



Sent via email

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The Interfaith Coalition for Justice In our Jails (ICJJ) brings members of diverse faith communities together to effect change within the Alameda County criminal justice system. We seek to reduce incarceration as a response to social problems and to decrease harmful conditions in the jail. We advocate to minimize the number incarcerated and close the revolving door to jail - especially for those with mental health or housing needs. The jail must be safe, humane, and supportive of successful reentry into our communities.

ICJJ thanks you for your April 22, 2021, report critiquing Alameda County's inadequate mental health services. As you put it: ". . . many adults who rely on Alameda County for mental health services are without access to services that would allow them to recover, and instead end up cycling in and out of psychiatric institutions or incarcerated at Santa Rita Jail." Our research and advocacy efforts substantiate your findings.

The Interfaith Coalition of Justice in our Jails is an independent table of Faith In Action East Bay

While we agree that conditions must be improved at Santa Rita Jail, we strongly object to a strategy to resolve the problems primarily through single-minded improvements to jail conditions. Rather, reversing current practices, the majority of resources must be dedicated to expansion of community-based mental health and other services; in short, a mental health care system serving everyone.

Only with a sustained commitment to such a policy can our county move away from housing those with mental illness in our jail. As you point out, currently 40% of the people who are incarcerated from Alameda County have a mental illness. This is a mental health crisis and also a racial justice crisis: an overwhelming majority of incarcerated people with mental illness in Alameda County are Black men.

Referencing the delivery of mental health and associated services in the community and Santa Rita Jail, you find reason to believe that Alameda County violates the Americans with Disabilities Act by failing to provide mental health services "in the most integrated settings appropriate" to the needs of individuals with disabilities. We urge the DOJ and the Attorney General to intervene in related private suits that threaten further to promote the single-minded approach we mention above of addressing the problems in the Jail. Please review any proposed settlement of Babu vs. Ahern or other litigation that focus resolutions only or primarily on upgrades to County Jail facilities.

Settlement of Babu, for example, must focus on the provision of community-based mental health services and eliminate reliance on use of the County jail in lieu of care for individuals with serious mental illness in non-institutionalized settings.

Alameda County requires comprehensive, proactive planning and resource allocation, not reactive, litigation-driven attention to jail crises when things go wrong.¹

Please let us know how we can support your efforts.

Sincerely,

Richard Speigman, Chair
Interfaith Coalition for Justice in our Jails
(510) 919-2535

Myrna Schwartz, Chair
ICJJ Mental Health Work Group

Bob Britton, Steering Committee Member
Alameda County Justice Involved Mental Health Task Force

¹ The following "Notes" page offers information on several specific problems, not mentioned above.

Initial list of clergy signatories

Rev. Dr. Rosalyn Brookins
Parks Chapel A.M.E., Oakland

Rev. Maria Cristina Vlassidis Burgoa
Starr King Unitarian Universalist Church, Hayward

Rev. Dr. George C.L. Cummings, Pastor
Imani Community Church, Oakland

Rev. Billy Dixon
At Thy Word Ministries, Oakland

Rev. Demetries Edwards
23rd Avenue Church of God, Oakland

Reverend Mary Foran, Unitarian Universalist Community Minister
Affiliated with the First Unitarian Church of Oakland

H. James Hopkins, Pastor
Lakeshore Avenue Baptist Church, Oakland

Rev. Kurt Kuhwald
Faith Alliance for a Moral Economy / Economic Justice 4 Black Oakland

Laurie Manning, Pastor
Skyline Community Church, United Church of Christ in Oakland

Rev. Michael McBride
The Way, Berkeley

Rev. Tom McAninley, M.Div., Community Minister
Berkeley Fellowship of Unitarian Universalists; Board member, Youth Spirit
Artworks; Member, Bay Area Steering Committee, Poor People's Campaign

Rev. Monte McClain
College Avenue Presbyterian Church, Berkeley

Dev Noily, Senior Rabbi
Kehilla Community Synagogue, Piedmont

Rev. Millie Phillips
Unitarian Universalist Minister

B.K. Woodson, Sr., Pastor
Bay Area Christian Connection

NOTES

Little County Interest in Resolving Deficiencies in Treatment of Mentally Ill Persons

It appears that the County and the Sheriff's Office have little interest in working to resolve the all too apparent deficiencies in treatment of mentally ill people in the County. The County has begun a media campaign attacking the DOJ investigation as "stale." <https://www.ktvu.com/news/alameda-county-pushes-back-on-doj-report-that-found-santa-rita-jail-conditions-unconstitutional>

Unreported In-custody Deaths

Attempts to hide conditions in the jail continue. Three in-custody deaths, including two recent suicides and the murder of an elderly Black man in the intake section of the jail before he was even booked were not reported publicly by the County. Instead, all three of these in-custody death were discovered in court filings by investigative reporters. <https://www.davisvanguard.org/2021/04/another-suicide-at-santa-rita-jail-sparks-cry-for-sheriff-oversight-in-alameda-county/>

Damning State Audit

A State audit criticized Alameda County for not sharing critical information about incarcerated mentally ill residents with jail staff responsible for detainees' health and safety. <https://www.auditor.ca.gov/reports/2020-102/index.html> The March 2021 audit of Public Safety Realignment efforts in three counties, including Alameda, also criticized all three counties for lack of classrooms and outdoor space and resources needed to provide adequate educational and rehabilitative programs and for not tracking the efficacy of funded programs. "Without comprehensive planning and oversight, counties cannot ensure that their decisions regarding the use of public safety realignment funds are well informed," the report says. See also <https://www.propublica.org/article/california-sent-8-billion-to-counties-to-improve-jails-and-services-but-failed-to-track-the-money-says-auditor>

Failure to Promote Medi-Cal or Affordable Care Act Enrollment

Since October 2019 Faith in Action East Bay and the Interfaith Coalition for Justice in our Jails have urged the County to enact state provisions to enroll or re-enroll in Medi-Cal benefits those released from custody. Many of those in custody with a mental illness might avoid re-arrest if they had access to adequate and uninterrupted healthcare coverage. Although the California Welfare and Institutions Code states that suspension of benefits shall end on the date the individual is no longer incarcerated, we know that people have been turned away by pharmacies when trying to renew the prescriptions necessary to control symptoms of their mental illness because they lacked active insurance. To date the County has not responded adequately to petitions from 11 different Alameda County congregations and faith organizations with over 1100 constituent signatures calling for action. In their push-back and denial of the DOJ investigation's findings the Sheriff's Office cites the County Behavioral Health contract for the ROOTS trailer in one of the parking lots outside the jail. But the reality is that only a fraction of those released make it to the trailer. The ROOTS trailer hours of operation are only eight hours a day; releases occur at all hours of the day and night, and making a stop at the trailer before returning to their loved ones is often not a priority for those leaving the jail.

Justice Involved Mental Health Task Force

Multiple rounds of community input and specific recommendations for community-based mental health services including alternatives to incarceration have gone largely unaddressed. The latest recommendations, from the 2021 JIMH Task Force, have yet to be presented to the Board of Supervisors. Meanwhile, at the start of this year's budget cycle the County Administrative Officer recommended budget cuts to Behavioral Health Services