

El Dorado County probation in state of flux

By Kathryn Reed

A show of force late Monday afternoon by El Dorado County employees prevented the chief probation officer and others from being found in contempt of court.

El Dorado County Superior Court Judge Steve Bailey summoned Greg Sly to his courtroom April 8 to talk about the staffing situation at the Juvenile Detention Center in South Lake Tahoe. Bailey is the presiding judge of the juvi system and Sly is head of probation.

Since September there has not been enough female staff to allow girls to be housed at the South Lake Tahoe facility. Today there are seven girls in the juvenile system; one is from Tahoe. She is with the rest of the girls in Placerville.

Bailey and Sly met April 5. Bailey wasn't satisfied with Sly's reasons for the ongoing staff shortage and at that meeting threatened Sly and other county officials with contempt of court. This could have resulted in their sitting in a jail cell or facing a fine.



Greg Sly, El Dorado County chief probation officer, is ready to spend more time

backpacking with his dog.

Photo/Provided

It was Sly, two members of the county legal team, the human resources director and a member of the chief administrative office who met with Bailey on Monday. The result is none was detained or fined, and that there is better understanding of the recruiting process for probation.

Staffing issues

The 40-bed Tahoe facility was built to house an equal number of girls and boys. This is the second time since the facility opened in 2004 that the girls' side is dark. That's because a minimum of six female employees are needed to keep that side of the 24-hour facility open. Physical searches and showers require staff to be the same sex as the detainees.

Five of the seven female workers are injured – some are workers' comp cases, some injuries happened outside of work.

Sly told *Lake Tahoe News* he hopes to be back to a full complement of employees by May 1. Three of the injured workers should be off leave and new recruits hired. The hiring process takes about six months with all the background checks and other training needed for probation officers.

Fully staffed at the Tahoe Juvenile Treatment Center would be 10 men, 10 women.

The JTC has had trouble keeping and recruiting people because it's more expensive to live in Tahoe, more remote and the kids more dangerous than those in Placerville.

Probation officers cost the county about \$90,000 a year in salary and benefits. There are 131 people in the department. Probation has an annual budget of about \$14 million.

In the current recruitment batch 318 people submitted

applications. Of those, 168 went through the testing process. Nine of the 60 top tier applicants want to work in South Lake Tahoe.

After a report by Sly last fall went to top administrators as well as the Board of Supervisors, the county has created the position of program coordinator and hired a counselor for the Tahoe site.

While Sly is getting what he wanted in terms of staffing, it came with some retaliation last fall when he was placed on a 10-week paid administrative leave for reasons Chief Administrative Officer Terri Daly has never disclosed.

The lack of communication continued between Daly and Sly when after a report by a third party was done on the probation department, Daly kept it from the person in charge of the department for several weeks. It also took a public records request for *Lake Tahoe News* to obtain the document.

The report says, "The findings of this study are that the major critical factors affecting El Dorado County's ability to recruit and retain qualified personnel for its juvenile justice facilities are: Fiscal issues; work schedules and shift structures; operational and programming issues affecting staff safety; and, to a slightly lesser extent, safety concerns associated with facility physical plants."

Consultant's report

Suzie Cohen and Associates was paid \$33,000 to evaluate the county's juvenile facilities from October 2012-February 2013. The consultant was tasked with looking at staffing, programs, operations, population levels at the facilities in South Lake Tahoe and Placerville, and more.

Recommendations include:

- Increase base pay by 10 to 12 percent for staff.

- Raise base pay of chief probation officer before hiring a new one.
- Increase stipend for Tahoe employees.
- Have someone do a scheduling study to potentially go from three eight-hour shifts to two 12s.
- Screening and placement of wards should be the responsibility of probation staff, not the courts.
- Community members and service providers should assist with delivering life skills.
- Introduce a “true” drug and alcohol treatment program.
- Introduce “proven” programs that reduce recidivism.
- Girls should have as many programs as boys.
- More internal training.
- Develop comprehensive emergency response plan with El Dorado County Sheriff’s Department.
- Plan to build a new juvenile facility in Placerville.

Not much has changed since the county did a needs assessment for South Lake Tahoe in 1999-2000. The consultant quoted from that report, “The Tahoe area could pose particular problems ... because it is relatively remote, has a small and transient population base, has no university nearby from which to draw, is expensive and has a mainly recreation/gaming economy. The consultant added, “Especially if El Dorado County pays less than comparable and/or neighboring counties, recruiting and retaining staff will continue to be extremely difficult.”

Population projections for the county indicate both juvi facilities could be full as time goes by.

The report says, “Violent crime and youth gang activity are

more prevalent in South Lake Tahoe than on the West Slope. As a result, juvenile offenders from the Tahoe basin are somewhat more sophisticated and have committed more serious offenses than their counterparts from the West Slope.”

Staff who were interviewed by the consultant team spoke of the differences between Tahoe and Placerville, right down to how a little snow in Placerville means closing offices, while Tahoe offices stay open with several feet of snow.

“Cultural differences between the West Slope and South Lake Tahoe reportedly contribute to morale problems in many agencies, including the DA’s office, the bench, the jail and others,” the report says. “People in South Lake Tahoe feel cut off, like ‘step children.’ They say managers and administrators in Placerville ‘don’t know what it’s like up here.’”

Sly retiring

The county on April 5 opened the recruitment process to replace Sly. His last day will be Sept. 13. With his assistant chief retiring in December, Sly announced his retirement early with the intent of allowing his replacement to be on board so there is no gap in leadership.

He has been with the department for 23 years.

Sly will be 50 when he retires. He is considering what his future will entail. He’s hoping not to work the first year. Instead, he wants to fill his time backpacking. The John Muir Trail is on his list.

Sly has a new dog that became part of the family to be his backpacking buddy.

He is also looking at going to law school. He and his daughter could be classmates. Sly admitted with the turmoil in his life of late, labor law is of particular interest.

Having taught at Lake Tahoe Community College, he also envisions possibly teaching at UNR.

Then part of Sly also thinks selling backpacks at REI could be his next career.