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SAN JOSE MERCURY NEWS

ASTHMA PATIENTS URGED TO LEAVE MOLDY COURTHOUSE: COUNTY OFFICIAL SAYS AFFLICTED WORKERS WILL BE TRANSFERRED.

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Illustration: Photo

Caption: PHOTO: MERCURY NEWS FILE PHOTOGRAPH

The county plans to close the \$7.5 million San Martin Courthouse by August because of the mold.

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An expert hired by Santa Clara County recommended more than a week ago that employees with asthma be immediately moved out of the mold-infested San Martin Courthouse. But until Thursday, six employees who say they have asthma were still there.

"They're ignoring their own report, and we're worried about our health," said one employee who asked not to be identified for fear of reprisals.

The employees were told they could not leave by their immediate supervisors until they got a doctor's note verifying their condition. But after being contacted Thursday by the Mercury News, Assistant County Executive Pete Kutras said the employees with asthma would be moved immediately. But he said they must still bring in a doctor's note by the end of next week.

"There was a communication problem with the courts," Kutras said. "Any employee who has adult-onset asthma or says their asthma has worsened is to be immediately reassigned."

The county plans to close the \$7.5 million courthouse and finish moving all the employees by early August because the mold, *Stachybotrys atra*, can trigger reactions ranging from mild lower-respiratory infections to, in extremely rare cases, bleeding lungs in infants.

The slimy, black mold is caused by moisture leaking through the roof, windows and walls of the building.

Higher cost

Analyzing the mold problem and moving 71 employees to portable offices on the same Monterey Road site will cost \$1.6 million more than originally anticipated, for a total of \$2.6 million, county officials said Thursday.

The move, which will take two months, was originally planned to start in April, but has been delayed until May 28. Kutras said it could be further postponed because of delays in installing sewer lines and other infrastructure.

"The relocation dates are a constantly moving target," he acknowledged.

To determine the health risk facing employees, the county hired Dr. Joseph Jarvis, an occupational and environmental health expert based in Salt Lake City.

In a May 5 report, Jarvis recommended that any courthouse employee who has contracted asthma since the building opened in 1995 or whose previous asthma condition has worsened be immediately moved to another building. "This is not all in their heads or manufactured," Jarvis said Thursday, adding that asthma rates among courthouse employees are twice as high as among a control group of other county employees. "This kind of asthma can become a chronic health problem even after a person is removed from exposure."

In addition to high rates of asthma, Jarvis also discovered a higher-than-normal rate of mold-related "sick-building syndrome," including headaches and eye, nose and throat irritation. But he said it is safe for employees who are suffering from that syndrome to remain in the courthouse. He based his conclusions on in-depth interviews with 16 courthouse employees and county employees who work in other buildings.

"Sick-building syndrome is a horrible name, but unlike with asthma, you can recover from it once you are no longer in a problem building," Jarvis said.

Cleaning ahead

Rampant growth of the mold has already forced the county to close about 15 rooms in the courthouse. Seventeen employees have been temporarily relocated to facilities in San Jose.

Jarvis said the contents of many rooms in the courthouse will have to be cleaned before being moved to the portables. Furniture, papers and books from rooms that have had visible mold growth will have to be cleaned using a vacuum equipped with a special filter, he said. "You can spray Clorox all over to kill the mold spores, but dead or alive, they can still cause an allergic reaction," Jarvis said.

It is still unclear whether the courthouse can be repaired or will have to be replaced. To try to recover its costs, the county has filed a lawsuit against 17 companies involved in designing and building the San Martin courthouse,

alleging faulty construction.

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