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## L.A.'S PARENT OF LAST RESORT

# Hope in MacLaren's Closure

Just eight children were bedded down this week in the gloomy, dormitory-style cubicles of MacLaren Children's Center. Even these last few severely troubled children in the county's de facto orphanage may soon get other homes. Good riddance to forbidding, often violence-plagued MacLaren. Now county officials need to make sure its former residents, and the thousands of other emotionally damaged children in foster care, get the psychiatric assistance, medication, tutoring and counseling they need.

Social workers in recent years routinely crammed as many as 250 children into "Mac," where terrified 8-year-olds rubbed shoulders with violent young adults. Although the El Monte facility was supposed to be a temporary emergency shelter for abused and neglected children, MacLaren long was a dumping ground where children lingered for months, sometimes even years, as their behavioral problems escalated.

That the battered metal doors to MacLaren soon will probably close for good is a victory for child welfare advocates in and out of county government. It takes nothing away from the achievement to note that the Department of Children and Family Services could have emptied MacLaren years ago or that the agency must now do much more than just warehouse somewhere else those for whom Mac was no excuse for a home.

Without intensive outside support, many

mentally ill or developmentally disabled foster children cannot live in families or, eventually, independently as adults. In the past, they've been moved from Mac to group homes and psychiatric hospitals and back again. This dismal circuit prompted several public interest groups to file suit last summer to force the county to act.

The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, trying to avoid a court battle, reportedly is close to the outlines of a settlement. Emptying MacLaren could be a signal of its new resolve to get children in real homes and keep them there.

Social workers have become much more diligent about linking troubled children and their parents, whether foster or biological, to counselors and therapists who may visit daily in an effort to keep families from flying apart. This kind of one-on-one help is expensive — \$6,000 and up annually for each child — but vastly cheaper than the \$270,000 the county paid each year to keep one child at MacLaren.

Still, initially serving the thousands of children and families countywide who could benefit from intense help will take money and a more flexible child welfare bureaucracy. Most of all, improving the odds for the most troubled kids will call for a steady resolve the county hasn't often demonstrated when it comes to its foster charges. Without that resolve, shuttering MacLaren will be nothing to celebrate.