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To: [sbcob](#)
Subject: CLUE-Santa Barbara CUE-SB & League of Women Voters Criminal Justice Workgroup public comment
Date: Friday, March 28, 2025 3:59:40 PM
Attachments: [CLUE.LWV.letter.to.Board.of.Supervisors.2025.03.28^.docx](#)
[PUBLIC SAFETY CHART OF DEFICIENCIES^J IMPROVEMENTS^J NEEDS.docx](#)

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Dear Clerk,

Please receive and distribute to Supervisors the attached public comment which relates to the April 1, 2025 hearing, Department Agenda item 4 - jail beds

The letter and attachment are submitted on behalf of the CLUE-Ssant Barbara and the League of Women Voters-Santa Barbara combined Criminal Justice Workgroup.

Thank you,
Laurence Severance,
for and on behalf of the Workgroup



CLUE (Clergy & Laity United for Economic Justice) Santa Barbara

March 28, 2025

Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors
c/o Clerk of the Board
sbcob@countyofsb.org

Public comment: Department Agenda item 4 – jail beds

Dear Supervisors:

Clergy & Laity United for Economic Justice – Santa Barbara (CLUE-SB) and League of Women Voters Santa Barbara’s combined Criminal Justice Workgroup urges you to appoint a short-term Task Force to examine how investment in community-alternatives to incarceration can support a sustainable reduction in our jail population. There is a strong public consensus that improved resources in our community are a better investment than more jail beds, especially for low level offenders in need of mental health and substance use care and treatment. The Task Force could provide specific recommendations for robust community-based infrastructure/ services, funding, and implementation.

Our County criminal justice system’s interface for jail residents re-entering our communities needs serious attention. Increased infrastructure and services through the Departments of Behavioral Wellness, Public Health, and housing are better investments in long-term solutions than more jail beds. Now is the time to take this broader view of public safety and do the analysis.

Reasons supporting our recommendations to this Board are presented in the attached article just published in the Santa Barbara Independent. A possible framework for analyzing strengths, weaknesses and improvements across various departments is presented in the attached chart. In that chart green lettering denotes programs or

operations that are helpful for reducing our jail population, and red lettering denotes practices or short-falls work against jail population reduction.

Respectfully submitted,

CLUE-SB/LWV-SB combined Criminal Justice Workgroup

Encl. (2)

Santa Barbara Independent article, March 28, 2025, "Too Many Unanswered Questions About Jail Expansion";

Public Safety Chart showing deficiencies and improvements for jail reduction

Santa Barbara Independent March 28, 2025,
<https://www.independent.com/2025/03/27/too-many-unanswered-questions-about-jail-expansion/>

TOO MANY UNANSWERED QUESTIONS ABOUT JAIL EXPANSION

Santa Barbara's County Supervisors are scheduled to consider on April 1st how many jail beds are needed to address inhumane conditions in the South County Jail (SCJ). Currently, the North County Jail (NCJ) has 376 beds. The South County will retain 116 beds for a Reception Intake Center. Adding 256 more beds (1 jail housing unit) to the NCJ is under consideration but now estimated to cost \$120-\$132 million, which would achieve a County-wide total of 748 beds.

Our County Sheriff wants even more, asking Supervisors to build 512 new North County jail beds at costs estimated between \$206-\$220 million. This would create a jail capacity approximately 33% larger than our current average jail population. Inevitable cost overruns will increase the construction total; then add in 30 years of financing costs plus increased jail operating expenses *every year* - indefinitely. These vast sums represent an imperfect solution to secure public safety.

Our Supervisors need to get this once-in-a-generation decision right. Overbuilding the jail at exorbitant expense will commit the County to decades of costs that will reduce General Funds available for many other essential services. The Board needs answers to crucial questions before deciding. It should appoint a Task Force of stakeholders with authority and a mandate to spend 6 months examining the facts and clarifying the bigger picture of infrastructure needs beyond just jail beds. A key goal for this Task Force would be to determine whether and how more robust community mental health resources could reduce our need for jail beds.

A well-rounded Task Force that includes stakeholders and community should address these critical questions:

Why are we housing so many people in jail whose primary needs are treatment, not incarceration?

We currently house people in jail who don't need to be there for public safety. These include jail residents accused of low-level, non-violent offenses who are Court-approved for diversion back into our community, but remain jailed because of insufficient community resources to accommodate their release.

Among 732 jail residents in January 2025: Up to 60% (over 400 people) have documented mental health histories

- 200 also struggle with substance use issues
- 90% fall below our poverty line and cannot afford bail

- 65% are neither convicted nor sentenced

For low-level offenders, lengthy stays in jail increase recidivism. Jail healthcare doesn't treat mental illness; it only manages symptoms until individuals return to our communities.

What do cost-benefit projections look like if we limit jail expansion and use savings to build robust community healthcare resources?

Currently, it costs \$332 per person per day in jail, or \$121,180 annually. The current fiscal year budget just to operate our jail is \$96.4 million, with \$17 million in cost overruns projected. *Every year*, operational costs exceed the Sheriff's allocated budget.

Overuse of our jails to house low-level offenders is a questionable approach to public safety. If we build more jail beds, we commit to greater operational costs indefinitely. A task force could provide a clear-eyed understanding of the aggregate costs of new jail bed construction, long-term financing, and operational cost increase projections.

Why should the Sheriff be delegated primary responsibility for managing a community-based mental health crisis?

Jailing people who need treatment is a failing strategy. While jail serves a critical public safety function by removing violent and/or repeat offenders from causing public harm, our jails have become the largest housing facilities for those with mental health and/or substance use challenges who are charged with low-level crimes as a result of those conditions.

Costly jails are not helping this large group, nor improving public health. People with mental health conditions often leave jail worse than when they entered. This problem is exemplified by "familiar faces"—people who repeatedly cycle in and out of our jails. A Task Force can help clarify if we can better invest the \$332/day we spend on jail costs.

How can we better prepare people to return to our communities?

Many people don't know that in 2017, serious shortcomings in jail management and facilities resulted in a federal lawsuit (Murray vs. Sheriff, Santa Barbara County) brought on behalf of all jail residents. A Stipulated (agreed) Judgment in that case identified inhumane jail conditions and inadequate care, requiring remedial action. Nearly five years later, remedial jail healthcare requirements remain unfulfilled.

Virtually all low-level offenders in jail return to our community. Robust community-based Public Health and Behavioral Wellness infrastructure could provide cost-effective ways to meet remedial treatment requirements imposed by a federal Court in Murray - - outside of jail and with better long-term outcomes: for example, A serious examination of these alternatives has been overshadowed by the singular focus on jail beds.

The Board needs to consider how an increased, community-based role for Public Health and Behavioral Wellness could support a reduced jail population and help meet remedial needs identified in Murray, with better stabilizing results for affected individuals, their families, and communities. For example, a hybrid solution (some new jail beds, more community-based resources) could be cost-saving and optimal. A Task

Force analysis can help Supervisors decide before committing to more jail beds as THE primary solution.

What is being done to insure long-term retention of jail employees and prevention of future staffing shortages, without which jail care will continue to falter?

The Sheriff's Department has a chronic shortage of jail custodial staff that results in large cost overruns every year. The Stipulated Judgment in Murray specifically includes examining ways to reduce our jail size as part of the remedy. A limited jail footprint has a better chance of being fully staffed. A Task Force could seriously examine the relationship between jail healthcare and reduced jail size. Millions of taxpayer dollars are at stake.

Do crime rates and population growth projections support the case for a substantial increase in jail beds? Available data suggests otherwise:

- **Crime rates are dropping.** In California, between 1990 and 2024, violent crimes fell by more than half, including a 68% drop in homicides. Overall property crimes decreased by 65%. In Santa Barbara County, "Part 1 crimes" (violent and property crimes) decreased by 16.9% from 2022 to 2023. The Sheriff's website states: "The overall Part 1 crime total was the lowest it has been during the past 10 years."
- **Population growth projections are modest.** The California State Finance Department projects that over the next 30 years, our County population will grow by only 9.55% (42,996 people).

A Task Force could analyze these statistics thoroughly. Current facts support conservative jail spending, not over-expansion.

Conclusion

We're told a former lawyer for Santa Barbara County frequently offered Supervisors a tailor's advice: "Measure twice, cut once." In other words, mistakes once made may be irretrievable.

Our Supervisors need to "measure twice" by creating a Task Force to examine a broader range of options than just building more jail beds. Cost-effective community-based or hybrid solutions likely exist that can satisfy Murray requirements and better serve public safety and public health. Take a careful look at alternatives before deciding about jail expansion.

Laurence Severance
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COURTS

PROBATION

PUBLIC DEFENDER

DISTRICT ATTORNEY

SHERIFF

- * CARES Court
- * High bail for Poor people

- * Increased Community-Supervision staffing
- * New Re-entry Coordinator

- * READY – Early Representation

- * Lead Diversion Attorney
- * Victim support

- * Build the biggest jail possible
- * Chronic Jail under-staffing and cost overruns.
- * Ineffective Sheriff’s oversight of Wellpath Wellpath jail healthcare
- * Jail deaths while in custody Grand Jury Report
- * Illegal overstays by persons found to be Incompetent to Stand Trial (IST)
- * Failure to grant early release options
- * High jail resident grievances relating to jail healthcare; missed appointments, etc.
- * Rushed, poor reentry planning
- * Mental health housing for SMI in jail with care, but no treatment
- * Direct supervision at North County Jail – staff training
- * Increased Wellpath staff for Medically Assisted Treatment (MAT) program
- * Co-response teams to handle Mental health, addiction crises
- * Deputies lack 5150 authority

TO IMPROVE:

PUBLIC HEALTH

BEHAVIORAL WELLNESS

- * Fairer bail for poor People (up to 90% of jail residents)

- * Increased oversight of jail healthcare
- * Increased role as lead for CALAim
- * “Warm hand-offs” at Re-entry

- * Prop. 1 Stepdown facility (32 beds)
- * Prop 1 PHF bed expansion
- * “Warm handoffs” at Re-entry

- * Improve case discovery production to Public Defender

- * Public Health expert oversight of jail health/mental healthcare
- * Long-term reduction in incarceration (Wilson’ reports identify steps to sustainably reduce jail pop. by 200-300)