

American prisons and jails have been places of psychological, physical and social terror. The power to imprison people entrusted to our justice system has been used to corrupt the very fabric of civil society. In our own Alameda County, conditions of confinement have led to abuse, despair, and even death.

WHAT'S UP WITH OUR JAILS? Holding Alameda County's Sheriff Accountable



“Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them.”

Hebrews 13:3

Between 2005 and 2017, the county detention and corrections budget increased by 92% while the daily jail population decreased by 45%.¹

THE 2,600 PEOPLE held in Alameda County jails daily are our brothers and sisters, fathers, mothers, and neighbors.² The jails are ours, as taxpayers and voters, and should reflect our values.

Racial and economic injustices are evident in who ends up in jail. While we work to correct these injustices, our research raises urgent questions about county jail operations:

- **Do our jails meet basic human rights standards?**
- **Do we offer persons leaving jail the resources they need to successfully return to our communities?**
- **What can we, as a community, do to make a difference?**

WHO RUNS OUR JAILS?

The Alameda County Sheriff is the elected official with authority over county jail operations.³ The Alameda County Sheriff's Office (ACSO), under the direction of Sheriff Gregory Ahern since 2006, also polices unincorporated areas of the county and functions as county coroner. The Alameda County Board of Supervisors, also an elected body, is responsible for authorizing the annual ACSO budget and monitoring jail conditions.

WHO IS LOCKED UP?

Alameda County has two jails — the Santa Rita Jail (the larger facility, in Dublin) and the Glenn E. Dyer Detention Facility (a high-rise maximum security jail in Oakland). In early 2018, the county jails held on average 2,362 men and 236 women daily.⁴ The average daily jail population is more than 50 percent African-American, 20 percent Latino, and less than 20 percent white.⁵

REASON FOR INCARCERATION: Only 446 (18 percent) of the 2,598 people held in our jails in early 2018 were actually serving sentences.⁶ According to ACSO data from December 2017, of those detained but not sentenced, one-third were bail-eligible.⁷ They remained in custody because they were too poor to afford bail.

LENGTH OF INCARCERATION: Some people are serving sentences of years rather than months in our jails. State prison reforms in 2011 moved many people convicted of nonviolent crimes from state jurisdiction to the counties.⁸ For lower-level offenders, local supervision is supposed to be better than state prison. Yet county jails were never intended for long confinement. Even pretrial incarceration can take years. In 2013, for instance, Dajon Ford was arrested as a juvenile and spent four years in Santa Rita awaiting trial before community efforts finally won his freedom.⁹

September 2018. Published by Oakland Community Organizations (OCO), a faith-based, nonpartisan social justice group of 60 congregations, schools and allied organizations. For information about OCO's jail project as well as sources, methods, citations and notes, see www.oaklandcommunity.org/OurJails. A Free Cultural Work. [Share Alike with Attribution].



OAKLAND COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS
Unlocking the Power of Oakland



OUR JAIL CONDITIONS VIOLATE HUMAN RIGHTS.

OCO leaders have heard many complaints about the treatment of people detained in the county's jails over the years. Based on our research, we find these to be the most serious current problems.

PREGNANCY: At Santa Rita, pregnant women are in with the general population unless they ask to be moved to a medical unit, which means isolation 23 hours a day.¹⁰ Multiple sworn testimonies reveal that medical needs for pregnant women are often neglected.¹¹

A very pregnant woman ... was in so much pain she could not walk. ... Instead of taking her to receive medical care, [deputies] placed her in an isolation cell ... [she] began to scream. This went on for hours. ... Finally, we could hear the crying of a baby ... [she] had given birth, alone.

SWORN DECLARATION OF A WOMAN
INCARCERATED AT SANTA RITA¹²

MEDICAL CARE: Many lawsuits have been brought against the jails' for-profit medical care contractors.¹³ Sheriff's deputies are not trained as certified emergency medical responders.¹⁴ In 2015, Mario Martinez died in Santa Rita when deputies ignored cries for help and failed to provide needed medical care.¹⁵

FOOD SERVICES: Complaints about poor jail food and kitchen cleanliness — including reports of animal feces and rats — are common.¹⁶ A recent Alameda County Public Health Department inspection found that 24 percent of persons in Santa Rita were not getting their required diets.¹⁷ Canteen food is available, but only to those who can pay for it.

HYGIENE SERVICES: Female inmates have testified in recent lawsuits that they cannot get the sanitary supplies they need.¹⁸ During the 2017 hunger strike at Glenn Dyer, inmates complained that they were getting only one set of clean clothes per week.¹⁹

It kills me mentally to be in jail!

A YOUNG MAN WHO WAS HELD IN SANTA RITA

ISOLATION: Ten percent of Santa Rita inmates and 20 percent of Glenn Dyer inmates are held in “administrative isolation” — a kind of solitary confinement.²⁰ Isolation was a major grievance of the Glenn Dyer strikers.²¹ Studies have shown solitary confinement can “severely impair prisoners’ capacity for normal human functioning.”²²

CONTACT WITH FAMILY AND COMMUNITY: Family visitation is restricted to 30 minutes.²³ No physical contact is permitted. Visiting hours are available during limited hours, three days a week. The cost of phone and video calls runs about \$6 for 15 minutes.

A 30-minute visit maximum a week ... is not enough. It breaks families.

They use visits as punishment, taking visits away.

TWO MEN FORMERLY HELD IN SANTA RITA

TRANSLATORS: Although there are bilingual deputies and ACSO has a rulebook in Spanish, there are no dedicated translators on staff.²⁴ Translation is often done informally among inmates. Language barriers can prevent individuals from participating in programs and services.

ICE AND UNDOCUMENTED PERSONS: Despite sanctuary policies passed by the Board of Supervisors that restrict contact between ICE and law enforcement, the Sheriff's Office has posted inmates' release dates on the internet.²⁵ This allows ICE to take undocumented persons into custody (even though being held at Santa Rita Jail is not evidence of criminal guilt) and exposes others to harassment or retaliation as they leave the jail.



WE MUST REDUCE THE LIKELIHOOD OF PEOPLE RETURNING TO JAIL.

The community has a right to expect that people returning to our families and neighborhoods after staying in our jails will not be worse off than before they were detained.

RELEASE FROM JAIL: People are often released from our jails at night and alone with no more than a BART ticket — without even a few days’ supply of essential medications.^{26,27} Since Medi-Cal benefits are automatically suspended in jail, many people return to the community with no medical coverage.²⁸

They just release you. No referrals.

They gave me a \$5 BART ticket. I had to walk to the BART station in my [jail] blues.

TWO YOUNG MEN RELEASED FROM SANTA RITA

They classify people by tattoos, gang, where they’re from. ... Couldn’t take college or trade classes in there because of security.

There are waiting lists. Everybody is trying to get into a program.

TWO YOUNG MEN WHO DID TIME IN SANTA RITA

Rita Jail remain underfunded and understaffed, serving relatively few inmates effectively. Only the most motivated individuals tend to get the help they need. But society would be better off if everyone received needed services.

COMMUNITY RE-ENTRY AND REHABILITATIVE PROGRAMS:

In 2014, the Alameda County Board of Supervisors adopted a re-entry strategic plan to help break the cycle of returning the same people to jail.²⁹ The plan, not yet implemented, acknowledges the need to provide inmates with a wide range of services such as housing, health care, mental health and substance abuse services; employment; and education. Yet rehabilitative programs within Santa

Our sources report that ACSO’s jail classification system (the way it segregates and houses people for security and other reasons) ends up denying program access to those who need resources the most. (ACSO, unlike state prisons, does not make its classification system public.)³⁰ ACSO also routinely excludes formerly incarcerated persons from serving as community program staff and peer mentors within the jail, eliminating another invaluable resource for inmates.

OCO RECOMMENDATIONS

HOW CAN COMMUNITY ACTION MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

1 Demand that our jails adopt best practices.

Here are a few changes Alameda County should initiate immediately to make our jails more humane:

- Adopt the higher California state prison standards for conditions of confinement, which reflect the needs of inmates held for longer periods.
- Adopt a supportive model for meeting the critical needs of pregnant women and new mothers.³¹
- Make the cost of phone calls and jail canteen food affordable for all inmates, as Santa Clara County has done.



- Prohibit the posting of inmate release information on the internet where it can endanger the lives and safety of those departing custody.

2 Insist on more effective community re-entry programs.

Return to the community is the expected outcome for every person held in our jails. This understanding should drive a comprehensive “needs-based” re-entry plan for each individual. As the re-entry strategic plan adopted by the county in 2014 stated, effective re-entry “begins with assisting the individual at the earliest possible point of contact with the criminal justice system [and continues] through community-based supervision and community integration.”³²

Require a Full Needs Assessment: Every inmate must receive a full assessment of their needs so that they are better prepared to re-enter the community.³³ This means identifying their health, education, housing, and employment needs. Job training and placement are particularly essential to successful re-entry.

Four hours after her 1:30 a.m. release from Santa Rita on July 28, 2018, Jessica St. Louis, 26, was found dead near the passenger pick-up area of the Dublin/Pleasanton BART station, two miles from the jail.

FROM *SAN FRANCISCO WEEKLY*, AUGUST 8, 2018

Release with a Warm Hand-Off: Our jails must ensure that all released individuals have safe transportation, emergency housing if needed and access to critical community services to meet their immediate needs (medical services, mental health care, substance abuse treatment and domestic violence prevention). The county must ensure that Medi-Cal benefits are reinstated at the point of release. San Diego and Los Angeles counties work with the Department of Motor Vehicles so that everyone leaving jail has an ID or driver’s license. Alameda County should adopt this model.

Ensure Continuity with Community-Based Providers:

On-site and re-entry programs are better run by community-based providers who can offer continuity of services once people are released, rather than by the Sheriff’s Office whose primary expertise is detention and law enforcement. In its re-entry strategic plan, the Board of Supervisors concurred that a successful return to the community relies on “high-quality, peer-involved and comprehensive” programs and services.³⁴

3 Hold our elected officials accountable and institute community oversight.

The Alameda County Board of Supervisors holds the purse strings of the Sheriff’s Office. Since 2005, the county jail population has declined by 45 percent while the sheriff’s budget for detention and corrections has increased by 92 percent. This large increase in ACSO’s resources raises questions for taxpayers:

- **How are these dollars being used?**
- **How can money be reinvested in community-based re-entry programs and services?**

Conduct a Financial Management and Performance Audit:

The Justice Reinvestment Coalition (a community group that includes OCO) has proposed a Financial Management and Performance Audit to determine how ACSO has used increased resources while its jail population has decreased — and to what effect.³⁵ The audit is an essential step toward systematic ACSO transparency. We demand that the Board of Supervisors adopt the audit as proposed.

Separate Coroner Duties from the Sheriff: In Alameda County, the sheriff is also the county coroner by law. Deaths that occur inside the jails are medically examined by ACSO (including two deaths that occurred within one week in June 2018). Coroner duties must be separated from the Sheriff’s Office.³⁶

Establish Independent Oversight: No one can be expected to monitor their own behavior objectively. Los Angeles and Santa Clara counties have initiated independent oversight agencies of their sheriff’s departments.³⁷ Alameda County should adopt a model of independent community oversight of jail conditions and re-entry programs.

Greater accountability and oversight of the Sheriff’s Office are in the interests of a wide range of stakeholders in Alameda County, including deputies working in the jails.

WHAT’S NEXT?

The immediate goals of OCO’s Live Free Committee are to guarantee humane jail conditions and to return individuals to the community with the resources to improve their chances for success.

FOR MORE INFORMATION on continuing campaigns and actions, please contact BK Woodson Sr. at servantbk@oaklandcommunity.org.