

## A softer landing for kids

*Although the verdict isn't in yet, the Children's Receiving Center does seem to earn a thumbs up from children*

**N**ine years ago, Dan Saltzman, then a county commissioner, persuaded the Multnomah County board to tuck \$4 million into a public-safety bond measure. The money was earmarked to build a Children's Receiving Center.

The idea was simple: When police remove abused or neglected children from their homes, the kids sometimes wait in the back of a squad car while a foster home is hastily arranged. Saltzman and other advocates realized such kids needed a place to land, briefly but comfortably, after leaving their parents.

In addition to easing children's fears, the center was meant to address some of their medical problems, such as lice, and buy time for child-protective workers, too. Instead of rushing children into the first available foster family, the center gives workers a few days to ponder the best available match, boosting the odds that a placement will succeed.

In the end, voters supported the nearly \$80 million public safety bond measure. Voters wanted to build a new jail, and Wapato got built. Unfortunately, there's no money to operate it.

Other unpleasant surprises arose, too: The Children's Receiving Center wound up costing \$12 million, and money to operate it was hard to come by. It is operating today, however, and some preliminary evidence shows that it's doing what it is supposed to do, easing the transition into foster care.

When police remove children from their parents, the children often suffer a double blow. The abuse or neglect they have experienced is compounded by the disorientation of leaving everything familiar behind, including their siblings.

In many cases, an elder sister or brother has been effectively functioning as parent, and it's traumatic when siblings go to different placements. Finding foster care for a group of siblings takes time. Splitting them up is easier. But a study by the state Department of Human Services found that more siblings who went through the center in 2004 stayed together in foster care.

The study also found that children who went directly into foster care had twice as many subsequent placements as CRC children, suggesting that kids are better off when more time and care is spent selecting their foster parents.

Critics feared that the center would become a mini-warehouse, a place kids would be parked for too long. But that hasn't happened. The average stay is a little more than five days.

Admittedly, it's too soon to say that the center is an unqualified success. It serves fewer than 300 children a year, which is far fewer than it could or should serve. The Christie School, an excellent choice, is running the center for the county, but with an operating budget of \$523,566, the center is not inexpensive. Even when it's running at full capacity, the cost per child is \$179 a day.

Yet not everything good about the center can be reduced to numbers either. The center is softening children's landings, not only with stuffed animals and gentle treatment but also by preserving children's routines, including keeping them in their own schools.

Kids give the experience high marks. Some drop by later to visit staff. Happy endings aren't guaranteed, but the center is providing happier beginnings.

3/28/05

OREGONIAN