



PRESS RELEASE

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CJC EXAMINES BEHAVIORAL HEALTH CASES IN JUSTICE SYSTEM

Report examines strengths, needs for cases with a mental health component

A new report by the Criminal Justice System of Santa Cruz County focuses a spotlight on criminal cases with a mental health component in the justice system, finding common ground on many issues while highlighting areas that can be improved.

The study is the first collaborative and comprehensive look at the handling of criminal cases with a behavioral health component by local justice system partners. The review found that justice system partners approach cases with a behavioral health component with compassion and a belief that incarceration is not the most effective response in most cases. All partners also expressed a desire to increase and strengthen collaboration on such cases, including more integrated case management and improved data sharing.

The report also notes that diversions from criminal court for cases with a mental health component have increased significantly in the last several years, and that additional resources are needed to fully address mental health issues for justice-involved individuals.

“This report shows that there is common ground when it comes to handling cases with a mental health component in our community,” said Donna Lind, chair of the Criminal Justice Council of Santa Cruz County. “It also identifies areas of need and provides a platform for improving outcomes for those individuals involved in the criminal justice system.”

Criminal Justice Council partners include public safety leadership throughout Santa Cruz County, including the Sheriff and police chiefs from each of the four cities, the District Attorney, the Chief Probation Officer, the Public Defender’s Office, members of Santa Cruz County Superior Court, County Behavioral Health, and many more.

The report also acknowledged that the aging Santa Cruz County Main Jail is not conducive to housing or managing cases with a behavioral health component, and that alternate facilities specializing in crisis stabilization with higher security are needed.

The report comes during a period of significant change to the State’s justice system and its response to justice-involved individuals with mental health needs, including a 2021 California Supreme Court decision limiting the use of cash bail, caps on the number of individuals who can be committed as Incompetent to Stand Trial (IST), the upcoming implementation of the Community Assistance, Recovery and Empowerment (CARE) Act, and Medi-Cal mandates impacting those with behavioral health issues, along with other State and local changes.

The report was created by Watsonville-based Applied Survey Research. To view the report, visit santacruzajc.org.