

County of Santa Clara

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Santa Clara County Appoints Mental Health Jail Diversion Steering Committee Members

SAN JOSE, California -- Santa Clara County has appointed nineteen prominent members to its Mental Health Jail Diversion Steering Committee. At the request of Supervisor Jim Beall, the formation of a steering committee was approved unanimously by the Board of Supervisors last November to analyze the possibility of diverting mentally ill people from jail into an appropriate community facility. The committee will meet for the first time on **January 3, 1996, at 1 p.m. in the 11th floor conference room at 70 West Hedding Street in San Jose**, to discuss issues concerning the mentally ill in our community and create a work plan to effectively divert the mentally ill.

Among the members are Supervisor Jim Beall, Municipal and Superior Court Judge Stephen Manley and Judge LaDoris Cordell respectively, Santa Clara Valley Health and Hospital Director Bob Sillen, the acting Chief Probation Officer John Cavalli, Department of Corrections Director Dan Vasquez and representatives from the District Attorney's office, the Public Defender's office, the Sheriffs office, the San Jose Police Department, the Mental Health Advisory Board, the Police Chiefs' Association, Pretrial Services, county counsel and the Public Guardians' office. "By bringing all these perspectives to the table, we can effectively create a work plan that is comprehensive. Diverting the mentally ill from incarceration is not a brand new concept, but one that has not been implemented due to budget constraints and a lack of long-range planning" says Jim Beall.

There are two separate issues that will be addressed by bringing the mentally ill diversion idea to the table: jail overcrowding, which will result in cost savings and treating the mentally ill in an appropriate community setting.

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Anecdotal information suggests that local law enforcement arrest the mentally ill on minor charges, therefore, increasing jail population and the total number of criminal cases being processed. Four of the most common offenses the mentally ill are arrested for (in order) are: loitering, disturbing the peace, assault and various minor misdemeanors. Therefore, despite the truth of financial constraints, the fact remains that individuals seeking treatment from the mental health system are left without treatment and are responsible for an increasing number of criminal acts and overcrowding in jails. The vast majority of mentally ill patients who end up in jail are not dangerous. Danger stems from a small group for whom neglect has left their illness untreated.

An important part of process analysis will include how and by whom the determination of the mental disability is made. Historically, law enforcement personnel have not had resources to assume this responsibility. "Ultimately, keeping the mentally ill out of jail will save the taxpayers millions of dollars, minimize minor disturbances and offenses in our community, and reduce overcrowding in our jails. It is our moral and fiscal obligation to address these issues at the forefront, rather than after the fact" adds Jim Beall.

The committee will establish goals, develop a timeline for accomplishing goals, designate subcommittees and plan a community meeting at their first meeting.

Jim Beall has been a member of the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors since January 1995. If you're interested in attending the Mental Health Jail Diversion Steering Committee, please call 408-299-3924.

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