

December 14, 2015

Honorable Ed Lee
Mayor, City and County of San Francisco
1 Dr. Carlton B. Goodlett Place, Room 200
San Francisco, Ca 94102

Dear Mayor Lee,

We write today to ask that you reject plans to spend more than a quarter of a billion dollars in taxpayer resources to build a new jail that San Francisco does not need. The voters of San Francisco have repeatedly rejected proposals to build jails in the city, preferring more community-based solutions. Today, the San Francisco jails are 50% empty, and all signs point to future reductions in our in-custody population. What San Francisco needs desperately, and as can be seen on streets across the city, are mental health treatment services.

You have made it clear that your administration will prioritize homelessness in your second term. One of the primary causes of homelessness is the widespread prevalence of mental illness on San Francisco's streets. Since 2009, the percentage of inmates requiring psychiatric medication has increased 30 percent, and the number of contacts between inmates and Jail Behavioral Health Services has increased 24 percent. While our in-custody jail services are increasingly insufficient, our needs for community-based mental health treatment continue to soar. We have an excess of jail beds, but we have long waiting lists for residential mental health treatment beds. The impact this dichotomy has on public safety is palpable. Without treatment beds, individuals whose criminal behavior may not warrant ongoing incarceration, but who desperately need treatment if they are going to exit the cycle of crime, don't get the help they need.

Rather than warehousing individuals with mental illness in the jail, where their needs are unmet, and their risk to the community may increase, San Francisco has the opportunity to continue to lead the state and the country in pursuing innovative alternatives to incarceration. The \$1,483,000 you have proposed to renovate San Francisco General Hospital to accommodate mental health services is dwarfed by the \$240,000,000 you have pledged to construct a new jail that will remain largely empty. This is a simple value proposition, and San Francisco's taxpayers are not getting what they are paying for. It is imperative that massive infrastructure investments and the future of San Francisco's public safety net reflect actual, existing needs.

While incarceration rates have skyrocketed across the state and country, San Francisco decreased its jail population by 35 percent over the past ten years. This reduction has not resulted in increased public safety risk; overall crime is down. According to recent studies,

San Francisco's rate of incarceration stands at just 40 percent of the State's rate (279 versus 677 incarcerated adults per 100,000). Meanwhile, the country is having a dialogue about the toll an era of mass incarceration has taken on our budgets and our communities. These studies indicate that should the Nation follow San Francisco's lead we would eliminate mass incarceration, one of the greatest failures of our criminal justice system. Accordingly, the construction of another jail would be a big step back for a city that has shown the country the way forward.

Those who assert that the new jail "must" be built in order to accommodate the existing population at the Hall of Justice fail to consider the suite of existing options to house this small number of inmates. There are roughly 350 people who need to be relocated from the HOJ. The efficacy of constructing a \$240 million facility for 350 people is highly questionable when over 40 percent of the approximately 1,300 San Francisco County Jail inmates receive care from Jail Psychiatric Services.

We propose an evidence-based approach to our criminal justice system and the individuals with mental illness whom the system currently cannot accommodate. We propose a comprehensive plan, one which incorporates a continuum of mental health services, housing, and necessary supports. These community-based resources would include tiered treatment services ranging from residential housing with intensive services, to transitional residential housing and programming, to outpatient treatment. Treatment would be coordinated with the Courts, to ensure the success of people with mental illness involved in the criminal justice system.

Rather than build a new jail that perpetuates tired, ineffective, and unnecessary incarceration models, San Francisco must account for current trends: historically low crime rates, and increasing rates of inmates with mental illness. Building a new jail in San Francisco would be a return to the failed policies of the past, and an indefensible choice in the face of rising mental health needs. Instead, we hope you will embrace the opportunity to address our mental health crisis, and help those suffering with mental illness exit the criminal justice system.

In closing, the greater need that must be met, the larger population that must be served, and the bigger impact our elected officials can have on public safety and our quality of life requires the construction of a mental health facility - not a jail. We urge you to join leading public safety experts and your partners in the community to reject this proposal. Your leadership on this issue is imperative to make sure the work that San Francisco has done to implement alternatives to incarceration is not undone. You have the opportunity to ensure this city continues to be a national leader in the ongoing conversation by leading San Francisco away from, and not back to, the era of mass incarceration.



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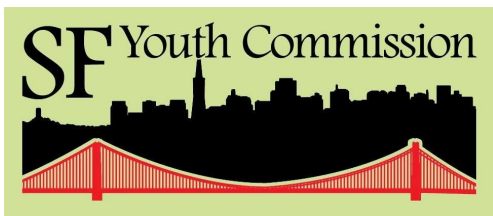
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San Francisco Youth Commission

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