

# **EDITORIAL: Fresno County supervisors must perform due diligence**

## **Youth psychiatric hospital plan is promising, but it must be vetted.**

By The Bee Editorial Board

The Fresno Bee

February 13, 2014 Updated 11 hours ago

Parents of children with severe mental illness in the Fresno area face the stressful additional burden of sending them at least 100 miles away to receive treatment. Sometimes, the distance is even greater.

"The first time my child was hospitalized, he was 12. He was falling apart — he wanted to kill himself," Linda Graves of Clovis told Bee reporter Barbara Anderson. "They sent him someplace that was four hours away. I'm trying as a parent to support him, but I'm not close enough."

But now there is hope for Graves and many other local families. Fresno County is negotiating with a private company — Long Beach-based Stars Behavioral Health Group — to open and run a 16-bed inpatient unit for adolescents in a building on the former University Medical Center campus.

If the proposed Central Star Behavioral Health psychiatric hospital becomes a reality, Fresno would no longer be the second-largest county in California without a treatment center for youths, according to the California Hospital Association. In 2013, the county sent 199 children to out-of-the-area hospitals at a cost of \$1.3 million.

Psychiatric care is expensive, and the Board of Supervisors has had to make gut-wrenching budget decisions in recent years. But the county's revenue is on the upswing and the financial plan for the adolescent psychiatric hospital appears realistic.

As explained by Dawan Utecht, director of the Fresno County Department of Behavioral Health, the county has applied for \$1.8 million in state funding. If that application is successful, the grant would go toward the unit's start-up costs. Reimbursements from federal, state and private insurance and other counties for patient treatment would help pay for the projected \$3.7 million in annual operating costs.

Stars Behavioral Health Group is a 25-year-old company. It provides services in behavioral health, child welfare, juvenile probation and special education in five California counties. And it operates a mental health hospital for children in Los Angeles County.

"We're one of the few agencies that really have the experience to do a children's (psychiatric hospital)," said Kent Dunlap, the company's chief operating officer. "We're dedicated to this work and serving children."

We expect Fresno County's supervisors to perform their due diligence. Stars' track record raises concerns.

In 2007, the company settled a Medi-Cal fraud lawsuit for \$1 million. A company lawyer told the San Francisco Chronicle that overbillings resulted from sloppy work and "it was a very isolated incident." In 2008, the San Jose Mercury News reported on state-documented instances of violence and other troubles at the company's locked psychiatric facility for troubled youth in Santa Clara County. The company denied the findings of investigators. But the county decided not to renew its contract with Stars, and the center closed that year.

By asking tough questions, the supervisors can both better protect taxpayers and help develop a successful partnership.

If this hospital can get up and running, moms and dads will be able to more easily visit children receiving treatment. No longer would a teen experiencing a mental breakdown have to be restrained for a distance of 100 miles or more while en route for help.

We ask that the supervisors take ownership of this important effort. This includes digging to see if Stars' problems have been rectified.

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