

Economy hits nonprofit hard: Major funding for the Family Service Agency of San Mateo County at risk

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The Family Service Agency of San Mateo County keeps children of divorced parents in a safe place during court-ordered visits, among other objectives, but faces losing its primary source of funding for its visitation center as the county looks to balance its own budget.

Family Service has two contracts with the county to provide services for children in crisis, one with the family court when parents are dealing with custody issues and the other with the Human Service Agency when children end up in juvenile court.

Family Service risks losing its Human Service Agency contract due to the poor economy.

"We are facing an 80 percent cut," said Kimberly Pesavento, director of visitation services at the nonprofit agency.

The contract has been recommended for elimination, said Amanda Kim, the Human Service Agency's public information officer. The contract was slashed by \$65,000 last year and is down to \$146,500 annually.

The county has taken over some of the visitation duties and county family care workers will continue to provide services for the families, she said.

"Our staff will absorb a lot of these cases," Kim said. "County funding relies on state funding and the numbers are down."

Family Service's family visitation center will have to rely almost exclusively on client fees and charitable contributions going forward. Most of its clients are low-income, however, and unable to financially sustain the program.

Rich Gordon, president of the San Mateo County Board of Supervisors, and the rest of the board face some tough decisions as it takes a close look at the county's budget and where to make cuts to its \$100 million ongoing structural deficit.

"In general, most of the contracts with our nonprofit providers face reductions of about 10 percent," Gordon said. "It depends on the funding source."

The county eliminated 50 positions earlier this week and may have to eliminate more later this year, Gordon said.

"Our nonprofit sector will be impacted. There are some difficult decisions ahead. Some expenditures might be eliminated," he said. "It is no reflection on the work these nonprofits do. The money just isn't there."

The visitation center helps keep children connected with both parents in the aftermath of a messy divorce.

Sometimes divorced couples just can't stand to look at each other and the agency helps exchange children between the two parties to minimize risk of conflict, Pesavento said.

Family Service also provides on-site supervised visits between child and parent to maintain safety in cases of domestic violence, substance abuse, mental illness and child abuse or neglect. Visits often include emotional and physical interventions by staff, Pesavento said. Parents get up to two hours with their children to play games, prepare food, read books or just talk.

Parent participants agree not to ask questions about the other parent or to put their child in awkward situations, such as asking the whereabouts of the other parent or who they might be dating.

"Kids are caught in the middle. They are often powerless and get mixed messages. It can be confusing or scary for kids," Pesavento said.

Family Service provides a broad range of services for families and seniors, for instance and the visitation center was established by a grant from the U.S. Department of Justice Office on Violence Against Women.

Santa Cruz, Santa Clara and San Mateo counties partnered between 2002 and 2006 to participate in the Safe Havens: Supervised Visitation and Safe Exchange Program Demonstration Initiative established by the Violence Against Women Act of 2000.

The principle of "equal regard for the safety of children and adult victims as key to visitation services related to domestic violence" was introduced, in part, by the partnership between the three counties.

The Office on Violence Against Women uses the Family Service Agency model to promote supervised visitation and safe child exchanges.

"The visitation center's goal is to build better relationships among all involved," Pesavento said.

Family Service will hold the Third Annual "Gina Tringale" Bench Press Benefit fundraiser 10 a.m., Saturday, June 5, San Mateo Elks Lodge, 229 W. 20th Ave., San Mateo. For more information check out www.familyserviceagency.org

Bill Silverfarb can be reached by e-mail: silverfarb@smdailyjournal.com or by phone: (650) 344-5200 ext. 106.