



County of Santa Cruz

JUVENILE JUSTICE AND DELINQUENCY PREVENTION COMMISSION

October 11, 2025

Felipe Hernandez, Chair and
The Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors
701 Ocean Street
Santa Cruz, CA 95060

Inspection Report for 2025 Santa Cruz County Juvenile Hall Detention Facility and the Secure Youth Treatment Facility

Dear Chair Hernandez and Supervisors,

Pursuant to the California Welfare and Institutions Code, Division 2, Part 1, Chapter 2, Article 2, Section 229, the Santa Cruz County Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Commission (JJDPCC) was established by the Board of Supervisors and is required to conduct an annual inspection of any facility in the county that detains and holds youth for more than 24 hours.

This report presents the findings of the Commission's 2025 inspection of the Juvenile Hall Detention Facility and the Secure Youth Treatment Facility that was established at the Juvenile Hall in January 2025. The inspection was conducted on August 27 and 28, 2025, and was additionally informed by interviews conducted subsequent to that visit. There were six youths in the facility on the days of the inspection. The number of youth detained in the Facility has continued to decline from year to year, primarily due to the implementation of diversion and detention alternative programs used by the Probation Department, in conjunction with city and county schools and police and sheriff departments.

The JJDPCC's annual Juvenile Hall facility inspection has consistently used the nation's highest standards — the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative (JDAI) self-inspection tool established by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. These comprehensive standards reflect national "best practices" and exceed the mandates from the Board of State Community Corrections (BSCC) and California's Title 15 minimum standards. As a department, Probation supports holding the facility to the highest standards, ensuring the best level of care for young people detained in the Juvenile Hall, and voluntarily submits to this high level of national practice, recognizing that court-involved youth should be served in the least restrictive environment possible.

The Annie E. Casey standards were also used for the inspection of the Secure Youth Treatment Facility (SYTF). While most youth in the Juvenile Hall are held there temporarily until their case is adjudicated, youth in the SYTF are serving sentences and could be there until they turn 25 years of age. The Annie E. Casey standards have not yet been updated to incorporate additional best practices for long-term detention facilities such as SYTFs. Also, the state's Title 15 minimum standards are being revised by the state to reflect the needs of SYTF youth, but the revisions are not yet available. Therefore, the JJDPC utilized the available recommendations of the state's Office of Youth and Community Restoration (OYCR) for SYTF youth. These included the *OYCR Standards of Excellence for Stepping Home Practices* and the *OYCR Youth Dignity Guide*.

The JJDPC's use of the Annie E. Casey's inspection tool for the Juvenile Hall ensures that the benchmarks used from year to year are consistent and reflect best practices. It also enables the Commission to use the staff and volunteer inspection team resources more effectively.

The core strategies of JDAI are the following:

- Interagency collaboration to improve problem solving and coordination.
- Reliance on data to guide programs and policy.
- Use of objective instruments to guide detention admissions decisions.
- Increased or enhanced community-based alternatives to secure detention.
- Expedited case processing to reduce the length of stay and accelerate case resolutions.
- Innovations to reduce the use of secure detention for probation violations, warrants, and cases in which youth are awaiting placement.
- Use of best practices to reduce racial disparities in the detention population.
- Routine facility inspections to improve conditions of confinement.

The inspections are conducted by JJDPC Commissioners. This year's inspection team comprised the following JJDPC Commissioners: Elias Gonzales, Cynthia Druley, Sierra Thompson, David Brody, Julia Feldman, Beverly Brook, Reyna Ruiz, Bernard Gomez, and Jeri Limon.

The Commission performed a full inspection last year and found that the Juvenile Hall met or exceeded standards in eight separate categories. This year, because of their pertinence to the operations of the Juvenile Hall and the newly established SYTF, the Commission looked closely at the following areas: 1) Training and Supervision of Employees and 2) Programming (including Education). In addition, we reviewed the progress or completion of the recommendations that were included in our 2024 report.

The inspection team also had limited discussions with Juvenile Hall staff about the planning for upcoming changes—namely, adding a Ranch Camp program to the Juvenile Hall facility and transitioning SYTF youth to outside Less Restrictive Programs (LRPs)—that might entail daytime furloughs for youth or outside placements. These will continue to be areas of interest to the Commission in discussions with Probation in the coming year.

Inspection Specifics

Team members participated by doing the following activities:

- Conducting an inspection of the facility and in-person interviews with the Juvenile Hall Detention Facility administrators and line staff, Hartman School teachers and Santa Cruz County Office of Education managers, youths in the facility and some of their families/natural supports, and community-based organizations working within the facility.
- Reviewing SB823, BSCC, and OYCR standards for SYTF youth.
- Reviewing Facility policy and procedures documentation.
- Reviewing Facility data.

The Commission would like to thank Division Director Sara Berman; Assistant Division Director Jennifer Martinez; the County Office of Education; the staff members, teachers, and community-based partners working at the facility who assisted us in conducting the inspection; and the youth who freely shared their time and perspectives with us. We appreciated Juvenile Hall staff's prompt responses to requests for information and for arranging logistics of visits, youth interviews, and follow-up communications.

We are pleased to report that the Santa Cruz County Juvenile Hall Detention Facility meets or exceeds the vast majority of standards that represent “best practices” established by JDAI.

OVERVIEW OF FACILITY INSPECTION

Juvenile Hall staff clearly care about offering a safe, positive, and supportive environment for youth and families. They demonstrate a commitment to continuously improving both the available programming and the physical facility.

The facility held six (6) male youths on the days of the inspection: two in the A unit and four in the B unit. The Facility has implemented a differentiation of the A and B units. Youth are assigned to the A or B unit based upon a number of criteria including, but not limited to, age, maturity, the type of offense they were charged with, the amount of time that they have been or are expected to remain in the Facility, and their educational level. Generally, the A unit held the more transient and younger population, and the B unit held the one SYTF youth and three youth who had been in the Juvenile Hall for a longer time.

The SYTF youth and the three pretrial youth who have been there for extended periods are all being afforded goals and privileges normally provided to SYTF youth. This includes the environment, their cell accommodations, and education and programming. This flexibility ensures that the SYTF youth is not held in what might be a type of solitary confinement and has created a cohesive unit of youth who demonstrate greater maturity and commitment to their futures.

Several positive changes in the Facility have been made this year, including the use of monitored internet for youth, as well as Rising Scholars' provision of computers for youth taking college courses. All four youth in the B unit were taking one to three Cabrillo College courses. The self-perception of these youths as "scholars" was evident.

The Facility is currently undergoing renovations. The original B unit's cells and dayroom are under construction, as are the kitchen and the eating area. B unit youth are housed in cells in one part of the A unit and move back and forth to their classroom and the library; the A unit youth also move in and out of their unit to use the library. B unit youth eat in the library, and A unit youth eat in the dayroom. This will somewhat reverse when the A unit undergoes construction. The timeline for the construction is about 18 months. Although the construction creates logistical difficulties, the youth and staff appear to be dealing with it well.

Because of the Facility's age, much of the infrastructure reflects a punitive era, standing in contrast to the intent outlined in Welf. & Inst. Code § 851, which states that a juvenile hall "shall be a safe and supportive homelike environment." We are hopeful that the renovations bring the physical environment of the Facility in line with this goal.

JUVENILE HALL COMMENDATIONS

Programming

1. As recognized in prior-year reports, staff clearly care about offering a safe, positive, and supportive environment for youth and families. They also continue to demonstrate a commitment to continuously improving both the available programming and the physical facility.
2. Probation staff and educators are committed to serving the youth and offer a robust educational program that meets federal mandates requiring support for students with special education needs, as well as support for college preparation and enrollment.
3. Cabrillo College's Rising Scholars program has flourished in the Facility. It was a pleasure to observe all eligible youth fully engaged in online Cabrillo courses, taking advantage of newly available laptops provided by Rising Scholars and secure Internet access in the Facility.
4. Staff are implementing the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) system school- and facility-wide, to help create an environment of consistency and fairness that supports the social and emotional well-being of the youth.
5. Staff have implemented an incentive program that applies to the SYTF and other B unit youth. This system, called "Phases," consists of privileges and tangible rewards that the youth can earn as they move through successive phases and is meant to encourage constructive behavior through positive reinforcement. It achieves this goal for the eligible youth.
6. The CORE Cash program provides points or credits for good behavior that youth can use to "purchase" snacks and comfort items. This program is well-liked by youth and staff.

7. Staff have implemented a new quarterly youth survey to solicit input on existing and future programming in the facility.
8. All staff and partners should be commended for maintaining program continuity, quality, and safety in light of ongoing construction.

Training and Supervision of Employees

1. Through the exemplary leadership of Division Director Sara Berman and her team, the Santa Cruz County Juvenile Hall facility's work environment is distinguished by collaboration, mutual respect, and professional growth. Staff members consistently report feeling supported in their roles and empowered to propose ideas and solutions.
2. The commitment and professionalism of the staff are highly regarded and deserve commendation. The work culture of mutual respect starts at the top, and Division Director Sara Berman and Assistant Division Director Jennifer Martinez demonstrate how employees can be held accountable in a supportive manner that strengthens relationships and perpetuates an open environment where staff feel free to share ideas and honestly debrief after challenging situations.
3. A remarkable testament to the facility's supportive culture is its high employee retention rate. Many veteran staff members return after retirement, underscoring the sense of belonging and professional fulfillment fostered by the leadership. This continuity enhances the facility's institutional knowledge and contributes significantly to its ongoing success.
4. The supportive climate benefits not only employees but also the youth served by the Facility. Staff who feel respected and empowered are better prepared to provide guidance, mentorship, and support to incarcerated youth. This creates a more hopeful and constructive atmosphere.

JUVENILE HALL RECOMMENDATIONS

Programming

1. Youth and education partners continue to request access to synchronous online college courses. As noted above, the Rising Scholars program has flourished in the facility and all involved should be commended for its success. With that said, the program is still only able to offer asynchronous courses without the opportunity to experience real-time lecture, interaction, and discussion (core to the college experience). Lack of access to synchronous online courses also limits the course offerings available to youth; we feel that safety and confidentiality concerns can be adequately addressed.

Other areas of improvement for higher education that should be explored include the following:

- It was reported that youth needed more independence to schedule their own virtual appointments with tutors and academic counselors (not just professor office hours);

- it currently is limited and deemed difficult in part to the inflexibility of programming.
 - Supporting field trips to local colleges and universities.
- 2. Access to more vocational training in areas including, but not limited to, barbering, construction, welding, and forklift certification would greatly benefit youth success.
- 3. With respect to exercise and recreation, we recommend the following:
 - Provide a fitness coach or trainer to support youth in meeting their fitness and nutrition goals.
 - Multiple male youth reported that they are hungry at times. There should be increased independent access to more healthy snacks, especially after working out.
- 4. With respect to positive behavior interventions and supports:
 - The CORE Cash behavior incentive program is well-liked by staff and youth. We recommend increasing the number of days the CORE Cash store is open per week (we understand this is in process now).
 - Because youth can only benefit from the Phases program (providing additional comfort items to their rooms for good behavior) after four months, the program is in effect unavailable to youth in the A unit, which has resulted in a perception of disparity: the A unit youth are aware of rewards that are available in theory but that, given their short time stays, they may never be able to earn, no matter how well they perform. We recommend that the Phases program be revised to allow youth to earn rewards at earlier timeframes e.g, one or two months.
 - While the daily points system is based on points gained for good behavior, youth often experience the system as points lost for bad behavior when points that are usually granted are not. We recommend soliciting input from youth and refining the points system to ensure that it continues to be a strength-based positive behavior reinforcement system. The Facility states that the future implementation of PBIS should accomplish this.

Training and Supervision of Employees

1. Multiple youth reported a lack of confidence in the Grievance Reporting System. They felt that staff expressed a level of cynicism of it. Youth felt that if they reported a grievance, either “nothing would be done” or there might be negative repercussions. We recommend that staff be retrained to better communicate the grievance procedure, and that the administration ensure that youth understand that their grievances will be treated respectfully and acknowledged promptly. We also recommend that the administration create clear feedback loops to youth who file grievances, so the process feels more meaningful to them.
2. While staff currently receive training, youth feedback suggests gaps in how communication, de-escalation, and respect are applied in practice. In addition, access to more in-person training was requested by almost all employees during inspection interviews. For example, while all staff receive training on how to conduct searches

respectfully and consistently, when trainings are conducted online, staff do not have the opportunity to engage, practice, and receive feedback on their technique. We recommend that staff training should include less reliance on online modules and move toward more in-person, hands-on, and scenario-based learning.

3. A youth reported that his belongings were not returned after their release from Juvenile Hall. We recommend that the Facility should provide refresher training for staff, emphasizing respect for youth's property, such as schoolwork and personal items, and their appropriate return.

SECURE YOUTH TREATMENT FACILITY (SYTF)

Overview

When the Division of Juvenile Justice closed youth detention centers and shifted the paradigm for juvenile justice in 2023 via SB823, young people housed in youth prisons were moved to Secure Youth Treatment Facilities (SYTFs). Youth and young adults serve much longer terms in SYTFs and can be in a facility for many years — up to the age of 25. The goal of this realignment is to reduce recidivism, encourage accountability, and provide treatment, educational, and vocational opportunities to prepare youth for success upon their release.

Santa Cruz County youth who were in prison or had been sentenced by the Juvenile Court at that time were sent to a SYTF in Sonoma that is under contract with our Probation Department. Three Santa Cruz youths are currently incarcerated in that facility.

The Santa Cruz County SYTF was established at the existing Santa Cruz County Juvenile Hall Facility in January 2025. This is the JJDPC's first inspection of this Facility.

As in the Juvenile Hall inspection, the Commission used the Annie E. Casey detention center standards in the inspection of the SYTF. However, the Annie E. Casey standards do not yet reflect "best practices" for long-term detention facilities like SYTFs. Also, California's Title 15 minimum standards for detention centers are being revised by the state to reflect the needs of SYTF youth; however, they are not yet available. Therefore, the JJDPC utilized the available recommendations of the state's Office of Youth and Community Restoration (OYCR) for SYTF youth, which included the *OYCR Standards of Excellence for Stepping Home Practices* and the *OYCR Youth Dignity Guide*.

At the time of the inspection, the Facility held one youth who was sentenced to the SYTF by the Court. Therefore, the SYTF-specific inspection often included reviewing the programming and environment for both the SYTF youth and the three other "pre-disposition" detainees who have been there for extended periods. These young adults were all assigned to the B unit in the facility, and were all being afforded most of the positive attributes and privileges usually provided only to those in SYTF (with two specific exceptions). Hereafter, unless otherwise noted, we are referring to all youth in the B unit as "SYTF" youth.

Commendations of SYTF

1. The implementation of a separate unit where both SYTF and Juvenile Hall youth are being held for longer terms has created a cohesive unit of young adults who demonstrate a greater level of maturity and commitment to their futures. It provides a differentiation in treatment, including its culture, environment, cell accommodations, privileges, and differentiated education and programming. The creation of this unit ensures that the one SYTF youth is not held in isolation from all other youth.
2. A new staff position has been created to work specifically with youth in the SYTF program and other long-term youth. Currently, this case manager is reviewing current policies for possible modifications, in addition to creating and implementing new programs and activities to enhance the youths' success. Additionally, she will be instrumental in developing Less Restrictive

Programs (LRPs), community furloughs, and reentry planning for the SYTF youth. The Commission encourages her to continue to cultivate and implement age- and culturally appropriate programs and resources, both in the community and in the SYTF. We also recommend that she reach out to Community Based Organizations and the Commission to identify resources and programs to specifically address the needs of youth held for up to seven years.

3. The Facility is providing greater support of higher education through coordination with Cabrillo College's Rising Scholars Program, by providing each youth with a computer and monitored internet access, and supporting each individual's educational needs. The shift to these young adults' view of themselves as scholars was evident, which is a significant change from last year's inspection.
4. A monthly cooking program called "Stirring Up Success" has been instituted on the B unit. Cooking is a wonderful life skill to develop. It started with simple things like protein shakes, and in September they will make a full entree of a stir fry. Youth also asked that the program be held more often and include additional information about nutrition. While we understand that the Facility will partner with a community based organization to provide a full culinary program once kitchen construction is complete, we encourage expansion of "Stirring Up Success" until that happens.
5. The Probation Department purchased a van to transport SYTF youth's families to Sonoma to ensure their access to familial support. We commend the Facility for determining the family's transportation needs to the Felton facility and using the van to transport SYTF families to the Felton SYTF.

Recommendations for SYTF

We recognize that the SYTF is a new program and will be evolving over the next few years. We are aware that some of the recommendations we are making may already be evident to the administration and staff but want to ensure that the needs expressed by youth and staff are recorded and shared.

1. The Facility is commended for its work to implement a shift in the atmosphere, culture, and policies that is appropriate to SYTF and the young adults in the B unit. It is understood that this program is very new, and we recommend that the administration's monitoring of the "trickle down" of this cultural and policy shift to line staff be periodically reviewed and that the SYTF-specific staff training be made mandatory rather than voluntary.
2. Higher education is clearly evident in the SYTF. Most students are older; they are young adults and are learning to navigate their coursework and its communication requirements as any college student needs to do. This includes the need for self-motivation, organization, study skills, scaffolding, and time management. This is a challenge in any environment, but will be even more challenging in an environment where every minute is scheduled. We recommend that these young scholars have more flexibility and independence in scheduling their time; this will help ensure equity and access to their full educational success. Who hasn't failed to manage their time and need to spend more time outside of allotted school hours to finish an assignment or cram for an exam? This is a positive part of the maturing and learning experience.
3. The youth in B unit are really young adults who need to be able to self-regulate and take increasing levels of responsibility for their lives and their actions. We recommend that they be provided additional levels of autonomy and decision-making to mature and grow. Requiring that they seek permission to get a glass of water or a book or get up from a table does not encourage or reflect that.
4. Many SYTF and long-stay youth have long-term partners. We recommend expanding the list of approved in-person visitors for these youth to include their boyfriends or girlfriends who are part of their support system. Currently the policy only allows virtual visits.
5. Youth commended the quality of the food but felt that the quantity was insufficient. The caloric recommendations from Title 15 address the needs of youth under the age of 18. SYTF youth are really young adults up to age 25. They are working out, doing activities and school work, and need more calories such as fruit or protein bars. Although we recognize that the Facility follows a nutritionist-approved menu which provides the legally required calories and nutrients for youth, youth still requested that more food be provided at meals and that they have access to healthy snacks, protein bars or packaged protein drinks, on the unit, where they could just take them whenever they are hungry.

6. We recommend that the Facility continue to work on and share their plans and have dialog with the Commission regarding the following:
 - a. Plans for the Ranch Camp.
 - b. Plans for outside options for LRPs for youth to continue their full transition home.
 - c. Plans for meaningful vocational programs that will make the youth job-ready upon release.
 - d. Reentry planning that includes the youths' family and community supports.
 - e. Opportunities for fulfilling community service hours and paying restitution. (We are aware that one youth is doing community service with mural painting.)
7. In last year's recommendations, the Commission suggested that wording in the policies that refer to Group Supervisors and Institutional Supervisors as "counselors" be changed or eliminated in order to more accurately reflect their role, which balances safety and support; we again recommend that the word counselor be removed from the policies. We recommended this because these staff members occupy positions of power over the youth; they are responsible for supervising the youths' behavior on the units. They report behavioral issues and can withhold points that grant privileges. The youth reported this year that they do not see Group Supervisor or Institutional Supervisors as counselors; they see these staff as supervisors. A true counselor should not be in a position of power and while being responsible for providing a safe environment for sharing confidential information and seeking emotional support.

While the Commission continues to encourage stakeholders in the juvenile justice system to minimize youth incarceration, our findings confirm that Probation continues to provide an excellent level of care within the Facility. The Facility far exceeds the minimum standards of Title 15 and is doing an exemplary job of meeting the aspirational "best practices" of the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative and the holistic needs of incarcerated youth. We observed that one of the key strengths of the Facility is their commitment to continuous improvement.

Sincerely,



Elias Gonzales, Chair
Santa Cruz County Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Commission

cc: Valerie Thompson, Interim Probation Chief
Honorable Jerry Vinluan, Superior Court Judge – Juvenile Court
Sara Berman, Superintendent, Santa Cruz County Juvenile Hall and Secure Youth Treatment Facility

