

Little peace, joy at shelter

Questions/Answers

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CONTRACT: Ties to South Bay political figures helped keep troubled facility for women from being shut.

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Article Launched: 07/05/2008 10:42:27 PM PDT

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The problems at the Peace & Joy battered women's shelter built up over several months. Clients complained that the staff was abusive, the food was inadequate and the toilets didn't flush.

There were cockroaches and vermin droppings. One woman said she had developed a foot fungus, and maggots were invading her room. She later moved back home because she felt safer with her abuser.

County administrators watched as the situation spiraled out of control. But they were wary of cracking down on the shelter because they believed that Supervisor Yvonne Brathwaite Burke was inclined to protect it. One of Burke's deputies was friends with the shelter's director, and both women were active in Carson politics.

Still, the staffers believed that conditions were so bad that they had to take action. So they drew up a plan to cut off funding and move the women and their children to other facilities.

But that didn't happen. Instead of suspending Peace & Joy's contract, the Community and Senior Services agency merely put the shelter on probation. Peace & Joy no longer got referrals, but it still got funding.

The decision was mystifying within the county bureaucracy. In an e-mail two months after the suspension was supposed to take effect, a contract management director asked several colleagues if they had figured out whether the decision was reversed.

A colleague wrote back: "Although CSS' plan was to suspend the agency, they ended up putting them on

probation per Second District's recommendation."

That was a reference to Burke's office. Despite urgent warnings about maggots and cockroaches, county staffers were saying that Burke had intervened to keep the shelter open.

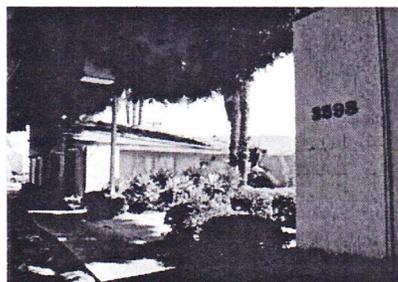
In interviews and e-mails, Burke and other county officials denied that she had any role in dealing with the problems at Peace & Joy.

"I don't dictate policy. I don't dictate action," Burke said. "I can't make suggestions. - I can never be involved in action that's taken by a department."

But in thousands of pages of e-mails and other documents obtained through the state Public Records Act, it became clear that Burke and her staff have been more engaged than she lets on, and that county staffers felt inhibited from doing their jobs because of it.

Of particular concern was the relationship between the shelter director, Wilma Wilson, and Burke's deputy, Del Huff. Both are prominent in Carson. Wilson is a former planning commissioner who has run for City Council, and Huff is the president of a major neighborhood association.

Over the years, Wilson has taken her complaints about the county bureaucracy to Huff. Huff would relay those



This shelter for battered women in Lynwood was taken over by Peace & Joy after another agency shut down in 2001. Under Peace & Joy, a series of maintenance and financial issues led to the shelter being abandoned earlier this year. (Robert Casillas / Staff Photographer)

concerns - such as slow payment of invoices - to Burke, and Burke would bring them up with the head of the department. Wilson named a hallway at her shelter after Huff and another after Burke.

As the conditions deteriorated at Peace & Joy last summer and fall, another Burke deputy, Miriam Long, became involved in monitoring the situation. On Oct. 19, Long wrote an urgent warning to Burke.

"This one is really bothering me," she said. "Somehow, CSS is under the impression that we are 'protecting' this agency."

Long asked Burke for instructions on how to proceed, but recommended that she allow county staffers to remove women from the shelter.

"There is even an instance of a client reporting her return to her batterer, rather than to live in this rat/roach/maggot infested (though well-meaning I am sure) facility," Long wrote. "I have discussed the matter with Del (Huff) and she is 'on top of the matter,' but I wanted to be sure you saw what was happening, also."

Complaints early on

Peace & Joy opened its first shelter in Carson in 1994. The agency expanded and now runs three more shelters in Compton. In 2001, another agency shut down its own facility in Lynwood, and Burke's office urged Peace & Joy to take it over.

The building was enormous. It had room for 140 beds - though most of the rooms were not in use. And it needed repairs.

"I should have not taken the building," Wilson said in an interview. "I was told by one of my funders not to take the building. I should have listened to their advice."

There were complaints early on about the building, but also about the staff. In one complaint made to the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority in 2003, an employee said there was little to no counseling going on, that the "children's coordinator" just played video games all day, and that a man on the kitchen staff was known to sexually harass residents.

In 2005, two residents and a former staffer filed further complaints about rodent and insect infestation at the shelter. The kitchen was dingy, and the shelter was in disrepair. The staff was also unprofessional.

Wilson told LAHSA administrators that she paid her staff \$10 an hour, and got "\$10/hour employees." She said she would try to improve her screening process.

She also started spending her own money on repairs to the shelter.

"Every dime I had, I put it into the shelter," Wilson said in the interview.

That raised concerns with county auditors, who issued a report in December 2005 calling Peace & Joy financially unstable.

"The service provider is insolvent and might not have enough funding to finance its daily operation," the auditor wrote.

Despite that report and subsequent audits that showed serious accounting problems, Peace & Joy continued to get public funding: \$2.4 million in 2004, \$2.5 million in 2005, and \$2.3 million in 2006, the last year for which tax records are available.

In February 2007, the Community and Senior Services agency followed up on more complaints against Peace & Joy. Three months later, the agency issued a scathing report.

Investigators found evidence that Peace & Joy staffers threatened clients, used profanity and did not provide counseling or enough food. The building was too cold in winter, and children had become sick because of it. Mothers felt it was unsafe to leave their kids at the day-care facility.

Battered women also said they had been forced to work on Wilson's political campaign. (She was running for Carson City Council at the time and intends to run again next spring.)

Wilson wrote back, vehemently denying the allegations.

In July 2007, the Public Health Department inspected the Lynwood shelter and found broken fixtures, toilets that didn't flush, mildew on the ceiling, holes in the walls, peeling paint and dozens of dead cockroaches.

In follow-up visits in August and September, CSS staffers found vermin droppings. Now that it was late summer, clients said it was too hot in the building. Other problems had still not been fixed, including the plumbing and the lack of adequate counseling.

Wilson turned to Huff. Huff facilitated a conversation between Wilson and the CSS staff. The outcome was that Peace & Joy would not be suspended immediately, but would get three to four weeks to repair the shelter.

Improvements short-lived

In October, a health inspector found significant improvements. Wilson quickly wrote to CSS - with copies sent to Huff and Burke - asking that the violations be cleared.

But CSS Assistant Director Josie Marquez had already decided to suspend the contract and relocate the battered women. She wrote to Miriam Long, Burke's deputy, that the shelter still had programmatic problems and client safety issues that "bring into question this agency's ability to provide safety net services to domestic violence victims."

"Please advise the supervisor that we are looking out for the interest of the client," Marquez wrote.

The next day, Long wrote her e-mail to Burke, advising her to allow CSS to proceed with the plan to move the women out of Peace & Joy.

On Oct. 24, CSS suspended the contract. The day after that, a group of 25 people from six agencies descended on the shelter to evacuate it.

Things did not go according to plan. Only seven clients were actually at the shelter, out of 22 who were supposed to be living there. Shelter staffers said that the women were at work or at school, though it was only 7:20 a.m.

County administrators learned that Wilson had held a meeting the previous night with staff and residents, informing them of the planned evacuation. They suspected that their clients might have been at one of Peace & Joy's other locations.

Of the seven women who were present, three did not want to leave. They referred to the clients who had complained as "troublemakers." Four others wanted to go.

At 9 a.m., Wilson arrived and began to disrupt the evacuation, according to a county report.

"Why do you want to go?" she asked her clients. "What you all are doing is just not right."

At some point, she "became hysterical," according to the report, and began to cry uncontrollably.

CSS had asked three other shelters to take in Peace & Joy's clients. But when the shelter staff arrived, they huddled with Wilson's staff and from then on became unhelpful in the evacuation.

One county official called staff members at the shelters "unkind and insensitive" and said their behavior increased the fear and anxiety level of the clients.

"Those shelters did not go against me," Wilson said in the interview. "I thank them for that support."

Peace & Joy staff told one woman, "You know they are sending you to a mental place, right?"

The woman, who had been suicidal, told the county she was afraid to go to a "crazy house" with her two children. Ultimately, she was persuaded to move to a shelter sponsored by the Department of Mental Health. LAHSA placed another woman in one of its shelters.

Two other clients said they would leave, but were not ready to go right away. County staffers never heard from them again.

The result of the evacuation was that out of 22 women at the shelter, three stayed, two left, and 17 were unaccounted for.

The next week, CSS reversed the suspension and put Peace & Joy on probation.

Cynthia Banks, the director of CSS, said the decision was made because "some of the participants were going to continue receiving services from the agency."

Banks said Burke "does not have an active role" in such decisions, disputing her own staff's explanation that the decision was Burke's idea.

In December, the shelter racked up some new health code violations: holes in the wall, a clogged toilet, dirty floors. The probation period was extended, and Wilson again sought extra time to fix the problems.

Suddenly abandoned

In January, without telling anyone beforehand, Wilson abandoned the Lynwood facility and moved her clients into a new shelter in Compton.

The move cleared the health code violations - though once again, it left the programmatic issues unaddressed.

But by this spring, the supervisor's office appeared to have changed its mind about Peace & Joy. In April, Phil Ansell of the Department of Public Social Services, which funds the CSS grants, wrote to colleagues that he had received a call from Burke's senior deputy, Dana Blackwell.

"The Second District is interested in seeing our contracts with Peace & Joy end, but does not want us to take action to terminate those contracts," he wrote. Blackwell wanted to know how many contracts Peace & Joy had, and when they would expire.

Peace & Joy recently was notified that its CSS contracts would not be renewed as of July 1. Two other county contracts have also expired and will not be renewed, cutting Peace & Joy's total revenue by about \$400,000.

Wilson's annual budget for the fiscal year will be about \$1.8 million - mostly from state and federal grants.

A spokeswoman for one of those funders, the California Department of Public Health, was asked about the allegations against Peace & Joy.

"We are looking into the situation," she said.

Though Wilson still serves more than 100 women and children, she said she had to cut her staff from 43 people to 32.

"At this point, we all feel like we are victims," she said. "Why was our shelter the only one not funded?"

Wilson has her own theory, and it depends heavily on Huff.

In Wilson's view, her troubles started when she ran for council last year. She was seen as an ally of Carson Mayor Jim Dear, and therefore became estranged from his opponents: Councilman Mike Gipson, Councilwoman Lula Davis-Holmes and Huff.

"It's political," Wilson said. "It's so obvious."

In this view, Huff was the one responsible for the CSS audits. Wilson said that some of the clients who had complained to CSS later told her they had been planted there for political reasons.

"Why is there a battered women's shelter that's been good for so long, and after I run for office, we're bad?" she asked.

Burke found that hard to fathom.

"I thought Del Huff was a close friend of hers," she said.

Apparently not anymore.

In an interview, Huff said she and her colleagues in Burke's office have no relationship with Peace & Joy.

"The supervisor's office has absolutely nothing to do with it," Huff said. "That's the department of CSS. You would have to call them. I don't have anything to do with it."

Burke said she did not believe her staff was protecting Peace & Joy.

"We do have an interest in maintaining services and go out of our way to maintain services," she said.

In March, health inspectors visited the new shelter in Compton for the first time. It was mostly OK, though on the basement door they did see one live roach.

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