

# **LOS PRIETOS BOYS CAMP/ACADEMY**

## **An Oasis of Hope**

### **SUMMARY**

Los Prietos Boys Camp/Academy (Los Prietos) offers an alternative to traditional detention for selected male juvenile offenders. From continuing their high school education to learning discipline, leadership, job and life skills, the facility and its dedicated staff offer the wards an opportunity to turn around their lives.

The Grand Jury identified several areas where improvements to the program could be made. These include evacuation preparedness, expanded vocational training, enhanced security technology, and the establishment of formal protocols related to the disbursement of scholarship and other discretionary funds.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Pursuant to its responsibility to review all detention facilities in the county, the Grand Jury conducted an in-depth review of the operations of Los Prietos. The unique open environment serves as an alternative to conventional “lock-up” facilities providing residential and rehabilitative services for designated adolescent males. The Grand Jury’s review of the operation of Los Prietos consisted of multiple site visits, meetings on and off campus with County Probation Department staff, and review of the discretionary fund records provided by the department.

### **OBSERVATIONS AND ANALYSIS**

Los Prietos has served as an alternative detention facility for youths convicted of certain types of offenses for over six decades. It is located 20 miles north of the City of Santa Barbara within the Los Padres National Forest. In collaboration with the juvenile court system and County Probation Department, youths considered eligible between the ages of 13 to 18 are assigned to the camp to complete a highly structured program lasting between four to six months.

While the Boys Camp has been in operation since 1944, in 1997 a separate Boys Academy component was established in order to facilitate accepting and segregating younger offenders. Together, their goals are “providing safe, secure, and effective juvenile detention and treatment programs.” Since its inception nearly 8,000 young men have experienced the benefits of the Los Prietos program. One-on-one counseling, vocational training, learning computer skills, assisting in community events, and continuing high school coursework are just a few of the activities carried out at the camp in a highly structured and supervised environment. Overall, the Grand Jury is impressed

with the facilities, programming, and dedication of the staff. Like an oasis of hope, Los Prietos is a unique and valuable asset to our county's juvenile justice system.

In focusing its review of the program, the Grand Jury elected to examine specific areas of operations:

### **Security/Safety/Supervision**

The Los Prietos compound is a minimum security facility. Supervisory personnel occupy the compound 24 hours a day, 365 days of the year. Teachers, counselors, and various medical professionals commute to the site daily as required. In addition, several on-site residential units are under construction to house staff members.

Each year several juveniles attempt to walk away from the camp compound and are almost always quickly apprehended. A closed circuit camera system monitors and records many of the common areas of the camp. The system serves as a deterrent to disturbances as well as provides a video when needed. While many common areas of the camp are monitored by security cameras, some areas where there may be safety issues (such as the wood chopping section) are not. Given the rural nature of the facility, and recognizing that work crews frequently engage in activities outside the camp perimeter, it is understood that video surveillance opportunities are limited.

### **Transportation/Emergency Evacuation**

The facility maintains on site a variety of passenger vans and a large-capacity bus that can be used in the event of a mass evacuation. During one visit, the Grand Jury requested that staff start the bus and some delay was experienced in locating the ignition key.

The Grand Jury found that in the event of an emergency an adequate complement of vehicles is available to evacuate the facility. If evacuation of the entire camp were required, it is likely that a combination of passenger vans, the camp bus, and potentially even staff member vehicles would be needed.

### **Scholarships**

Periodically throughout the year, civic organizations, service clubs, and private individuals make donations to support activities of the camp, including scholarship assistance for selected youths. It is the Grand Jury's understanding that no formal criteria or application process is utilized for the distribution of scholarship funds.

While the dollar amount and frequency of these very positive awards may not seem significant, establishing appropriate guidelines would serve to communicate to the recipients the intrinsic value of scholarships as well as help to insulate the staff in the event perceptions and/or assertions of favoritism should arise. In addition, the Grand Jury expresses optimism that this program will grow in the future, and therefore formal standards and protocols should be in place.

### **Vocational Training**

Vocational training activities in the camp have included kitchen services, chopping of large quantities of firewood that is sold to business and individuals, horticulture, and a program that refurbishes computers for low-income families. A well-equipped carpentry shop is presently idle due to the lack of a qualified instructor.

Some of the inherent value of the Los Prietos experience undoubtedly rests with the rural character of the facility. In many respects, it harkens back to a different era. While activities such as a wood shop and even wood chopping teach a variety of skills as well as build trust, discipline and teamwork, they are unlikely to offer a great deal in terms of genuine vocational training. Food service and horticulture components have a clear nexus to potential future employment and the computer refurbishing program represents an excellent, practical, and relevant vocational training experience.

### **Mentor Program**

Given that Los Prietos has been in existence for more than 60 years, it would seem likely that hundreds if not thousands of past graduates of all ages still reside in Santa Barbara County. Either through an outside non-profit organization or through the direct efforts of county staff, a mentor program could be created through which past graduates who have successfully moved beyond the challenges they faced as youths can assist recent graduates. The Grand Jury encourages the county to tap graduates of the Los Prietos program as a resource for mentoring, potential employment opportunities, assistance with fundraising for camp improvements and scholarships.

### **Capacity**

In the past and at any given time, the camp has served over 90 wards. Recently, the average daily population has been closer to 75, indicating available capacity to serve more youths. It should be noted that several years ago, San Luis Obispo and Ventura Counties stopped sending their wards to Los Prietos. The discontinuation of that inter-county collaboration reduced daily residency and some commensurate funding. The Grand Jury believes that funding should be increased to allow the camp to operate at full capacity.

### **Swimming Pool**

Los Prietos has \$18,000 in a reserve account to build a swimming pool. The Grand Jury was informed that these funds came as a dedicated donation but are inadequate for the construction of the project. Consequently, no pool has been constructed.

### **Discretionary Funds**

In its fiduciary role, the County Probation Department provides accounting functions for the camp. Several specific funds have been established. Of particular note is that discretionary accounts exist for both the Camp and Academy. Monies in these funds are to be used for the benefit of the wards. Funds may only be used for enhancements not considered part of standard operating or program activities. In recent years, between the Boys Camp and Boys Academy, the funds have grown to a combined amount in excess of \$70,000 with only minor annual expenditures.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Grand Jury has high praise for the Los Prietos program and staff and hopes that it will continue to have the full support of county officials. With the growing number of female wards, it may be timely to consider the creation of a similar facility for young women.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Finding 1**

Opportunities exist to expand the use of remote monitoring.

### **Finding 2**

Not all staff are familiar with the operation of the bus.

### **Finding 3**

While some designated financial donations are made with specific guidelines, overall no formal process or criteria exist for awarding scholarship funds.

### **Finding 4**

Vocational training opportunities are limited.

### **Finding 5**

No formal mentoring program presently exists.

### **Finding 6**

The facility is not operating at its functional capacity.

### **Finding 7**

Funds presently dedicated to the swimming pool project are inadequate. Furthermore, no plan has been established to bring the project to fruition.

### **Finding 8**

There are no formal annual needs assessment and criteria for allocating discretionary funds.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Recommendation 1**

Add cameras to monitor additional areas of the facility. Consideration might be given to converting the current camera system to a secure web/internet based monitoring approach.

### **Recommendation 2**

Provide orientation to staff on operation of the bus.

### **Recommendation 3**

Institute a formal review process based on minimum eligibility standards of all scholarships. Additional criteria can be added for special scholarships and grants.

### **Recommendation 4**

Develop a wider range of vocational training programs. Consideration might be given to forming partnerships with outside organizations.

### **Recommendation 5**

Create a formal, on-going mentoring program which actively engages past graduates in support of Los Prietos' mission.

### **Recommendation 6**

Efforts should be made to secure the funding and staffing required to maintain the camp at peak occupancy.

### **Recommendation 7**

Establish a plan to complete the swimming pool project.

### **Recommendation 8**

Conduct a formal annual needs assessment to identify appropriate projects for discretionary funding. Consideration might be given to establishing a citizen oversight panel.

## REQUEST FOR RESPONSE

In accordance with Section 933(c) of the California Penal Code, each agency and government body affected by or named in this report is requested to respond in writing to the findings and recommendations in a timely manner. The following are the affected agencies for this report, with the mandated response period for each:

### **Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors – 90 days**

Findings	All
Recommendations	All

### **Santa Barbara County Probation Department – 60 days**

Findings	All
Recommendations	All

### **Santa Barbara County Education Office – Information Only**