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Countywide Effort to Address Regulatory Gaps in Children’s Camps

In 2019, Roxie Forbes, a 6-year-old child, tragically drowned while attending a summer camp in Altadena, California. This terrible incident was compounded by the fact that this was wholly preventable, according to an abundance of documentation and testimony. One of the contributing factors was the lack of oversight of children’s day camp, which 40 states regulate but California does not.

Existing State law establishes minimum standards and regulations for operations at “organized camps,” defined in the California Health and Safety Code as a site with programs or facilities established for the primary purposes of providing an “outdoor group living experience” with social, spiritual, educational, or recreational objectives for five or more days. This State law definition, in practice, is applied to regulate overnight or “sleepaway camps” from an environmental health perspective. The statutory definition does not include or address children’s day camps. Locally, requirements for organized overnight camps were established in 1964 as outlined in Los Angeles County

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Code Title 11.

Recently, there have been numerous attempts over the past ten years to clarify existing statutes and regulations that may apply to organized overnight camps and children's camps and/or day camps. There appears to be no environmental health and safety regulations of children's camps or day camps. There is currently no definition or reference to "children's camps" or "children's day camps" in State law, which has created uncertainty and confusion about regulatory jurisdiction. The California Department of Social Services regulates childcare within California, however the California Health and Safety Code defines only "childcare centers" and "family day care homes" in the context of childcare licensing requirements, and the state agency does not inspect or otherwise oversee operations at children's day camps. While some children's camp and day camp operators choose to meet accreditation standards set forth by groups such as the American Camp Association (ACA), a voluntary approach does not necessarily provide for ongoing enforcement of minimum standards, and many more camps, as seen through listings on the internet and other sources, appear to be operating without any specific environmental health and safety regulations. This is especially problematic as programming at children's camps can include activities with some degree of inherent danger, such as archery, aquatics, zip lines, and challenge courses.

Thanks to the advocacy of Roxie's parents, who established the non-profit the Meow Meow Foundation focusing on water and camp safety, there is an opportunity for the County to demonstrate leadership in setting forth reasonable minimum health and safety requirements that apply to all camps within its jurisdiction. This includes

organized camps and children's day camps and will help move this issue forward at the State level and establishing oversight of day camps attended by our local youth.

Through collaboration and community engagement, the County can help meet the Meow Meow Foundation's goal of "eliminating preventable childhood drowning and camp-related injuries, deaths, and abuse."

I, THEREFORE, MOVE that the Board of Supervisors direct the Office of County Counsel, in coordination with the Department of Public Health, to consult with relevant County departments and report back to the Board within 180 days with draft Ordinance language that achieves the following:

1. Defines in County Code what constitutes a children's camp in Los Angeles County;
2. Establishes feasible and enforceable regulations with minimum requirements for children's camps, which includes day camps and overnight camps;
3. Amends the existing County Code to align with State requirements for Organized Camps;
4. Ensures that children's camps are regularly inspected for the safety and well-being of children and staff, and that inspection results are posted online for public review to promote transparency of the regulations; and
5. Ensures the proposed ordinance takes diversity, equity and inclusion into consideration.