

SHIELD Project Summary

SHIELD (Supportive Holistic Intervention for Early Legal Diversion) is a new post-booking diversion program that would expand Santa Barbara County's mental health diversion efforts. This is a countywide program that leverages currently existing programs in North and South County. Through early intervention and assessment, SHIELD aims to identify individuals with Serious Mental Illness (SMI) who are at risk of IST within 72 hours of booking and initiate the diversion process.

The requested funding staffs 1 FTE Holistic Defense Advocate (HDA) who is a defense based social worker, with clinical knowledge in mental health assessment, trauma-informed care, and behavioral interventions. The HDA conducts biopsychosocial assessments, develops therapeutic rapport with clients, promotes medication engagement, facilitates family interventions, and provides crisis de-escalation when needed. Their clinical skills enable comprehensive assessment of SMI symptoms, substance use disorders, and treatment needs. The HDA connects eligible clients to Justice Alliance program at Department of Behavioral Wellness for treatment planning while providing ongoing advocacy and support throughout the diversion process. The HDA works alongside attorneys, as a member of the defense team, bringing their unique skillset to inform the legal process.

As part of the defense team, the SHIELD advocate provides assessment findings to the supervising attorney, who communicates with the assigned prosecutor to facilitate informal and prompt resolution of diversion applications, and litigates contested diversion plans in court.

With 104 baseline Department of State Hospitals (DSH) commitments in FY2023-24 and an existing Felony IST diversion program averaging six diversions, annually, SHIELD proposes to divert 6 additional individuals, annually, through early assessment and intervention. The 1 FTE SHIELD advocate is projected to assess 30 individuals with SMI annually, focusing on those with felony charges who have previous incompetency findings or who experience chronic homelessness with SMI. Referrals come through initial legal screenings at pre-arraignment and arraignment stages.

The \$414,000 three-year program strengthens the county's commitment to reducing DSH commitments through faster identification, connection to treatment, reduced jail stays and ensuing reduction in psychiatric decompensation.

The following sections detail SHIELD's program components, implementation plan, and evaluation framework. This proposal outlines the target population, project scope, and anticipated outcomes for this three-year initiative to expand early intervention services within the Public Defender's Office.

A. Program/Project Title: SHIELD: Supportive Holistic Intervention for Early Legal Diversion

B. Project Funds: \$414,000 over 3 years

Project Funds: \$414,000 over 3 years. This amount matches the FY 22-23 DSH penalty invoice amount of \$414,000.

C. Program Type and IST Impact: Post-booking Diversion

Funding for SHIELD (Supportive Holistic Intervention for Early Legal Diversion) would expand current Penal Code 1001.36 mental health diversion efforts within the Public Defender's office by establishing an early intervention system for individuals with SMI. The SHIELD HDA would identify those likely to become Incompetent to Stand Trial (IST) who are subject to felony charges, screen them within 72 hours of booking, and support an early path to diversion and community-based treatment.

Through post-booking interviews and record review, the SHIELD HDA will identify and divert individuals who are likely to become IST, preventing expenditure of resources on IST proceedings and costly commitments. The SHIELD HDA conducts preliminary assessments, refers eligible clients to Justice Alliance for treatment planning, and initiates Regional Center referrals. For this program, the definition of "likely to be found IST" includes people charged with a felony offense who have previously been found incompetent to stand trial, and/or who suffer from SMI and who have a history of being chronically unsheltered.

Santa Barbara County recorded 104 baseline Department of State Hospitals (DSH) commitments in FY2023-24.¹ The County's DSH Felony Incompetent to Stand Trial (FIST) diversion program averages 6 diversion admissions, annually, consequently reducing the number of individuals made subject to IST proceedings and/or found IST on felony charges. The SHIELD advocate proposes to conduct mental health diversion screenings for an estimated 30 individuals annually, following referrals identified during the pre-arraignment or arraignment court stages. Based on current trends, approximately 80% (n=24) of screened individuals are projected to

¹ [DSH FY2023-24 Reconciled Data Memo](#)

become subject to IST proceedings and/or found IST, with 20% (n=6) being granted diversion. These projections may be refined as the program develops and more data becomes available.

D. Project Scope

The funding would staff 1 full-time SHIELD Holistic Defense Advocate, a graduate-level defense social worker with expertise in mental health assessment, trauma-informed engagement, and crisis de-escalation. The HDA conducts comprehensive biopsychosocial assessments, complex records review, and supports medication adherence – skills that complement legal representation and mental health diversion. Their understanding of mental health symptoms, substance use challenges, general functioning, and social support enables client-centered advocacy beyond legal proceedings. By managing client engagement and treatment coordination, the advocate allows attorneys to focus on legal strategy. As part of the defense team, the advocate provides assessment findings to attorneys to facilitate prompt resolution of diversion matters.

The SHIELD HDA conducts comprehensive assessments through in-person jail visits to evaluate mental status, substance use, and psychosocial functioning. This includes gathering and analyzing mental health records, treatment history, prior competency evaluations, and criminal history. The advocate assesses family support systems, community resource needs, treatment barriers, and both risk and protective factors. These findings inform diversion eligibility, treatment recommendations, and support service planning to create effective intervention strategies.

The HDA implements a structured intervention process:

1. **Initial Contact Phase (0-72 hours):** Conducts preliminary screening and jail visits following attorney referral
2. **Assessment Phase (3-5 days):** Completes preliminary assessment, including mental status examination and record collection, where possible
3. **Attorney Consultation Phase (3-5 days):** Reviews findings with supervising attorney to determine diversion strategy
4. **Justice Alliance Referral Phase (Week 2-3):** Refers to Justice Alliance for clinical evaluation and treatment planning; where feasible, connects with client's family, continues to engage with client, regularly.

5. **Motion and Court Phase (Week 3-4):** Attorney works with prosecutor toward informal and prompt diversion and, where necessary, takes necessary steps to litigate contested applications for diversion
6. **Implementation Phase (Week 4 and beyond):** Following court approval, facilitates service connections, transition, and advocacy

A crucial aspect of the HDA's role is building and coordinating support networks for clients both during and after incarceration. The HDA obtains releases of information (ROIs), engages family members and existing social supports, and coordinates with agencies that have prior contact with the client. Through collaboration with jail mental health staff, probation pre-trial services, and Behavioral Wellness Justice Alliance clinicians, the HDA ensures comprehensive care coordination. While the HDA remains available for support after release and future court hearings, the primary goal is to establish prosocial support systems in the community that can provide sustainable client support.

E. Project Outcomes

The SHIELD Program measures success through targeted outcomes. Our primary goal is reducing Incompetent to Stand Trial determinations and DSH commitments. Through early intervention and comprehensive support, the SHIELD HDA will expedite client access to essential treatment, including jail mental health services, MAT programs, and behavioral health resources. Through early assessment and coordinated advocacy, the program will increase successful diversions for clients at risk of IST determinations. Additionally, we will establish earlier connections to Behavioral Wellness Justice Alliance partners to support long-term stability.

The Santa Barbara County Public Defender's Office has demonstrated success with Holistic Defense Advocates across multiple diversion programs. Building on experience from CREDO-47, DSH Diversion, and the READY program, the SHIELD advocate will continue this proven approach of early intervention and comprehensive support to reduce Incompetent to Stand Trial determinations and Department of State Hospitals commitments. The following section will explore demographics and outcomes of these related programs, to demonstrate the need of the SHIELD HDA.

Santa Barbara County previously secured funding to develop the CREDO47 Program.² CREDO-47 program focused on pre-arraignment diversion from the court system. From January 1, 2020, to December 31, 2021, the CREDO47 initiative

² All CREDO47 Program data from Santa Barbara County Probation CREDO47 Report, 2021.

served 955 unique individuals through various interventions, including programs through pre-arraignment diversion, co-response, the CREDO47 Center, and Step Down Housing.

Demographic Breakdown and Measurability:

- Mental Health/Substance Use Disorders: 100%
- Gender: 64% male
- Age: 69% aged 26-59 years
- Ethnicity: 50% White, 28% Hispanic/Latino
- Employment Status: 64% unemployed
- Housing Status: 40% homeless

These statistics demonstrate that a target population exists which is measurable and well-defined, allowing for expanded interventions to address the specific needs of incarcerated individuals post-arraignment.

Correlation to the Need:

The data indicates that a significant portion of the target population faces challenges such as unemployment and homelessness, which correlate with higher rates of substance use and mental health issues. These factors contribute to their involvement in the criminal justice system. Holistic Defense Advocates work closely with county partners and community providers to address the complex needs of our clients.

Quantitative and Qualitative Data from the supporting County programs:

Co-Response Team:

- Served 259 individuals in 332 encounters
- 77% of activities were crisis responses, 23% proactive engagements
- 92% diversion from arrest for arrestable offenses
- Frequent linkages to mental health and other support services

CREDO47 Center:

- Served 552 individuals in 744 encounters
- Primary substances: Alcohol and Methamphetamine
- Entry sources: 40% law enforcement, 33% hospital referrals
- Functioned as a diversion hub from jail or hospital
- 47% of individuals transitioned to treatment

Step Down Housing:

- Served 32 individuals in 34 admissions
- 20 successful completions
- Average stay: six months

- Transition outcomes: 35% to permanent supportive housing, 25% to independent housing, and other categories

Pre-Arrest Diversion:

- Public Defender screened 210 individuals
- 25 individuals enrolled, 14 completed program requirements
- Service enrollment: 40% in mental health services, 29% in substance use services, 29% in both
- Program outcomes: 80% post-filing cases dismissed, 20% pre-filing cases not filed

The qualitative data reveals that the CREDO47 Center has become a critical hub for transitioning individuals from incarceration to treatment, providing a vital link to necessary services. CREDO-47 services are available to all justice involved individuals, allowing Holistic Defense Advocates to refer clients to sobering and stabilization centers when necessary, and to Step Down Housing, a transitional and supportive housing program, once clients are stable enough to live independently.

From a systemic perspective, the increase in cross-departmental collaboration and communication has been one of the most significant benefits of the Prop 47 program. Grant partners frequently meet to coordinate efforts, develop data dashboards, and create shared referral systems for Step Down Housing and client treatment for Pre-Arrest Diversion. This collaborative approach ensures that the needs of the target population are met, enhancing the program's overall impact.

Santa Barbara County's DSH Felony IST diversion program, launched in 2020, provides mental health treatment and wrap around services. To date, this program has served 28 individuals. According to the 2023 presentation given by Behavioral Wellness, all enrolled individuals were either IST or at risk of IST, 91% had a primary diagnosis of Schizophrenia, Schizoaffective, Bipolar disorders, and 82% were found to have co-occurring disorders.³ The success of program participants can be attributed to interagency collaboration, wrap-around services, and continuity of care from jail to the community with appropriate and timely step-down placements.

The Santa Barbara County Public Defender's Office is a key partner in the DSH felony diversion program, with Holistic Defense Advocates conducting screenings and providing comprehensive support services. This established framework demonstrates our experience in successful legal intervention and diversion outcomes.

³ Santa Barbara County Behavioral Wellness, Department of State Hospitals (DSH) AB1810 Felony IST Diversion Program PPT Slides, June 2023.

A significant obstacle inherent to the DSH diversion program is the inability of advocates and service providers to begin their work until an individual has been found IST. The process of assessment and evaluation takes, on average, 82 days from the date on which an IST individual is before the court for a placement order. By that time, most individuals have been incarcerated, typically without voluntarily seeking or accepting treatment, for many months. The SHIELD advocate addresses this gap by initiating assessment and engagement as soon as possible after booking, working to prevent the initiation of IST proceedings and expedite diversion for appropriate candidates.

In January 2024, the Public Defender's Office launched READY (Holistic Reentry, Early Access, and Diversion for You), an early representation program for individuals booked into jail on misdemeanor charges. The READY team engages with clients within 24-48 hours of booking, before arraignment, to provide early assessment, intervention, and release advocacy. According to the Public Defender's READY data dashboard ⁴, the program has completed 216 READY interviews, achieved a 45% dismissal rate and 34% non-filing rate, and secured release for all but two clients, with an average pre-release time of 15 days. To ensure successful reentry, READY advocates provide transportation and facilitates connections to community services, including placement in emergency shelters, sobering centers, and Behavioral Wellness mental health programs.

While READY effectively serves misdemeanor clients with SMI, its scope is limited to lower level charges. Building on READY's approach, the proposed SHIELD advocate brings advanced-level skills in mental health assessment and support. Through proven diversion strategies in client engagement, assessment, and community referrals, this position extends comprehensive support to felony cases, enabling intervention before competency issues arise and creating early pathways to diversion.

Building on these experiences and lessons learned, the SHIELD advocate's effectiveness will be evaluated through the following: activity metrics (quantity), quality metrics (implementation), and impact metrics (outcomes):

How much did we do? (activity metrics)

1. Number of clients referred
2. Number of clients assessed
3. Number of clients diverted
4. Number of jail visits

⁴ Santa Barbara County Public Defender READY Data Dashboard, January-November 2024.

5. Number and types of service linkages

How well did we do? (quality metrics)

1. Speed of post-booking engagement by attorney and advocate
2. Percentage of assessments completed within target timeframe (e.g., 48-72 hours of referral)
3. Time from booking to community service linkage (Justice Alliance referral)
4. Number of clients granted diversion

Is anyone better off as a result? (impact metrics)

1. Reduction in IST determinations compared to historical baseline
2. Reduced time in custody for program participants, as compared to individuals diverted after a finding of IST pursuant to section 1370
3. Rate of successful diversion completion

F. Points of Contact

- *Name: Nicole Parmelee*
- *Title: Principal Analyst; DSH Designated County Contact*
- *Organization: County Executive Office*
- *County: Santa Barbara County*
- *Email: NParmelee@countyofsb.org*

- *Name: Tracy Macuga*
- *Title: Chief Public Defender*
- *Organization: Public Defender's Office*
- *County: Santa Barbara County*
- *Email: TMacuga@countyofsb.org*