

JAN 23, 2024

EDITOR'S PICK

Guest Commentary

Mental health care at heart of jail population reduction | Guest Commentary

Because we lack proper mental health care services in our community, Santa Barbara County jails are often used as a last resort to house people with mental illness.

Public safety is not served by placing people suffering from mental illness in jail. Our county's new Jail Population Management Plan explains in detail how agencies are cooperating to safely reduce the jail population by providing more support for individuals involved in the criminal justice system, especially those with mental health and/or substance use disorders.

The death of 61-year-old Scott Powers on Dec. 31, 2023 at the Santa Barbara Jail underscored the crisis of mental health care in our community and our jails.

Arrested on Dec. 28 for misdemeanor warrants, Powers "jumped from the second floor of a housing unit at the jail intake and release center" and later died of his injuries at Cottage Hospital, according to the Sheriff's report.

The County employs Wellpath, a private healthcare contractor, to provide medical and mental healthcare in the jails. But 87% of the mental health provisions required by the federal court-ordered Remedial Plan agreed to by Santa Barbara County in the lawsuit against the county, according to an October 2023 Status Report (by Tim



With 59% of jail residents needing some mental health treatment or services, including about 100 with severe mental illness, it is long past time to provide treatment, not punishment.

Powers' death just three days after his arrest is one more in a series of deaths in our two jails highlighting the urgent need to address both mental health care and addiction in our community.

As in this case, jail intake often does not effectively identify those with mental health issues that should be routed to community treatment or sent to one of our hospitals for further evaluation.

Officers do not quickly know what mental health facilities have available space, and the easier option is to take a person who is acting out to jail.

We don't yet know if Wellpath had information at intake that should have alerted them to the risk of a suicide and triggered a different placement in the jail or called for further mental health evaluation.

We know that critical mental health information available to Wellpath is not always shared with custody staff, completion of intake referrals is inconsistent, and delivery of prescribed medication is frequently delayed.

Mental health consultations regularly occur at the cell door in both jails rather than in a private treatment room violating medical privacy.

The new Jail Population Management Plan (attachment A on the Board's agenda for Jan. 23) lowers the population projections by 100 to a future population of 700-800.

The current population is 758, but with a dozen programs described in the Population Management Plan (attachment B) that range from Familiar Faces, Alternative Sentencing, and Pretrial Services to Early Representation and Mental Health Rapid Diversion, these numbers are likely to drop below 700.

Residents of Santa Barbara's jails deserve more humane care while incarcerated. We hope that health care in the jail will improve as the Public Health Department increases oversight of jail health care in March (as directed by the Board of Supervisors).

Many struggling with mental illness should not be jailed, but with the new plans, we anticipate more justice-involved people will get the care they need in the community, reducing costs and making us all safer.

The League of Women Voters of Santa Barbara and League of Women Voters of North Santa Barbara County are chapters of a nonpartisan political organization encouraging the informed and active participation of citizens in government. It influences public policy through education and advocacy.