



The communal living area inside the Transitional Living Center at the Humboldt County Juvenile Detention Center.

Transitional Living in Juvenile Justice

BY JUDGE MICHAEL MONTERO, SIXTH JUDICIAL DISTRICT COURT

In 2020, Sixth Judicial District Court Judge Michael Montero joined forces with Juvenile Services Director Pauline Salla to open an on-site Transitional Living Center (TLC) at the Humboldt County Juvenile Detention Center—the first of its kind in Nevada—offering a state-of-the-art intervention track within the continuum of care that serves as a seamless and effective stepdown program for at-risk youth returning from a higher level of care, e.g., state placements, treatment centers, etc.

The Juvenile Detention Center has historically housed at-risk youth in a traditional confinement setting, consisting of a secure 14-bed pod. It has since been converted to a single pod with six secure cells and one holding cell. The other half of the pod now rivals that of a college dorm, boasting a communal living environment with an inviting day room, a dining room table and chairs, a flat-screen television, a couch and bean bags, two gender-neutral full bathrooms, individual bedrooms (cells) with nightstands, dressers, and desks, a complete removal of all secure cell doors, secure sinks and toilets, and metal bed frames, a new security wall separating the secure pod from the TLC housing area, wooden non-secure doors, new flooring and electrical outlets, and a new HVAC system. Those who are housed here benefit from 24-hour supervision, access to mental health and/or substance use support providers, and on-site programming. The facility will also soon feature a full commercial kitchen, a mudroom, and a staff office for medication administration.

The TLC—experimental in nature and born out of juvenile justice reform—

has been extremely positive for Humboldt County youth, serving as an effective alternative to traditional placement options. Transitional housing allows the youth to feel safe, heard, and supported by staff who help them make better decisions that lead to more constructive outcomes. Director Pauline Salla and TLC staff encourage strong youth voices and empowerment in establishing individualized treatment goals, education plans, and any plan designed to assist and support youth at the TLC. The youth are granted developmental freedom, training, and support to learn from and process their own mistakes, identify appropriate responses, and value their strengths in navigating everyday life.

I expect Salla and the TLC staff to take a strengths-based approach and regularly gather feedback from youth to address individual concerns and to develop programming, policy reform, structure development, and pro-social activities. Throughout the term of the



youths' residential intervention, the TLC provides opportunities to connect and interact with supportive peers and mentors with whom they identify, *i.e.*, friends, pro-social peers, extended family members, coaches, and teachers from the community. We further encourage youth family involvement, not only with treatment plans, but with activities their youth may participate in during the course of residential intervention.

In addition, we support youth in exploring their cultural identities and enhancing positive cross-cultural interaction. Developmentally, the youth are discovering who they are and who they want to be, including how they identify racially, ethnically, sexually, religiously, and beyond. For some youth, their mental health and behavioral challenges are exacerbated by family and/or community members not affirming one or more aspects of the youth's cultural identity. TLC staff are trained to identify red flags when these situations arise and ensure that the youths' providers are competent in



addressing healthy cultural identity formation.

Ultimately, we value youth contributions by sharing the power to make decisions, respecting youth judgment, and recognizing and understanding what the youth have to offer. Although a decision might not be the one we want them to make, the youth are granted the freedom to make the choice and experience the results and responses to that choice that may organically occur.

We believe that zero tolerance with at-risk youth will not in itself create behavior change. I have taken a hard stance against removing youth from their community if it can be avoided. If we are using the word "non-compliant" with youth, that says more about the juvenile justice system and its professionals than it does the youth. Youth behavior is responsive to the system not meeting their needs and/or not addressing the driving issues in their lives. At-risk

youth need a safe and stable living environment before the system forces them to give up their peers and their substances, all-the-while demanding that they focus in school. Transitional housing provides an opportunity for the system to meet at-risk youth halfway—to listen to their problems, help navigate those problems, and to feel safe in addressing those problems, with the freedom to be themselves, the freedom to make bad choices and learn from them in a positive way, and the opportunity to grow into mature adults on their own terms.

Eligibility for entry into transitional living requires a juvenile delinquency petition. I assess each youth for their individual needs and suitability before ordering them into transitional living. To date, TLC has a 100 percent success rate for youth, including 100 percent early graduation from high school, 100 percent full-time employment, and 100 percent successful completion of probation terms.

TLC did not come to be without taking an honest look at the services, programming, and skilled employees that Humboldt County already had to offer. We are using data to drive our decisions, to strengthen what's working and to eliminate what's not. If the system abolishes detaining youth for low-risk offenses and technical violations, it needs to introduce a new protocol that is known to be effective. We wouldn't have been able to justify converting half of the juvenile detention center into the TLC without implementing (1) evidence-based programming, (2) a reliable, validated risk-need assessment (Youth Level of Service/Case Management Inventory (YLS/CMI)), and (3) supporting dually credited juvenile probation officers and youth advisors, all funneling into the long-term objective for youth to learn new behaviors and decrease the risk of new

offenses. The recidivism rate in Humboldt County for new youth arrests has dropped from 24 percent in 2016 to 16.5 percent in 2023 (Juvenile Services switched case management systems in 2016). The recidivism rate for 2024 is on track to fall below 16 percent, with only three months left in the fiscal year.



Judge Michael Montero was honored as Innovator of the Year by the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges for his work bringing the Transitional Living Center at the Humboldt County Juvenile Detention Center to life.



A newly renovated gender-neutral bathroom inside the Transitional Living Center at the Humboldt County Juvenile Detention Center.



JUDGE MICHAEL

MONTERO is a district judge in the Sixth Judicial District Court. In July 2023, Montero was honored by the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ) with its Innovator of the Year Award for his progressive work in establishing the first transitional living center operated by a juvenile justice agency in Nevada. He joined the NCJFCJ Board of Directors in July 2024. Montero is fully committed to the well-being and rehabilitation of at-risk youth in Humboldt County and is praised by his colleagues for his openness to innovative ideas that lead to long-term behavior change and improved outcomes for youth.