



Connie Beck, Director
Social Services | Public Health | Mental Health

news release

July 26, 2019

New visitation center allows foster children to spend more time with family

Local mom Ashaley said she enjoys spending visitation time with her children at the county's new Multi-Family Visitation (MFV) Center.

The MFV center, which is located at the Jefferson Community Center in Eureka, is run by the Humboldt County Department of Health & Human Services (DHHS) Child Welfare Services (CWS) Division and provides an area for multiple, eligible families to have supervised visitations at the same time.

Ashaley sits in the grassy field with her two young ones in her lap. Her children, ages 2, 4 and 10 years old, are currently in foster care, and Ashaley said she recently started having her visitations with them at the MFV. She said she enjoys spending time with her children playing on the playground and in the different activity rooms.

"It's a really wonderful opportunity. It's relaxed," Ashaley said, adding that it gives her a chance to be closer to her children.

Earlier this week, nearly 100 people attended the ribbon cutting event for the MFV, the first of its kind in Humboldt County. DHHS Director Connie Beck said she hopes more community-based family visitation centers can be opened throughout the county.

The center is something CWS Program Manager Sheryl Lyons said was a "grassroots" idea from staff. "We knew we wanted to give families more opportunities to visit."

CWS Director Amanda Winstead agrees, "Visits really matter. We know that from a research place, and we know that from our hearts."

It was important to staff that they create a "homelike and natural setting," she said. "Kids want to see their parents, and parents want to see their kids."

Heidi Benzonelli, president of the Westside Community Improvement Association which runs the Jefferson center said, "The Multi-Family Visitation

Center is in response to families, kids and CWS staff who wanted a healthy, vibrant, lively environment where families are encouraged to heal, thrive and engage as members of the community. The Jefferson Community Center stands as a place in our community for love and healing and is a perfect fit for this new endeavor.”

Currently in foster care with a family member, 11-year-old Alyssa said she enjoys spending time with her mother at the center as they work toward reunification. Prior to the opening of the MFV, Alyssa said her time with her mother was typically spent in Old Town or visiting the Sequoia Park Zoo. Alyssa said she enjoys the variety of things available at the MFV.

“There’s a lot more stuff to do,” Alyssa said. “We hang out on the playground, and she gives me her clothes and makeup and does my hair.” The outgoing pre-teen with multiple delicate ponytails framing her face said she loves spending time with her mom in a more relaxed environment.

“We take it to heart that families are counting on us to help them stay connected,” Lyons said, adding that MFV centers often allow for longer and more frequent visits.

Humboldt County Superior Court Judge Joyce Hinrichs said families involved in the court system are often disconnected, but the more they feel connected the more successful they are likely to be. “It’s such a friendly place,” Hinrichs said. “You can’t help but come here and feel that good things will happen.”

Alyssa agrees. “You get to visit your parents here,” she said, smiling over at her mom. “She’s working at getting me back.”

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Nearly 100 people gather at the Jefferson Community Center earlier this week to celebrate the opening of Humboldt County's first Multi-Family Visitation Center.



From left: California Center for Rural Policy Executive Director Connie Stewart, DHHS Public Health Director Michele Stephens, Eureka Mayor Susan Seaman, DHHS Director Connie Beck and First 5 Humboldt Executive Director Mary Ann Hansen attend the ribbon cutting for the county's first Multi-Family Visitation Center.