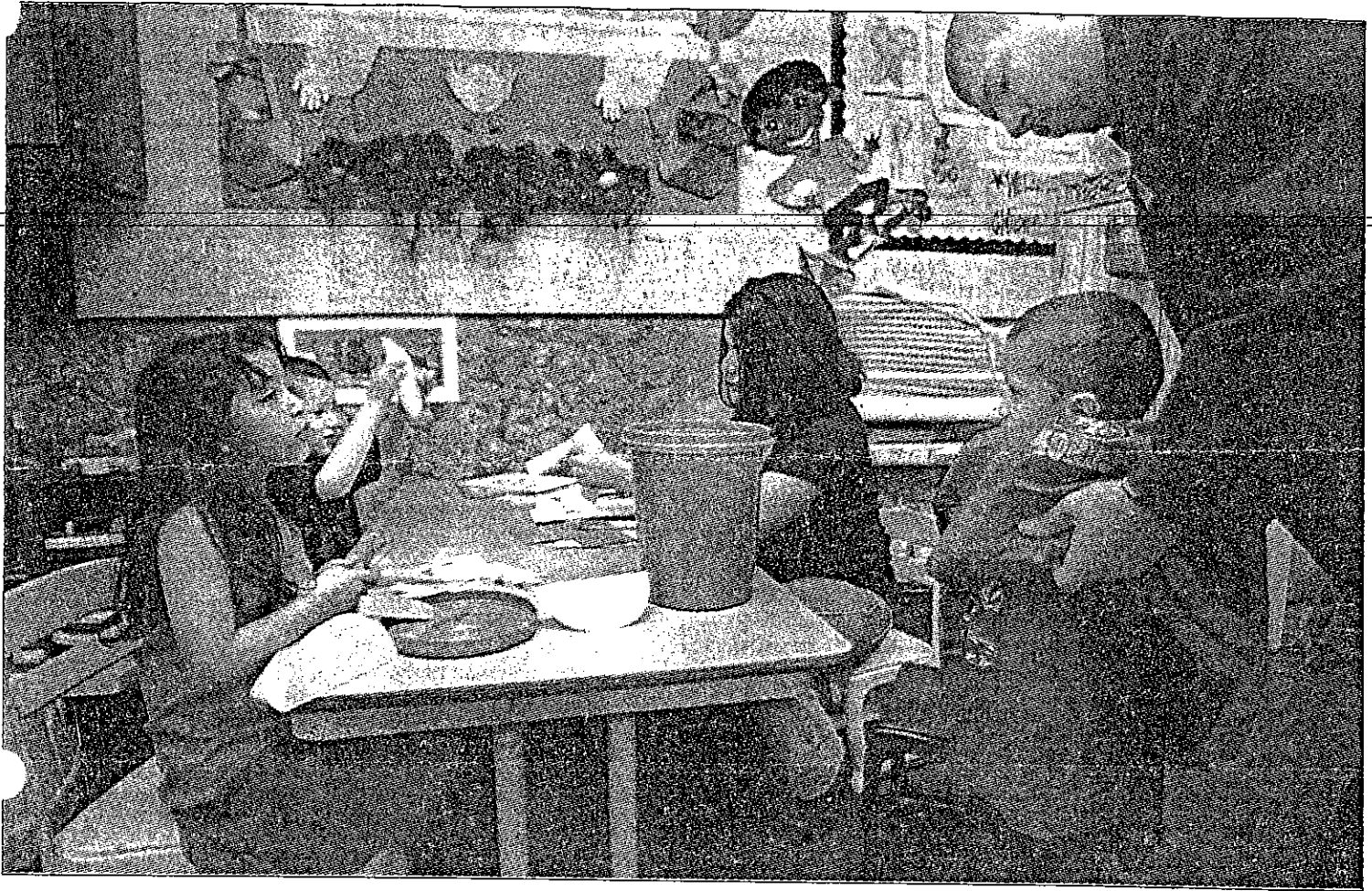


"The less they have to do with those courtroom scenes, the better."

MIKE NEVIN, San Mateo supervisor



A Civil Place for Kids

Special
play areas
shelter
children
whose
parents
come
to court

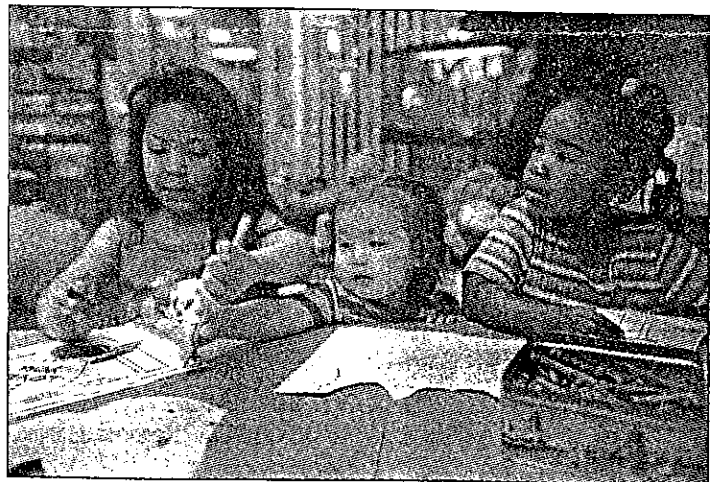
By Julie N. Lynem
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

Anna Quintero and her sister, Maricela Vega, are among the few visitors who look forward to spending time at the San Francisco Hall of Justice.

While their parents listen to a judge, they giggle and romp around with other kids. Instead of sitting quietly in a courtroom, they color and share toys.

A bustling courthouse may seem like a peculiar place for children to play in. But in eight California counties, children's waiting rooms are popular spots for kids whose relatives have business before the courts. In fact, state law requires child care facilities in all new courthouses.

Outside of the Bay Area, courthouses in Fresno, Sacramento, San Diego, Ventura, Orange, Riverside and Los Angeles counties



Photos by ROBIN WEINER / The Chronicle

Top: While their parents had business at the Hall of Justice, kids were kept busy with art projects in the children's waiting room. Above: Maricela Vega (left) tried to stop her sister, Anna Quintero, from coloring on her paper, while Jameisa Jones shared the table.

Volunteer Elizabeth Medina set up the alphabet with Anna Quintero at the children's waiting room in the Hall of Justice in San Francisco.



ROBIN WEINER / The Chronicle

Day Care Keeps Kids Happy While Parents Go to Court

► CHILDREN

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all have children's waiting rooms.

In the Bay Area, however, only San Francisco has such rooms — one each at the Hall of Justice and the Civil Courthouse. Both are funded through private donations and the Mayor's Office of Children, Youth and Families.

Assemblyman Lou Papan, D-Divisadero, has reintroduced a bill that would provide additional funding so that more counties throughout California can provide similar services.

"It really provides a shelter for kids that is safe and fun, and shields them from witnessing testimony that is often traumatic," said Gina Papan, the assemblyman's daughter and a board member of the San Francisco Women Lawyers Alliance. Her group sponsors the centers with help from the Northern California Service League, a nonprofit organization that provides services to current and former prisoners at San Francisco County jails.

"I've been in court where a child had to be present while his parents testified about an individual who violently attacked their car while the child was in the backseat. It wasn't fair to the little one," Gina Papan

said.

Vetoed last year by former Governor Pete Wilson, the bill passed in the Assembly last month. If adopted, it would allow counties to impose a \$2 to \$5 fee on all initial filings for civil cases to help fund the centers.

Counties would have the option of requiring the additional charge, Gina Papan said. But even with the fee, most counties would still be responsible for finding alternative sources of funds, she said.

Ed Randolph, a spokesman for Assemblyman Papan's office, said the filing fee is a small price to pay, considering the service it provides for children and their parents.

"Most people will probably never file something in civil court," Randolph said. "If they do, it's a small portion of the overall cost of being a plaintiff."

The San Mateo County Board of Supervisors has formed a committee to find space for a children's waiting room at the Hall of Justice in Redwood City, said Supervisor Mike Nevin, who supports Papan's bill. The room would be operated through a combination of private and government funds, he said.

"We're much more sensitive today about separating kids from court cases and protecting them the best

we can," he said. "Family law cases in courtrooms can be atrocious. It's hard on kids, and the less they have to do with those courtroom scenes, the better."

Before there were children's waiting rooms, kids were often forced to sit through long, boring cases — or even witness testimony at divorce or domestic violence hearings — said Shirley Melnicoe, executive director of the Northern California Service League.

If children were not in the courtroom, they sat or slept outside on hard benches in the lobby. Judges who disliked being interrupted by crying children frequently asked for parents to remove children from court proceedings.

"Here, they can be children," Melnicoe said. "We don't want them to think that just because their parent is dressed in orange, that's how their life will end up as well."

Since it opened eight years ago, the children's waiting room at the San Francisco Hall of Justice has provided temporary care for thousands of low- to moderate-income children who suddenly find themselves in a criminal courthouse with a parent or guardian.

Last year, more than 2,000 children, infants to age 12, spent time in the small but colorful play place

filled with books, toys and a window with a view of a courtyard. So far, more than 1,900 children have stayed at the much larger Civil Courthouse waiting room, now 15 months old.

The rooms are staffed by a coordinator, at least one aide and carefully screened volunteers who offer each child a snack and one-on-one attention. Parents must register each child, remain in the building and check in during every break period. Staff members do not change diapers, but changing tables are available for parents.

The Hall of Justice waiting room was a godsend for Ray Quintero and Esthela Vasquez last week. The couple had a feeling their children would rather play than sit still during Quintero's drug hearing.

They were right. Maricela, 7, and Anna, 15 months, barely noticed their parents when they walked in the door. The sisters were too busy coloring and laughing.

"This is their second time coming here," Vasquez said. "They want to stay some more."