

PVUSD receives \$8.5 million

BY LAURA NORTON



In early June, Eleazar Luis was preparing to pack up Caminos, a popular south Santa Cruz County alternative education program for expelled students. Now, with the help of Pajaro Valley Unified School District's largest single grant ever received, he is planning to keep the doors open. "We're sending out the letter that we're still in business," Luis said Wednesday when the grant was announced at a rare PVUSD press conference.

The federal funds responsible for saving Caminos were granted to the district and Pajaro Valley Prevention and Student Assistance, a nonprofit agency that

assists PVUSD in counseling students.

In total, the grant will provide \$8.5 million for mental health counseling, fighting drug and alcohol abuse and violence prevention during the course of three years.

"It's an opportunity for us to make a major difference," PVPSA Director Linda Perez said. "It feels like now we finally have enough resources."

The program funded by the grant, called Todos, will fund a myriad of campus and student safety programs including:

- campus security assessments
- two campus resources officers at each high school and an increased law enforcement presence at all schools
- new violence and drug-prevention curriculums
- elementary school yard supervisors
- conflict resolution education programs
- increased mental health services at select elementary schools
- clinical counseling for severely emotionally disturbed adolescents
- parent education in elementary schools
- additional probation staff
- sponsorship of positive school activities
- community service programs for expelled and suspended students.

PVUSD and PVPSA plan to "hit the ground running" on Oct. 1 when the grant starts, Perez said.

In the meantime, approximately 30 full-time employees will be hired by various organizations, including the Watsonville Police Department and the Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office to provide resources.

Mays called the program "a remarkable opportunity."

"It's not that the will to do all this wasn't there before, but the finances weren't there," she said.

Law enforcement officials said they were pleased with the grant, as well.

"We never stopped our efforts," said Watsonville Police Capt. Edmundo Rodriguez. "But now it's a lot easier that there is some money."

PVUSD and PVPSA were selected as one of 40 recipients from a stack of 450 applications, Perez said.

School board president Rhea DeHart, who has watched budgets for student assistance programs shrink in past years, said she was thrilled with the weighty grant.

"I'm on overwhelm," she said. "I mean, to have money to spend — it's overwhelming."

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