The L.A County Jail Plan—Not a Done Deal

The multi-billion dollar jail plan approved by the L.A. County Board of Supervisors on May 6, 2014 is not a done deal. No ground has been broken—there are still construction deadlines, environmental impact reports pending, final budgets to satisfy, ongoing operating costs to justify and defend and plans for diversion programs underway. Also, there will be two new members of the County Board of Supervisors and a new sheriff in place who will hopefully have a more humane perspective on the state of incarceration in Los Angeles County.

Ironically, the massive jail construction plan was approved on the same day the Board of Supervisors finally initiated a program that has the capacity to reduce the jail population by over 2,000 individuals. CURB and the No MORE JAILS L.A. Coalition think this is a step in the right direction. We support the push toward a Mental Health Diversion Program with $20 Million to back it up by D.A. Jackie Lacey and Mark Ridley Thomas and will continue to push for more alternatives to incarceration. Conditions in L.A.’s violent jails are causing trauma and creating and exacerbating mental illness. We know better than to expect jails to be rehabilitative for individuals, particularly for those who suffer from mental illness already, and this diversion plan finally shows the board taking steps to recognize this reality.

With our support of this proposal we also must highlight that we do not support the board using this plan to support locked mental health facilities or Laura’s Law to force people into treatment without their consent. Research has confirmed that forcing someone into treatment does not impact their overall outcomes and thus these are not viable diversion strategies or alternatives to incarceration. This diversion plan should maintain a focus on providing funding support to community-based organizations, that use un-locked facilities and voluntary, comprehensive treatment that continues care in one’s own community.

Even as we support the Mental Health Diversion Project we will continue to demand that they stop all jail construction plans and instead take further steps to reduce the jail population, lower incarceration rates, invest in community based services, and provide non-lockup alternatives for the mental health community.

The jail proposal as laid out by Vanir Construction Management Inc. includes a new 1,600 bed jail for women way up in Lancaster at the deteriorating Mira Loma Detention Center. The soil in this location is known to test positive for the deadly Valley Fever fungus. The plan also includes a new facility to replace Men’s Central Jail in downtown L.A. that will house 4,860 people; 3,260 people diagnosed with mental illness, 500 people with serious substance abuse issues, 500 people who need some level of medical treatment and 600 beds/cells that are high security units. This devastating jail plan gives L.A. County stakeholders the capacity to lock up 20,000
people on an ongoing basis and fails to account for any diversion plans. This jail will cost well over $2 billion to build and over $400 million to operate annually. Los Angeles County does not have the funding to continue with this costly jail plan and yet they continue to lobby the state for more construction dollars. These jail plans must be canceled. Tear down Men’s Central Jail and do not replace it, and do not build a women’s jail at the toxic Mira Loma site way out in Lancaster.

CURB and the No More Jails Coalition are working with the Los Angeles Regional Re-entry Partnership (LARRP) to launch a campaign demanding that 33-50% of the AB109 realignment dollars be invested in community based alternatives to incarceration. L.A. County garnered over $750 Million in AB109 dollars in the first three years of realignment and over 80% went to the Sheriff’s department. Less than 11% has been invested in community-based services. We need more services, jobs, rehab centers, mental health resources, youth centers and housing, and the money to fund these community-based services.

Californians United for a Responsible Budget and the NO MORE JAILS LA Coalition will continue to fight jail expansion including any proposal to sub-contract with private facilities or other counties to cage L.A. County prisoners. In 2013, community allies fought the transfer of 512 people to Kern County and now there is talk of transferring L.A. County people to the San Bernardino County Adelanto Jail. This is nothing but expansion of our system of incarceration, and we will continue to expose the impact: the human devastation, the cost, the environmental hazards, and the violence of incarceration. We will continue to advocate for alternatives to incarceration and challenge the lack of political will effort and imagination demonstrated by these proposed expansions. We need alternatives to incarceration, more diversion programs for youth and mothers, an end to ICE holds, and decriminalization of petty crimes and non-violent drug offenses. We do NOT need more jails.

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