



Alameda County  
Mental Health Advisory Board

June 21, 2023

Alameda County Board of Supervisors  
1221 Oak Street, Suite 536  
Oakland, CA 94612

Dear Board of Supervisors:

On May 9, 2023, the Board of Supervisors adopted a Resolution designating \$26,662,922 of county match funding to construct a Mental Health Program and Services Unit Project (“MHPSU”) at the Santa Rita Jail (“SRJ”). As explained in the Resolution (which accompanied the Agenda as Attachment #51), the full cost of this Jail Expansion Project is just over 81 million dollars, to be financed with \$54.3 million dollars from the State of California and \$26.6 million from Alameda County. The Resolution further suggests that the new building at SRJ is needed to accommodate increased staffing which will provide behavioral health care at the jail.<sup>1</sup>

On May 18, 2023, Senator Nancy Skinner wrote to the Director of the State Dept. of Finance requesting that a number of questions about the proposed project be answered before the State approved the project. Senator Skinner set forth twelve questions that she wanted Alameda County to answer and the Joint Legislative Budget Committee to review before the matter was brought before the State Public Works Board for consideration.

Pursuant to our oversight and advisory duties as set forth in Welfare and Institutions Code section 5604.2, the Mental Health Advisory Board (“MHAB”) has read and discussed the proposed Jail Expansion Project and Senator Skinner’s letter to the Dept. of Finance. It appears to the MHAB that the Jail Expansion Project is

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<sup>1</sup> The jail expansion plan originated in 2015 with a proposal to construct a new unit at the jail at a cost of \$61.6 million dollars, with the state of California providing \$54.3 million and Alameda County providing an additional \$7.2 million. The new plan greatly expands the scope and design of the original plan.

antithetical to the principles set forth in the “Care First, Jail Last” Resolution which your Board unanimously enacted in April 2021. Furthermore, the MHAB believes that such a significant investment in a new building at the jail is at odds with the goals of the Care First Task Force which your Board created over a year ago to implement the Care First Resolution. As the Board knows, the Task Force -- which includes a representative from the Mental Health Advisory Board -- has been working diligently to design a full continuum of behavioral healthcare that aims to significantly **reduce** the number of people with mental illness, substance abuse and co-occurring disorders in our jail.

In light of this, at our monthly board meeting on June 21<sup>st</sup>, the Mental Health Advisory Board (“MHAB”) voted unanimously in favor of a motion that the Jail Expansion Plan should not go forward at all, or at the very least, should be put on hold until the Care First Task Force concludes its work and makes its recommendations to the Board of Supervisors in April 2024.

Rather than spend 26.6 million dollars to construct a new building at Santa Rita Jail (which would constitute a “Jail First” policy), the MHAB believes that the County must invest in the kind of facilities and programs which will both divert mentally ill people out of jail and into medically appropriate treatment and will support those who are at risk of becoming incarcerated.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, the MHAB questions the rationale of building the new MHPSU to accommodate the additional ACBH staff at the jail. According the most recent figures from the experts who are assisting in the *Babu* Consent Decree, as much as 70% of ACBH positions at the jail are still vacant, three years later.

Finally, while Santa Rita Jail has a rated capacity of over 3,700 incarcerated people, it is currently half-full, today holding less than 1,800 individuals, with proposals to reduce that number through the Reimagining Adult Justice initiative and no evidence that the population will increase in the future. Notably, the original staffing analysis on which the *Babu* settlement was based assumed a jail population of as many as 3,000 persons. The MHAB questions whether all the unused space at the jail could be repurposed and redesigned, as opposed to constructing a new 81-million-dollar building.

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<sup>2</sup> For instance, on an annual basis, 26.6 million dollars would fund 760 Full Service Partnerships , 152 sub-acute treatment beds, or 143 Crisis Residential treatment beds.

For all these reasons, the MHAB recommends that the Board of Supervisors put the Jail Expansion Project on hold and instead prioritize investments in community-based services that have been proven to reduce crime and recidivism.

Please don't hesitate to contact the MHAB if you have any questions.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'B. Bloom', followed by a horizontal line extending to the right.

Brian Bloom, Interim Chair of the Mental Health Advisory Board  
(on behalf of the Mental Health Advisory Board)