



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

August 13, 2019

**Contact:** Christina Villacorte, (213) 447-1277

**Email:** [cvillacorte@bos.lacounty.gov](mailto:cvillacorte@bos.lacounty.gov)

**Contact:** Jethro Rothe-Kushel, (213) 479-6970

**Email:** [jrothe-kushel@bos.lacounty.gov](mailto:jrothe-kushel@bos.lacounty.gov)

## **Restructuring LA County's Juvenile Justice System**

The Board of Supervisors voted to explore moving Los Angeles County's juvenile justice system out of the Probation Department into another agency, with the goal of creating a rehabilitative, health-focused and care-first system.

Acting on a [motion](#) by Supervisors Mark Ridley-Thomas and Sheila Kuehl, they called for creating a Youth Justice Work Group to make recommendations for creating a system that truly meets the needs of young people in the justice system, noting almost 90 percent of them have an open mental health case.

"Shifting towards a rehabilitative and healing model that builds on a youth's strengths is not just ideal but necessary," Supervisor Ridley-Thomas said. "This Board must ask itself if the structure of the Probation Department itself is limiting and even counterproductive in the pursuit of reform. If the County is to meet its obligation of adequately addressing the rehabilitative needs of the youth in its care, it must acknowledge that the juvenile camps and halls model is fundamentally flawed, and that housing supervision and services within an agency oriented toward law enforcement may be the wrong approach."

"All the recent research on juvenile justice points to the need for a care-first approach," Supervisor Kuehl said. "Punitive approaches have not been shown to make things any better, but rather to worsen them over time. This motion asks an inclusive group of County and community stakeholders to meet and develop guidance, along with a

consultant with appropriate expertise, to think through whether this work might be moved out of the Probation Department, and, where it might better be housed. The care-first approach, if done right, can be transformational in the lives of some of our most vulnerable kids, and this motion will provide us with the thoughtful advice we need to consider our options and achieve our goal.”

The motion is consistent with one of the newly released [recommendations of the Probation Reform and Implementation Team](#) (PRIT) which, after 14 public hearings, determined the Board should “remove the Juvenile Services Division from the jurisdiction of the Probation Department, thereby separating youth and adult probation services in L.A. County.” Noting 9 out of 10 Probation youth suffer from mental health issues, the PRIT said in its report, “It is truly remiss of L.A. County not to place these youth with an agency staffed with people who are subject matter experts in mental health diagnosis, assessment, education and treatment. This shift in responsibility and care would support youth in their ongoing healthy and safe development, and best prepare them to return to their families and communities, and deter them from penetrating further into the juvenile justice system and/or entering the adult justice system. Such an approach ultimately ensures public safety.”

To date, 38 states have organized or reorganized their juvenile justice systems to be separate departments, or to fall under a health or youth development agency. Governor Gavin Newsom recently reorganized California’s Division of Juvenile Justice, transitioning it out of the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation and into the Department of Health and Human Services.

LA County 2<sup>nd</sup> District Probation Commissioner Jan Levine, a retired juvenile court judge and longtime volunteer at Central Juvenile Hall and probation camps, said she has both witnessed and participated in efforts to reshape the current juvenile justice system from a punitive to a rehabilitative model over the last 20 years. “Today, when I inspect our juvenile halls, I am shocked by the deterioration of staff morale, and the evidence of youth acting out through vandalism and assault – on each other as well as on staff. I live with the fear that it’s only a matter of time before someone – youth or staff – will end up severely injured or worse. I know first-hand that there are hundreds, if not thousands, of hardworking, well-meaning, dedicated Probation employees. However, I have reached the conclusion that the juvenile arm of this department, as currently structured and staffed, cannot accomplish the structural changes necessary to become a place that supports either the youth whose care it is responsible for, or the employees who are to deliver that care. For those reasons, I strongly support the Supervisor’s motion.”

“This is the right time for transformative redesign because Probation caseloads in LA County have dropped by some 50 percent or more to historic loads, and eight camps and one juvenile hall have closed,” said Patricia Suong, youth justice policy director at the nonprofit Children’s Defense Fund-California. “We can further reduce our reliance on the Probation system by imagining another system of care altogether.”

Judge Mike Nash (ret.), director of the County’s Office of Child Protection, said, “It’s important that we have a system that focuses meaningfully on serving our young people in a way that is different from adults... one that is meaningfully able to focus on the language and spirit of the Welfare Institutions Code, which mandates that we create a system that’s designed to provide care, treatment and guidance consistent with the best interests of youth and the public.”

Los Angeles County Superintendent of Schools Debra Duardo, who oversees educational services at juvenile justice facilities, said, “The LA County Office of Education already works hand-in-hand with Probation, the Department of Mental Health, and many other community organizations to better serve our students. I think that it’s important that we take time to explore what we’re doing, to evaluate whether or not it’s working, and to think about how we may be able to improve the services that we’re providing to our children and families.”

Currently, Los Angeles County’s Probation Department has a budget of almost \$1 billion and supervisory responsibility for more than 40,000 adult clients and about 8,000 youth, more than 900 of whom are in juvenile halls, probation camps, and other facilities.

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