements and high-acuity youth. There has been a clear and measurable shift away from the prior "Scattered Sites" model toward a more structured, therapeutic, and trauma-informed system of care. Facilities are cleaner, more stable, and increasingly centered on the needs of youth.

The Commission's December 2024 Call to Action continued to highlight system-wide concerns involving placement instability, behavioral health needs, staffing challenges, and the need for sustainable long-term solutions for youth with complex needs. The Commission further urged the Board of Supervisors to address the longstanding shortage of safe and appropriate placements for youth with complex behavioral and mental health needs. The Commission specifically emphasized the need for improved staffing, enhanced behavioral health support, and development of long-term housing and treatment solutions for high-acuity youth.

The Commission also acknowledges that several recommendations from the Call to Action have been partially addressed. These include:

- Increased staffing and management oversight at facilities;
- Greater integration of trauma-informed care practices;
- Enhanced behavioral health support and staff training;
- Improved facility environments and youth engagement; and
- Ongoing efforts to stabilize temporary shelter care operations.

However, despite these improvements, many of the Commission's core concerns remain unresolved. Most significantly, Santa Clara County continues to lack sufficient placement options for high-acuity youth. As a result, facilities designed for short-term stabilization continue functioning as de facto longer-term placements without the corresponding infrastructure, staffing models, educational supports, or resources necessary to meet youth needs safely and effectively.

This report provides a statement of the problem, a summary of current conditions across facilities, and a proposed course of action to address the ongoing systemic challenges.

Current System Overview

The Welcoming Center (TWC)

The Welcoming Center (TWC), operated by Seneca Family of Agencies in partnership with Santa Clara County, was established to serve as the County's primary intake, assessment, and stabilization center for youth entering foster care or requiring emergency placement. The facility was developed in response to the growing recognition that youth entering care, or experiencing placement disruptions, often arrive following traumatic experiences and require immediate access to behavioral health support, medical screening, and stabilization services in a safe and non-institutional environment.

TWC was intended to replace prior practices in which youth frequently waited in offices, hotels, emergency rooms, or other temporary settings while placement options were identified. The facility was designed to provide short-term care, comprehensive assessments, and rapid coordination of services with the goal of stabilizing youth and transitioning them to appropriate placements within approximately 24 hours.

TWC provides a therapeutic, trauma-informed environment with strong integration of behavioral health and medical services, including on-site nursing and access to electronic medical records. The facility is clean, well-maintained, and designed to provide a welcoming, home-like environment.

Despite these strengths, TWC continues to face significant challenges due to system-wide placement shortages. Youth are frequently held beyond the intended 24-hour limit, particularly older youth and those with complex behavioral health and placement needs. This has at times resulted in capacity strain and challenges in maintaining appropriate youth separation.

Transitional Shelter Care Facilities (TrSCFs)

The Transitional Shelter Care Facilities were established by Santa Clara County to provide temporary, short-term shelter and stabilization services for dependent youth awaiting placement. These facilities were intended to function as transitional environments where youth could receive supervision, behavioral health support, case management, and daily living assistance while permanent or longer-term placements were identified.

The facilities were originally designed to operate under short-term licensing limits, generally intended for stays of no more than 10 days. However, due to statewide shortages in foster care placements, STRTPs, and specialized behavioral health programs, these facilities have increasingly become longer-term stabilization settings for youth with complex behavioral, emotional, and mental health needs.

McKee Transitional Shelter Care Facility

The McKee Transitional Shelter Care Facility was originally developed to serve youth requiring short-term emergency shelter care in a structured and supportive setting. The program was intended to provide immediate stabilization, assessment, and basic care while placement staff identified family-based or therapeutic placements appropriate to the youth's needs.

The facility has evolved over time to accommodate youth with increasingly complex behavioral health and placement challenges. As placement shortages worsened statewide, McKee became one of the County's primary stabilization facilities for youth who could not immediately access higher levels of care.

Currently, the McKee facility demonstrates a structured and stable environment with strong staff engagement and consistent supervision practices. The program reflects a clear commitment to trauma-informed care, including the use of Therapeutic Crisis Intervention (TCI) and regular staff debriefings.

Youth reported positive interactions with staff and a sense of fairness and respect. Programming includes life-skills development and behavioral health services through community providers.

However, youth at McKee continue to remain beyond the 10-day licensing limit due to placement delays. Bedrooms remain minimally personalized, and limited activity funding restricts enrichment opportunities.

Almaden Transitional Shelter Care Facility

The Almaden Transitional Shelter Care Facility was established to provide shelter care and stabilization services specifically for girls entering dependency care who required temporary placement and supervision. The facility was designed to offer a safe and supportive environment focused on behavioral health stabilization, crisis intervention, and transition planning.

As placement shortages intensified, Almaden increasingly began serving youth with higher-acuity behavioral health needs and longer lengths of stay than originally intended under its licensing structure.

The Almaden facility reflects continued progress in clinical programming and staff development. Behavioral health services are well-integrated, with daily provider engagement and individualized crisis support planning. The Almaden facility houses girls only.

The facility is clean, organized, and supported by an expanding staffing structure and enhanced supervision.

Challenges remain significant. Youth are staying well beyond licensing limits, and transportation barriers continue to disrupt school attendance and access to services. The absence of on-site medical support further complicates care delivery.

Riverview (RV) Transitional Shelter Care Facility

The Riverview Transitional Shelter Care Facility was initially developed to provide temporary housing and stabilization services for dependent youth requiring short-term care while awaiting placement. Historically, Riverview operated with a more institutional structure intended to manage crisis situations and provide basic supervision and shelter.

Over time, County leadership and facility staff have worked to transition Riverview toward a more relationship-based and trauma-informed model of care. This shift reflects broader system-wide efforts to reduce institutional practices and improve youth engagement, trust-building, and emotional support.

The Riverview facility now shows the most notable transformation from prior inspections. The environment has shifted from a more institutional model to a home-like, relationship-based setting.

Staff morale and engagement have improved significantly, and youth were observed interacting positively with staff. The program emphasizes trust-building, consistency, and culturally responsive practices.

Despite these improvements, Riverview faces the same systemic challenges as other facilities. Youth remain beyond intended lengths of stay, crisis response resources are limited, and transportation barriers persist.

Statement of the Issues

The Juvenile Justice Commission has continued to monitor facilities that house minors entering care and those already dependent but without stable placement options.

The focus of this report is on youth with complex behavioral health and placement needs—often referred to as high-acuity youth—who remain in temporary shelter care settings beyond intended timeframes.

The Commission has identified the following systemic concerns:

Extended Lengths of Stay Beyond Licensing Limits

Youth are routinely staying beyond the licensed limits of 10 days in TrSCFs and 24 hours at TWC due to the lack of appropriate downstream placements.

The Commission also notes that recent state licensing changes have further complicated the situation by reducing allowable lengths of stay in TrSCFs without adequately addressing the statewide shortage of appropriate placement options for high-acuity youth.

Insufficient Placement Capacity

Even with the pending addition of local STRTP beds there remains a critical shortage of Short-Term Residential Therapeutic Programs (STRTPs), specialized foster homes, and other appropriate placement options, particularly for older youth and those with complex needs.

System Bottlenecks and Delays

Placement delays result in youth remaining in temporary settings that are not designed for long-term stabilization or treatment.

Transportation Barriers

Lack of reliable transportation disrupts access to school, medical care, court appointments, and enrichment activities, negatively impacting youth stability and development.

Limited Crisis Response Resources

Facilities report inconsistent availability of Mobile Crisis Response Teams, leading to reliance on law enforcement or emergency services during behavioral crises.

Gaps in Medical Access

Outside of TWC, facilities lack on-site medical support, resulting in delays and inefficiencies in accessing care.

Limited Programming and Activity Funding

Budget constraints limit access to enrichment, recreation, and life-skills programming critical to youth development.

Educational Disruption

Youth are frequently not attending school consistently due to placement instability, transportation barriers, and lack of coordinated educational planning. The Commission believes that the County Office of Education (COE) and DFCS must develop strategies to ensure that every youth is participating in school, whether through traditional school attendance, on-site instruction, or structured online learning.

While the number of youths impacted may be relatively small, these youth represent some of the most vulnerable and complex cases in the County's care. The system, as currently structured, is not adequately equipped to meet their needs.

Conclusion and Recommended Actions

The County has made substantial progress in improving the conditions, culture, and care models within its youth facilities. These efforts are commendable and reflect a genuine commitment to reform.

However, the fundamental issue remains unresolved: the lack of appropriate long-term placement options for high-acuity youth.

As a result, facilities designed for short-term stabilization are being used beyond their intended purpose. Without corresponding adjustments to staffing, programming, educational access, and infrastructure, this creates ongoing risks for both youth and staff.

The Commission recommends coordinated action through the following priorities:

1. Expand Placement Capacity

- Accelerate development of in-county STRTPs and specialized foster care placements;
- Explore innovative models for high-acuity youth who do not fit traditional placement criteria.

2. Stabilize and Resource Existing Facilities

- Increase funding for programming, activities, and life-skills development;
- Enhance staffing models and supervision structures to reflect longer lengths of stay.

3. Improve Transportation Infrastructure

- Provide shared vehicles or enhanced transportation contracts;
- Ensure consistent access to school, medical care, court appointments, and community-based activities.

4. Strengthen Crisis Response Systems

- Expand availability and responsiveness of Mobile Crisis Response Teams;
- Reduce reliance on law enforcement for behavioral health crises.

5. Enhance Medical Access

- Implement telehealth services across all TrSCFs;
- Explore on-call or rotating medical support models.

6. Support Workforce Development

- Continue investment in training, including crisis intervention and behavioral health services;
- Strengthen staff retention through improved support, supervision, and wellness resources.

7. Align Regulatory Compliance with System Realities

- Work collaboratively with Community Care Licensing to address extended stays;
- Advocate for regulatory flexibility while long-term placement solutions are developed.

8. Ensure Educational Access and Continuity

- Develop coordinated educational plans for every youth entering care;
- Ensure youth consistently attend school through traditional enrollment, on-site educational programming, or online instruction;
- Strengthen collaboration between DFCS, the County Office of Education, school districts, and care providers to minimize educational disruption.

Shared Accountability and System Coordination:

1. The responsibility for these youth lies not only with DFCS, but also with the Courts, Behavioral Health, the Board of Supervisors, educational partners, and the broader community.
2. Addressing these challenges will require a coordinated, system-wide response and sustained leadership commitment.
3. The Juvenile Justice Commission urges that these recommendations be treated with the highest level of priority.



Marcie Bellicitti, Chair Juvenile Justice Commission

August 27, 2026



Deryk Clark, Inspection Chair

August 27, 2026