

County Shuts Beleaguered Foster Center

A lawsuit by the ACLU and other groups alleged improper treatment of mentally ill children at the El Monte facility.

By SUE FOX
Times Staff Writer

Shadowed by a federal lawsuit over its treatment of mentally ill children, Los Angeles County has finally closed its much-criticized MacLaren Children's Center in El Monte and moved the few children who remained there into other homes.

Intended to house foster children for just a few days or weeks, MacLaren had grown perilously overcrowded with a mix of mentally ill, delinquent and abused youths who often lived there for months. Children often ran away, and violent outbursts were common, as were staff shakeups and lawsuits against the center.

In July, the American Civil Liberties Union of Southern California and other public-interest groups sued the county and state, contending they had failed to properly treat foster children with severe emotional and behavioral problems.

"It's really nothing short of outrageous that this has gone on for so long," said Miriam Krinsky, executive director of the children's Law Center of Los Angeles. "MacLaren has been riddled with problems and tragedies and hidden stories of lives that have been destroyed."

The shelter also was expensive; a recent grand jury report estimated that it spent about \$270,000 per child each year.

In recent months, county officials tried to move children into

smaller, community-based placements such as group homes or foster homes. In some cases, troubled youngsters who have bounced around the foster-care system for years have been returned to their families, bolstered by a support network of mental health professionals.

On Friday, MacLaren said goodbye to its last child, a 17-year-old boy who was sent to a group home, and closed its doors.

"It's time we stop just looking for the next placement and start planning for their lives," said Marjorie Kelly, interim director of the county Department of Children and Family Services.

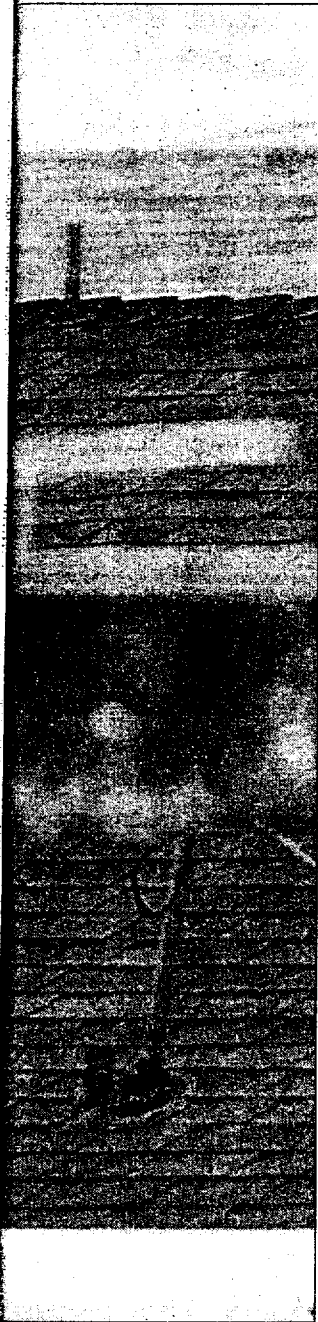
Union leaders who represent MacLaren's former social workers, however, counter that the county's sudden determination to close the shelter does not ensure better care.

"We want children to have families, but closing MacLaren does not create families," said Valerie Harragin of Service Employees International Union Local 535. "The county seems to be in a rush. They need to be absolutely sure that the alternatives are in place."

MacLaren's employees have been reassigned to other county jobs. But after a few staff members alleged that some children had run away from their new placements, county Supervisor Gloria Molina asked foster-care officials to compile a report tracking MacLaren's former charges.

Meanwhile, the county may soon settle the lawsuit brought by the ACLU and other groups, which sought MacLaren's closure.

The Board of Supervisors is scheduled to discuss the matter in closed session today.



Photos by LORI SHEPLER Los Angeles Times
About five shots were fired at
as hurt, authorities said.

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