

**Monday, May 15, 2006**

Last modified Saturday, May 13, 2006 11:51 PM PDT

## Juvenile Hall hosts annual open house

By: TERI FIGUEROA - Staff Writer

SAN DIEGO ---- Everything here clangs. There's nothing soft, quiet or inviting. Nothing "kid" about it at all.

The mattresses are super thin, more like cots. The stalls around the toilets are just about waist-high. Rooms are sparse, containing only beds, a metal stool bolted to the floor and a piece of wood jutting out of the wall to serve as a desk. Nothing else.

No, it ain't pretty. Nor is it supposed to be. And the people who run the Kearny Mesa Juvenile Detention Facility ---- commonly called Juvenile Hall ---- would prefer if the children housed inside never came back.

Although juvenile proceedings are shrouded in secrecy, once a year the San Diego County Probation Office invites the public into the juvenile facility, into the juvenile courtrooms, for a tour.

On Saturday, slightly more than 2,200 people stepped inside the fenced-in walls of juvenile hall to get a glimpse.

Visitors were allowed to see the inside of a courtroom ---- which has no jury box, since juvenile offenders are tried by a judge, not a jury ---- as well as the stark holding rooms where minors in custody wait before they head into court.

For those in custody, a trip from Juvenile Hall to the courtrooms means waist chains and prison blues.

Some 4,700 new cases are filed in Juvenile Court every year, officials said. The court also handles school truancy cases.

Before the behind-the-scenes sneak peek into Juvenile Hall began Saturday, probation officers with grim faces made everyone under 18 on the tour line up by twos and cross their arms ---- a taste of how the juveniles in custody are treated. Eyes front, tuck in your shirt, no talking and stand up straight, the officers barked.

"Harsh," said one 17-year-old Chula Vista girl obeying the commands as she toured.

And thus was the entrance into the living quarters for minors held in the 52-year-old facility in Kearny Mesa. For



*Juvenile Hall officer Natalie Boblatt CDPO-1 talks to children attending the Juvenile Hall tour Saturday.*

**WALDO NILO** Staff Photographer

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the minors held in custody, intake at Juvenile Hall includes a strip search and a shower.

All the residents share clean clothes from a common supply. Even the same underwear.

The rooms do not have toilets. For youth offenders locked inside, a trip to the bathroom means pushing a button to flip on a light in the hallway outside the room. It's also how they notify officers of any emergencies.

The tour served as an education for another Chula Vista teenager.

"I think it teaches a lesson for people like me to never end up in a place like this," the 17-year-old said, noting that he was taking the tour to complete the court-ordered community service hours he received after getting into trouble last year.

After walking through the stark hallways where the adolescents in custody live, the tour took a trip through the Girls Rehabilitation Facility and classrooms ---- which sit in the mesh shadows of extremely high fences topped with barbed wire.

The state Board of Corrections rated the capacity at 359, although a local judge mandated in 1998 that he capacity could reach 537 minors each day. The number of offenders currently held at the Kearny Mesa site was not immediately available Saturday afternoon, but in 2005, Juvenile Hall housed an average of about 284 youths a day.

The average length of stay at Juvenile Hall in San Diego County facilities is about 21 days, and the average cost per day to house an offender is about \$190. Parents are charged \$17 for each day their child is housed.

The Kearny Mesa facility has been under a little fire lately, with a group of attorneys, including some with a firm that pushes for prisoners' rights, alleging that youth offenders held there live in overcrowded conditions, are often subjected to pepper spray and are overprescribed psychotropic drugs to make them easier to control.

The lawsuit, filed last month in San Francisco, targeted a number of juvenile facilities across the state.

The Kearny Mesa center which houses juvenile offenders throughout San Diego County, including those from North County. Two years ago, the county opened up a second facility ---- in Otay Mesa ---- at a cost of about \$55 million. That facility was not targeted in the statewide suit.

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## Teens get a glimpse of Juvenile Hall life

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### Students on tour say they're struck by lack of privacy

**By Ray Huard**  
STAFF WRITER

May 14, 2006

The commands are barked in a clear and loud voice with just a hint of menace.

“Tuck in your shirts,” says Jenifer Miskulin, a deputy probation officer.

“Cross your arms” Miskulin says sternly. “No talking, let's go, let's go.

Glancing at the low-riding baggy pants of a teenage boy, she tells him to pull up his trousers and straighten up.

He does it quickly. Those behind him fall into a double line.

Gone are the jostling and joking that had happened moments before.

Miskulin later said the harsh tone and strong words were meant to make an impression on the nearly 3,000 teenagers and parents who yesterday toured the Kearny Mesa Juvenile Detention Facility – commonly called Juvenile Hall – and the adjacent Juvenile Court during an annual open house.

The impression stuck with 14-year-old Raquel Diaz of Escondido and her stepbrother, Jamie Diaz, 15.

“I won't come here,” Jamie said.

What struck him was the starkness of the cells – that and the isolation of those placed in solitary confinement.

“There's nothing in there, just the room and the beds,” Jamie said. “I'd go crazy.”

Raquel said she was stunned by the common bathrooms.

“You don't have any privacy,” she said.

Their parents, like many of the others taking the tour, said they brought their children to learn what happens when children break the law.

“We wanted our children to get a little eye-opener,” Leticia Lopez said.

The county Probation Department has been offering the tours for nearly 20 years, but the number of people taking them has nearly doubled since 2001, topping 3,200 in 2004.

Juvenile Hall was built in 1954, and currently houses 330 boys and girls.

Derryl Acosta, a Probation Department spokesman, said those sent to Juvenile Hall stay about 18 days on average before they are released or transferred elsewhere to serve their sentence.

"It's kind of bad in there," said Patrick Brown, 11, of Rancho San Diego.

"They watch you while you take a shower. There's no privacy. I don't want to end up like that."

Patrick's mother, Debbie Brown, said she left with a feeling of sadness for the children housed in Juvenile Hall.

"They're so isolated from their family, they're really in like a mini-prison," Brown said.

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