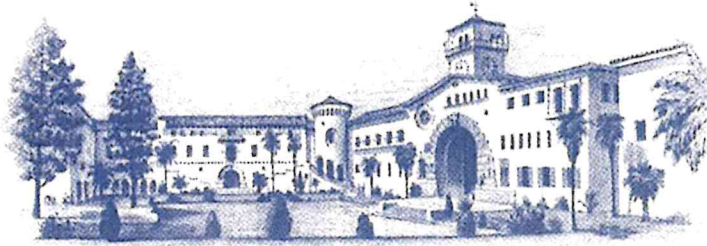


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BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

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COUNTY OF SANTA BARBARA

September 10, 2024

Honorable Pauline Maxwell
Presiding Judge
Santa Barbara Superior Court
County Courthouse
1100 Anacapa Street
P.O. Box 21107
Santa Barbara CA 93121-1107
pmaxwell@sbcourts.org

Re: Response to Santa Barbara Civil Grand Jury report titled, "Homeless Encampments in Santa Barbara County Becoming Part of the Community Again" published June 21, 2024.

Judge Pauline Maxwell:

Please find attached the Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors (Board) response to the above referenced Civil Grand Jury Report. As directed by the Grand Jury, all responses are provided in accordance with Section 933.05 of the California Penal Code.

The Board appreciates the work conducted by the Community Services Department for their assistance in responding to this matter. Note that the Sheriff's Office has separately responded to this matter within the statutory time limits.

Sincerely,

Steve Lavagnino, Chair
Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors

CC: sbcgj@sbcourts.org
Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors
Bill Brown, Sheriff-Coroner
Jesus Armas, Community Services Director
Kelly Hubbard, Office of Emergency Management Director

Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors
Response to the Santa Barbara County Grand Jury 2023-2024 Report
“Homeless Encampments in Santa Barbara County Becoming Part of the Community Again”

As the Grand Jury points out, the County of Santa Barbara has developed a multi-departmental strategy and focus to reducing homeless encampments throughout the County and has been recognized by the State for our efforts through award of several competitive grants. As the report points out, sustainable funding and regional and statewide effort are necessary to for ongoing progress. County staff continues to assess our encampment strategy and protocols to best maximize resources and produce positive outcomes.

Finding 1

Use of a team approach has made engagement with community services more acceptable to those who live in encampments.

The Board of Supervisors agrees. The County uses a team approach in its homeless outreach programs.

Finding 2

The negative effects of encampment sweeps can be mitigated when a variety of community resources are present at the time of the clean-up.

The Board of Supervisors agrees. The County uses the Encampment Response Protocol to address encampments, providing a variety of community resources before, during and after encampment resolution activities, as detailed in response to Recommendation 2 below.

Recommendation 2

The County and the cities shall ensure that all sweeps occur utilizing a multi-disciplinary approach.

This recommendation has been implemented in unincorporated areas of the County. The County’s approved Encampment Resolution Strategy and Response Protocol created an Encampment Response Team comprised of staff from Community Services, Public Health (Environmental Health Services), Fire, Sheriff, and homeless outreach service providers. The field team assesses encampments reported for health and safety risks, provides education on hazards, linkages to shelter and services. Other departments such as Public Works (including Roads, Flood Control, and Project Clean Water), General Services, local Code Enforcement, Agricultural Commissioner, and the County’s Multi-Disciplinary Team (Behavioral Wellness, Public Defender, Public Health, Social Services, Probation) are engaged depending on assessed needs and locations.

Finding 3

Encampments lack basic sanitation services.

The Board of Supervisors agrees. Unsafe conditions for persons remaining unsheltered include risk of fire, impacts on public recreation areas and the environment, safety of the greater community and visitors, and concern for the health and safety of those experiencing homelessness.

These concerns have been identified through calls for law enforcement service, the need for sanitation services, and removal of biohazards. Community member concerns about encampments within their neighborhoods, including those related to health, sanitation, and safety, should be addressed. When sites are assessed, the following is considered under Health:

- Excessive quantities of garbage, trash, or debris.
- Uncontrolled presence of needles, human waste, or other hazardous material.
- Vector hazards (e.g. rats).
- Other active health hazards to occupants or to the surrounding neighborhood.
- Risk to environmentally sensitive areas (e.g. water quality).

The County's approved Encampment Resolution Strategy and Response Protocol specifically includes sanitation services, which have been provided to active encampments (to reduce the footprint) and at encampment closure (removal or remaining waste, debris, biohazard, etc.).

Recommendation 3

The County and the cities shall make trash cans, porta-potties, resources for handwashing, and sharps containers for safe disposal of needles and other hazardous waste available near encampment sites.

This recommendation will not be implemented because it is not warranted. Trash cans and restrooms including resources for handwashing are currently available to the broad public, including persons in encampments. Additionally, waste is removed from active encampments to reduce the footprint of the site and mitigate public health and environmental concerns. Sharps containers for safe disposal of needles are made available to encampments through outreach teams.

Finding 4

Encampment residents are reluctant to transition to housing with strict rules of conduct.

The Board of Supervisors agrees. All housing projects supported by Santa Barbara County embody the policy of Housing First in order to receive State homeless program funds, as set forth in Welfare and Institutions Code (WIC) §§ 8256. WIC § 8255 defines Housing First policies to not predicate housing on an individual's willingness to take medication, be sober, or participate in treatment.

Recommendation 4

The County shall encourage the creation of more units that continue the Housing First model, providing a home first, and offering supportive services as the individual learns to cope in socially accepted ways.

This recommendation has been implemented. All County County Continuum of Care (COC) funded efforts are required to provide a meaningful path to safe and stable housing, using non-punitive, low-barrier, person-centered, Housing First approaches. In order to receive State homeless program funds, all County and COC funded efforts contractually obligate service providers to operate in a manner consistent with the requirements of Housing First as set forth in Welfare and Institutions Code sections 8255 et seq.

Finding 5

State funding for helping people without housing is becoming less available.

The Board of Supervisors agrees. The projected State budget indicates that funding for a variety of homeless support programs will become less available. The last five years marked an unprecedented investment to address homelessness with State and federal COVID-19 pandemic stimulus funding. However, nearly all of that State investment in homeless services and housing was one-time, meaning that there was no long-term fiscal sustainability of the services or programs funded during that time.

Recommendation 5

The Board of Supervisors shall instruct the County Community Services Department to work with community partners in addition to Continuum of Care members to pursue funding opportunities beyond those coming from the State or the encampment resolution.

This recommendation has been implemented. The Community Action Plan, adopted by the Board of Supervisors in February 2021, included a directive: “Increase the Pool of Funding Available to Provide Housing and Services” which included the following key actions:

- Maintain a comprehensive list of funds dedicated to homelessness;
- Coordinate and align all regional funding for homelessness;
- Ensure regional capacity to apply for/receive all new funding from the state for housing, homelessness;
- Align contracting expectations/best practices across funders;
- Increase the percentage of homeless individuals served in mental health and substance use disorder treatment programs;
- Ensure all cities have an inclusionary zoning policy for new development;
- Plan for a regional tax/bond local housing revenue creation program;
- Further strategically engage healthcare partners to collaboratively address homelessness and housing; and
- Engage CenCal in the planning and implementation of the State’s CalAIM proposal.

The Community Action Plan also acknowledges that “Solutions will require sustained support and funding, with leadership and political courage to explicitly identify and unequivocally work to resolve systemic challenges.” The pool of funding has grown significantly over the past few years, with \$134 million in new funding awarded/allocated since the Community Action Plan was adopted.

Finding 6

Most state encampment funding cannot be applied to environmental restoration.

The Board of Supervisors agrees. This finding is best exemplified through the California Encampment Resolution Fund (CERF), one of the many one-time (not ongoing) funding programs the State has created in recent years. CERF provides funding to resolve encampments along rivers and transit corridors, however, it explicitly excludes debris removal once the encampment is cleared from the eligible funding uses. There is no State dedicated homeless funding source that can fund environmental restoration of closed encampment sites.

Recommendation 6

The Board of Supervisors shall instruct the Community Services Department to invite environmental non-profits into its multi-disciplinary teams.

This recommendation has been implemented. Environmental agencies (public, private, and nonprofit) have been engaged in efforts to restore encampment sites, and in pursuit of funding.

Finding 7

When heavy rain is forecast and materializes, the persons in encampments along creeks and riverbeds are at high risk for loss of life, personal property, and living quarters.

The Board of Supervisors agrees. The Board's responses to Recommendations 7a and 7b below detail how efforts are taken during heavy rain events to mitigate risks to persons residing in homeless encampments.

Recommendation 7a

The Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Office and the Office of Emergency Management, using mapping technology, shall continue to refine and share comprehensive locations of encampment sites among all concerned agencies.

This recommendation has been implemented. Community Services Department already has implemented and maintains GIS mapping technology and shares the comprehensive locations of encampment sites with the Sheriff's Office, Office of Emergency Management, and all other concerned agencies. This is critical for situational awareness and data driven decision-making when these areas could be impacted by severe storm events. An Extreme Weather Protocol specific to persons experiencing homelessness has been in use by the Office of Emergency Management since 2023. The Office of Emergency Management has a Homeless Liaison in their policies and procedures. General locations are shared with the Office of Emergency Management and concerned agencies during emergency response. For instance, the Extreme Weather Response Protocol includes sites to post warning signage.

Recommendation 7b

The Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Office and the Office of Emergency Management shall develop and formalize a multi-modal warning system to relocate persons when there are looming credible threats.

This recommendation has been implemented. In early 2023, the Encampment Response Coordinator, in partnership with the Office of Emergency Management and other agencies, developed an "Extreme Weather Response Protocol" which has been implemented during several heavy rain events. Prior to severe storm events, the Sheriff's Office works with the Office of Emergency Management and Community Services District in a multi-modal warning system to alert our vulnerable populations in our local homeless encampments. This multi-modal system includes:

- Signage – Signs are placed at known entry and exit areas to riverbeds and creeks with instructions to leave the area.
- Alerts – For those registered at ReadySBC.org, alerts will be pushed out text messaging. For those with cellular devices not registered, Wireless Emergency Alerts (WEA) will be sent to those who are in an area where an imminent threat is current or emerging.

- Flyovers – Utilizing the data from Community Services Department, the Santa Barbara County Air Support Unit conducts flyover loudspeaker evacuation announcements over homeless encampments.
- In-person contact – Outreach workers go to known sites in the days before extreme weather arrives to notify persons living in encampments. They provide information on warming centers and warnings to leave waterways.

The Extreme Weather Protocol with its multi-modal warning system is meant to do all possible to encourage and assist with re-location during heavy rain events.