

# Visalia Times Delta

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## NEWS

# Connections Center is first of its kind in Tulare County, California

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Published 3:34 p.m. PT Dec. 8, 2021

In its simplest form, Connections does this: Helps clients figure out what they want and then helps them accomplish their goals.

The Tulare County Probation Department sponsored program is the first of its kind in the state and likely in the country. Connections serve youth, adults and families by providing mental health, education, vocational training, as well as drug and alcohol recovery services at one location.

On Wednesday, Chief Probation Officer Michelle Bonwell introduced the facility to the public.

"We created this with (the community) in mind," she said. "We really wanted them to walk through the door and know that our partners are here to serve, and they are here to help."

The program is the brainchild of Bonwell.

When she approached Tulare County Board of Supervisors with the idea of moving to the old Kmart building in Visalia, she also came with the vision of opening Connections.

"It's much more than I ever expected," Board Chairwoman Amy Shuklian said. "They've done a great job with this... This is the upper echelon of community service organizations in Tulare County. To bring them all together, under one roof, for the purpose the probation department has done is just incredible."

## **Trailblazer**

One of the many functions of a probation department is to supervise and provide youth and adult offenders with preventive programs. Clients are required to check in daily or regularly with their probation officers, and vendors are outsourced to provide needed services.

What Bonwell created is different.

"I believe we are the first in the state to bring in our community partners," she said. "We really looked into our community to bring our partners in to help grow their programs that we know work."

Connections is focused on helping probation clients and the community at large. The services are provided at no cost to the client and there are no requirements that need to be met in order to receive services.

So far, there are 13 community partners providing services at the facility.

Community partners include:

- Alliant International University
- Boys & Girls Clubs of the Sequoias
- Central Valley Recovery Services
- Champions
- CSET
- Family Services of Tulare County
- Tulare County Health & Human Services Agency
- JDT Consultants
- Tulare County Office of Education
- Visalia Adult School
- Visalia Youth Services
- Workforce Investment Board

These agencies will have staff at Connections five days a week, but the hope is to staff the facility seven days a week, Bonwell said.

"What I really wanted to do was grow our community," she said. "We wanted to give the money back to our county partners and have them expand services... this gives the ability to have more classes and serve more clients."

## **Drop the labels**

Although located next to Tulare County Probation Department, Bonwell said she didn't want "probation" to be in the program's name.

"It was really important to me to help the community and not have that stigma and drop the labels," she said. "It's a community collaborative, as the name states."

Bonwell said the department will continue to evaluate the project to ensure that community needs are being met. She also hopes to expand Connections.

"My vision is to have two more of these," Bonwell said.

Connections North is set to open in the spring at a former juvenile facility on Avenue 368 in Visalia, which was closed roughly four years ago. Bonwell is currently looking for a south county location.

The Tulare County Probation Department recently moved into 85,000 square feet of converted office space that formerly housed Visalia Kmart.

Visalia planning commissioners unanimously approved probation's planned move in January. Officials said the relocation would benefit the community by centralizing the probation department's services, which were spread throughout the city.

Of the whole probation department complex, located along Noble Avenue, Connections takes up 25,000 square feet.

*Sheyanne Romero covers Tulare County public safety, local government and business for the Visalia Times-Delta and Tulare Advance-Register newspapers. Follow her on Twitter @sheyanne\_VTD. **Get alerts and keep up on all things Tulare County for as little as \$1 a month. Subscribe today.***