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Honorable Santa Barbara County Supervisors,

Families ACT!'s mission is to help Santa Barbara County get people with complex mental health and behavioral disorders into compassionate and effective treatment. This involves a fundamental shift from a punitive approach to one that is both compassionate and truly effective. It involves moving away from the tendency to put people in jail for lack of treatment options and it involves funding prevention and treatment services rather than incarceration in a penal institution. As the pandemic takes its toll on the wellbeing of our community, it is ever more critical that we correct the distortion in our approach to mental and behavioral health disorders.

The Sheriff's Co-Response Teams are a big, big step in this direction. We are proud of what has been accomplished in the last few years in our Stepping Up Initiative and especially impressed with the collaboration between county law enforcement and the Behavioral Wellness department in terms of diverting people in a mental health crisis from arrest and incarceration and a series of often useless court hearings. Ensuring the funding to sustain these teams and expand their hours of operation and geographic coverage is absolutely essential to our county's wellbeing!

Diverting someone in a mental health crisis from jail is only the first step in transforming our approach. Our loved ones, and all of our citizens struggling to regain their mental wellbeing need help in addressing their illness and their life circumstances. In many cases, their will to continue living needs to be restored.

Much has been accomplished in the last few years to create more treatment options for people with a variety of mental health and behavioral health challenges and to divert people from a punitive setting to a healing one. But many gaps remain and will we need to address the remaining gaps in the whole spectrum of mental health and behavioral treatment, and especially the lack of acute psychiatric beds available to someone in a mental health crisis. Even a short stay in a psychiatric unit, when followed up with residential treatment, psychiatric care, counseling, case management and housing with supportive services can break the truly cruel and wasteful Revolving Door cycle of repeated crises, incarcerations and a fall into homelessness.

The first step in breaking this cycle is to divert someone in a mental health crisis from incarceration to treatment and our Co-Response Teams are doing a magnificent job of this. Thank you for your efforts to ensure that funding will be available to sustain them.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Suzanne Riordan".

Suzanne Riordan,  
Executive Director