



OFFICE OF THE DISTRICT ATTORNEY

COUNTY OF VENTURA, STATE OF CALIFORNIA

ERIK NASARENKO
District Attorney

May 15, 2023

The Honorable Matt LaVere, Chair
Board of Supervisors
County of Ventura
800 South Victoria Avenue
Ventura, CA 93009

Board of Supervisors
County of Ventura
800 South Victoria Avenue
Ventura, CA 93009

Dr. Sevet Johnson
County Executive Officer
County of Ventura
800 South Victoria Avenue
Ventura, CA 93009

Re: Family Justice Center Guidance

Dear Chair LaVere, Members of the Board of Supervisors and Dr. Johnson:

We are excited by and strongly supportive of efforts to create a Family Justice Center (FJC) in east Ventura County. A third and final FJC for the cities of Moorpark, Simi Valley, Thousand Oaks, and surrounding unincorporated communities will improve the lives of those impacted by violence, help to end abuse and exploitation, and create much-needed pathways of hope for east county victims who currently must travel to the City of Ventura to utilize the services of the county's only currently operating FJC.

The FJC's purpose is to improve access to services by removing barriers and bringing services closer to the families that need them. Based on current Ventura FJC usage data, it is estimated that as many as 600 families each year from the communities of Moorpark, Simi Valley, Thousand Oaks, and surrounding unincorporated communities would utilize the services of an east county FJC.

It must be noted that FJCs are multi-faceted and multi-agency collaborations requiring careful planning, thought, and deliberation. Thus, as you begin considering the appropriation of funding for an east county FJC and discuss where to situate the facility,

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we wanted to share with you the following guiding principles from the Department of Justice, Office of Violence Against Women, and the Family Justice Center Alliance, which serves as the central clearinghouse, research center, and affiliation organization for FJCs throughout the United States and internationally. In addition, we also included in this correspondence our own Ventura County experiences and the knowledge gained from establishing the Ventura FJC in 2019 and the ongoing effort to deliver the Carmen Ramirez Family Justice Center in Oxnard next year.

FAMILY JUSTICE CENTERS ARE NOT A GIVEN AND REQUIRE COMMUNITY INVESTMENTS

While FJCs are identified in California law as a service-provider for “victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, elder or dependent adult abuse, or human trafficking . . . to reduce the number of times victims must tell their story, reduce the number of places victims must go for help, and increase access to services and support for victims and their children” (Penal Code, § 13750, subd. (c)), California law provides *no* ongoing funding mechanism for FJCs. Rather, FJCs rely on a patchwork of revenue streams, including federal, state, and local dollars, grants, philanthropic and foundation support, and a wide variety of in-kind donations, largely from government partners and community-based organizations. The soon-to-be Carmen Ramirez Family Justice Center in Oxnard is an ideal example of multi-agency financial collaboration, with \$1 million coming from a state contribution championed by Assemblymember Jacqui Irwin, a \$2 million commitment from the City of Oxnard, a \$5 million commitment from the County of Ventura, and a \$640,000 appropriation from U.S. Representative Julia Brownley.

FAMILY JUSTICE CENTERS REQUIRE ONE-TIME AND SUSTAINABLE FUNDING

FJCs in Ventura County and elsewhere throughout the nation are sustainable largely because the buildings they reside in are owned and not leased. Secondly, they are sustainable because the on-going burden of labor costs is largely shared by and spread across numerous on-site partners through in-kind staffing from respective governmental and nonprofit agencies and volunteers. With that said, on-going costs do exist in the form of utilities, groundskeeping, security, and day-to-day business needs. Moreover, there must also be core administrative staff who oversee the quality of services, coordinate the activities of other on-site partners, and provide routine duties such as scheduling, reception, case reviews, and other duties. We anticipate that an east county FJC Center would require ongoing financial support for an Administrative Assistant I -\$113,000, Legal Processing Assistant III-bilingual - \$99,000, and a Victim Advocate III -\$109,000

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for a total of \$321,000 in annual salaries, benefits, and staffing costs. The addition of a Resiliency Center component would require the need for an additional Administrative Assistant III allocation - \$135,000, bringing total annual staffing costs to \$456,000. The existing District Attorney's budget does not currently contain funding to cover these costs.

FAMILY JUSTICE CENTERS REQUIRE VICTIM SECURITY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

FJCs also require investments in security. One of the most dangerous times in a domestic violence, stalking, or sexual assault victim's life is when the victim has the courage to seek help with a restraining order, housing placement, or other acts of independence. As a result, FJCs require fencing, security cameras, ballistic glass, and other one-time facility improvements that protect not only the confidentiality of the victim seeking services but also ensure the safety and security of on-site staff and partners. Moreover, placement of FJCs in shopping malls, courthouses, or high traffic areas where perpetrators and their victims may see one another can lead to deadly confrontations, dissuade victims from seeking help, and further jeopardize the confidentiality necessary for a successful FJC.

FAMILY JUSTICE CENTERS REQUIRE ACCESSIBILITY AND AVAILABILITY

Access is also paramount for successful FJCs both from a geographic perspective and from a usability perspective. FJCs must have adequate parking, access to public transportation, and easy access to freeways and highways that not only encourage victim access but also encourage partnering agencies such as law enforcement and other service providers who are not on-site to respond quickly when needed. FJCs should also be located where the need for services is greatest as measured by calls for service to law enforcement involving domestic violence, sexual assault, child abuse, human trafficking, elder abuse, and hate crimes. Lastly, FJCs should also be open, warm, friendly, and designed less like a storefront, police headquarters or emergency room lobby and more like a residential home where victims feel a sense of security, empowerment, and well-being.

FAMILY JUSTICE CENTERS REQUIRE PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENTS, TRUST AND COMMON OBJECTIVES

The founder of the first-ever FJC in San Diego, Casey Gwinn, stated, "The magic is not the building, it's the collaborative leadership." As we have learned from the

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Ventura FJC, successful FJCs are not simply about square footage, architecture, or other building attributes. Good, healthy, and effective FJCs are grounded in the perspectives of the survivors they serve and the healthy relationships among the FJCs partners that agree to co-locate and serve in a coordinated and compassionate manner. Partners enter into comprehensive “Premises Agreements” and participate in monthly case reviews, trainings, meetings, recognitions, and other collaborative activities that help to transcend institutional silos. Healthy FJC partnerships include local county staffing, city investment, and co-location of community-based, medical, and law enforcement providers. In short, the cultivation of strong and dynamic community support is the key ingredient to a successful FJC.

FAMILY JUSTICE CENTERS REQUIRE STRATEGIC PLANNING, STEERING COMMITTEES, AND VICTIM VOICES

In 2016, Ventura County’s first FJC began with the formation of workgroups consisting of multiple governmental and community stakeholders and survivors who met monthly to envision what an FJC in our County would be. These workgroups were organized around the concepts of data, sustainability, facilities, protocols, procedures, and partnerships. After years of collaboration and outreach and a comprehensive two-day strategic planning summit, the Ventura FJC opened a modest pilot project in a 900 square foot room of the Hall of Justice in March 2019. By November 2019, the demand for services far exceeded the capacity of the existing tiny office space in the courthouse and required expansion to accommodate more survivors and on-site partners at its current location on Loma Vista Road in Ventura. Recently, in Oxnard, residents, stakeholders, victims, and community leaders were also invited to participate in a comprehensive two-day strategic planning event in February that will culminate in a written report containing the recommendations and reflections of those who participated. In addition to these efforts, a series of focus groups is being organized to ensure the integration of community input into what will eventually become the Carmen Ramirez Family Justice Center in Oxnard. Working groups, steering committees, and victim voices are necessary underpinnings in the development of a successful FJC.

CONCLUSION

The journey to creating the County’s first FJC took over three years and hundreds of hours of community outreach and engagement. Similarly, the development of an east county proposed FJC will also take time and require similar efforts to engage and develop local community support and input. Partnerships will need to be developed, the voices of

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local survivors must be sought out and heard, and the crafting of best practices unique to the demographics of each locale must be considered.

While this office's immediate time and focus will be to ensure the success of the Carmen Ramirez Family Justice Center and the proper administration of the \$8.6 million devoted to it, we look forward to being a vital partner in the development of a much-needed east county FJC in the future.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Erik Nasarenko". The signature is stylized with a large initial "E" and a long, sweeping underline.

ERIK NASARENKO
District Attorney

EN:mrj