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Supervisors Unanimously Back a Comprehensive Diversion Plan for County Jails

The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors unanimously voted to include a strong jail diversion program as part of its overall jail master plan.

Acting on a motion authored by Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas, the board called for a strategy to divert a minimum of 1,000 inmates into mental health and services, analyze the need for more supportive housing, assess the cost savings of this program and include options for funding for staffing and operating a diversion program.

“The reality is that the vast majority of the men and women who are incarcerated suffer from mental health conditions and substance abuse disorders,” said Supervisor Ridley-Thomas. “Recent estimates suggest that upwards of 67% of inmates have substance abuse disorders. Not only is this costly for county taxpayers, but the outcomes are unacceptable, unsustainable and do not protect the public, with many simply cycling in and out of the system.”

That the county’s antiquated jail system needs to be modernized is clear, and Men’s Central Jail certainly needs to be replaced, the Supervisor said. But he emphasized the Los Angeles County Jail Master Plan, as presented on Tuesday by Vanir Construction Management Inc., was not comprehensive enough with regard to diversion and that jail construction is only one component of an overall strategy to manage the inmate population. He abstained from the vote on the construction plan.

“Providing appropriate mental health services, substance abuse treatment, job readiness and training as well as permanent supportive housing when it is needed, will

likely lead to less homelessness, crime and re-incarceration,” said Supervisor Ridley-Thomas.

District Attorney Jackie Lacey, who outlined the diversion program her office is currently creating, noted that there are approximately 3,000 inmates who are mentally ill, essentially turning the jail into a psychiatric ward.

“It is clear even to those of us in law enforcement that we can do better in Los Angeles County; the current system, simply put is unjust,” said District Attorney Lacey.

Both District Attorney Lacey and Supervisor Ridley-Thomas cited diversion programs in Florida, Tennessee and Texas as examples where recidivism rates have decreased, resulting in lower crime rates and lower jail costs.

Supervisor Ridley-Thomas’ motion asks that the District Attorney work with Los Angeles County Sheriff and Fire Chief, the directors of the Departments of Mental Health, Health Services, Public Health, Veterans Affairs and several other offices to assess existing county programs and determine the need for services, supportive housing and other services.

Because of overcrowding and other issues in the outdated jail such as bad lighting, locks that don’t work and non-compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, federal officials will likely intervene if the Board of Supervisors doesn’t act to improve conditions for mentally ill inmates.

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