Kids adrift without center; No plans for future of City Heights Boys & Girls Club

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When the last school bell rang, Malcolm Turley would head for a place that felt like home, a place where he could play ball, get help with homework and hang with his friends.

Since the Boys & Girls Clubs pulled out of City Heights, the sixth-grader has nowhere to go. He dillydallies around school. He scopes out a park gang members frequent. Bored, he wanders the neighborhood.

His mother, Patricia Johnson, never knows where he is, and she worries. Last week, when she got off work and went looking for him, she found him back at the vacant center.

"He was sitting on the porch, sucking his fingers, looking like a little child," she said.

Other kids return to the center, too, looking for the buzz of afternoon activity. Not all of the children have heard the bad news.

The facility closed May 23 after losing its lease with a Baptist church, leaving many to wonder why the Boys & Girls Clubs would abandon a community where the need is so great.

Forty kids between 6 and 18 regularly spent afternoons at the center under adult supervision. For five years, the modest Fairmount Baptist Church annex was their private clubhouse.

"That’s where I grew up," Malcolm said.

Of the 11 Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater San Diego facilities, it was the smallest, least funded and the only one with a short-term lease.

By comparison, the organization’s Escondido facility, at 37,000 square feet, was eight times the size and had eight times the budget. It also had gymnasiums and a technology center.

In the City Heights center, the foosball and pool tables were on wheels, and each night they had to be put away. Grass grew in the cracks of the tiny cement outdoor play area. But it never bothered the kids.

"That little dinky Boys & Girls club. They love it," Johnson said.
Church pastor Jim Gilbert said when the Boys & Girls Clubs first signed a lease with the church five years ago, officials told him they planned to find a permanent location in City Heights.

He figured five years was more than enough time.

Gilbert said the church gave the club notice because his growing congregation needs the extra space. But he was surprised and saddened the organization had made no other plans.

"It seems that the Boys & Girls Clubs is not seriously concerned about having an outreach in City Heights," he said.

Dee-Dee Hyde, who has served as the center's program director since it opened, is baffled.

"Why would they shut the place when kids need it?" she asked.

President and CEO Danny Sherlock said he still wants to find a permanent home in City Heights, but can't say when or if that will happen.

"We never, ever like to close facilities," he said. "We don't do that lightly."

He said no money has been set aside to build a facility in City Heights, where 40 percent of the population is under 20.

"There's no white knight out there who has jumped up and said here's the money or here's the location," he said.

When the facility closed, many parents had not secured spots for their children in alternative programs. The "6-to-6" child-care program is full in many schools, and parents had to put their children's names on a waiting list.

The Copley YMCA, also located in City Heights, has vacancies in its before- and after-school programs, but some parents found it too expensive. (Prices range from free to $140 a week, depending on income level.) They were accustomed to paying $8 a year per child at the Boys & Girls Clubs.

Heather Carlisle is one of the parents who relied on the club to keep an eye on her daughters.

Kayla and Alysha were walked from their middle and elementary schools to the club by Boys & Girls staff members. They also had the opportunity to go on golfing trips, compete in track meets and take walks to the library.
"My kids were exposed to a lot of things that I'm not able to do while I'm at work," Carlisle said.

She's sad they will be missing out on all those activities. But she feels worse that they will be home alone most summer afternoons.

Her neighborhood isn't safe, she says, and she's heard stories about break-ins in her apartment complex. Her girls are 8 and 11.

"I'm terrified," she said.

Child development experts say after-school programs prevent kids from committing crimes and joining gangs. They also say they improve academic performance by providing positive role models and assistance with homework.

When the Boys & Girls center was open, Johnson never had to worry what kind of trouble Malcolm and his three siblings were getting into after school. They were always at the club.

Now, she considers herself lucky to find them at Wilson Middle School.

Looking for her kids after she got off work one day last week, she found Macey, 15, had been sitting on a bench since school let out. Malcolm, 12, had gotten in trouble with a teacher. Marco, 14, was home sick.

But where was Cheyenne?

"Ya'll don't know where your sister is?" Johnson asked them.

No, they said, shaking their heads.

"All right, let's find your sister," she said.

So the three of them stood on Orange Avenue, looking up and down the street for a sign of the 11-year-old baby of the family.

The boys spotted her a block away, at Teralta Neighborhood Park, where gang members are known to hang out.

Johnson knows she needs to keep her kids under tighter control. Their father is in prison, and she wants to ensure they take a different path in life.

"If I leave them out here by themselves, they're liable to get into anything," she said. "That's the reality. I got good kids, but I know what they are capable of doing."
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Child-care referrals For child-care referrals, call YMCA Childcare Resource Service: (800) 481-2151

Caption: 3 PICS

1. Dee-Dee Hyde, program director of the City Heights Boys & Girls Club, told 11-year-olds Michael Seang, Ra Tran and Edgar Gonzalez (from left) that the club has closed. The facility closed May 23 after losing its lease with a Baptist church. 2. Patricia Johnson picked up her children, Cheyenne Turley, 11, Malcolm Turley, 12, and Macey Turley, 15. The kids used to go to the City Heights Boys & Girls Club, but now wander around the neighborhood after school. 3. Dee-Dee Hyde cleaned and packed up the now closed City Heights Boys & Girls Club. No money has been set aside to build a new facility. (B-10: 1,7) 1,2,3. Crissy Pascual / Union-Tribune photos

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