

Los Angeles County Must Invest Strategically in Community Providers to Create “Care First” Pretrial Services

As multiple lawsuits surrounding jail conditions and tragic in-custody deaths have made all too clear, Los Angeles County has failed to implement the “care first, jails last” vision unanimously adopted by the Board of Supervisors (BOS) in March 2020.¹ In a new Vera Institute of Justice (Vera) report, *Investing in Supportive Pretrial Services: How to Build a “Care First” Workforce in Los Angeles County*, county officials attribute implementation delays to a shortage of community-based behavioral health workers.² Drawing on conversations with community providers, Vera’s report documents how removing bureaucratic barriers and investing in service providers will help realize the “care first” vision.³ From this report emerges a clear set of steps Los Angeles County can take to build out an infrastructure for community-based pretrial services and address the urgent needs of system-impacted people:

1. **Allocate \$110 million per year for community-based pretrial services.**

Given the scale of pretrial incarceration and the need to center care, most of this money should go to service providers conducting assessments and doing case management.⁴ As part of the “care first” framework, the county committed to building an independent pretrial services entity situated outside of law enforcement, which is now the Justice, Care, and Opportunities Department’s (JCOD) Pretrial and Prevention Services division.⁵ However, the county continues to rely heavily on probation-led programs like the Pretrial Release Evaluation Program (PREP 2.0).⁶ Investing in a diverse community-centered service provider ecosystem is necessary to ensure that geographical areas most impacted by incarceration have the service options people need to receive care in their communities—in proximity to their loved ones and support networks.⁷

2. **Increase contract rates and absorb insurance premiums for small community providers.**

To remedy the shortage of community-based behavioral health workers, community providers need more money to hire and retain staff. In Vera’s survey, nearly all participating organizations cited salary stagnation as a primary reason for their staffing shortages. Competing with the county is a challenge: the average Los Angeles social worker’s monthly salary is \$3,784 compared to \$4,421.18 to \$6,640.82 for county-employed social workers.⁸ Community providers, particularly smaller ones, are unable to provide competitive compensation packages due to outdated contract rates (last negotiated five to 10 years ago), inaccessible contracting processes, and high insurance premium costs. Further, many respondents indicated their biggest capacity-building needs were overhead and expansion costs such as rent, insurance, grant writers, or accountants for reporting and billing purposes.

3. **Simplify county contracting processes and applications for technical assistance programs.**

Most community providers surveyed lambasted the county contracting process as confusing and overwhelming. The county should simplify, standardize, and streamline contract processes across departments so that its prohibitive eligibility requirements and difficult application process do not keep community providers from obtaining much-needed funding and technical assistance. Although the county’s Incubation Academy provides grant writing, organizational, and financial management support to small organizations, it is not a cure-all: participation and graduation do not guarantee contract awards, and graduates are left to navigate contracting hurdles on their own.⁹

4. **Make it easier for community providers to access and receive funding.**

Several small organizations in Vera’s survey discussed how slow funding disbursement and reimbursement create cash flow problems. For example, participants reported that Care First Community

Investment funds allocated in 2021 have yet to be disbursed. The county can quickly expand provider capacity with easily adjustable contracts (length and rate), upfront grants, expedited disbursement and reimbursement processes, and additional capacity-building support, like grant-writing assistance.

5. Ensure that JCOD implements the Equity in County Contracting (ECC) Workgroup's recommendations.

To center care, JCOD needs to ensure its contracting process expedites pretrial service delivery. In August 2021, the BOS established the ECC Workgroup to identify and implement improvements to the contracting process to “strengthen the ecosystem of CBOs [community-based organizations] that serve our highest need residents” in alignment with the “care first” model.¹⁰ JCOD should begin to implement the ECC’s contracting and funding distribution recommendations through its Pretrial and Prevention Services and Contracts and Grants divisions.¹¹

6. Simplify reporting requirements to protect organizational capacity and mitigate staff burnout.

Most community providers surveyed shared negative experiences with the county’s onerous billing and reporting requirements. County contracts vary by department and require service providers to itemize expenses per case, which strips organizational capacity, can cost more in labor than the services provided, and contributes to staff burnout. Simplifying and standardizing reporting requirements will help small to midsized community providers grow by allowing staff to focus on patient care and client support instead of paperwork.

7. Help meet the urgent need for more community-based behavioral health workers.¹²

The BOS recently supported an initiative to create a trainee-to-county-employment pipeline and scale existing peer-based programs for alternative crisis response.¹³ It should do the same for pretrial services and those looking to work in community-based settings. The county should offer scholarships, grants, sign-on bonuses, and professional development for behavioral health workers committed to working at community providers for three to five years.

Endnotes

¹ See for example Michael Finnegan, “‘Barbaric’ L.A. County Jail Conditions Alleged as ACLU Seeks Federal Intervention,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 8, 2022, [latimes.com/california/story/2022-09-08/barbaric-la-county-jail-conditions-alleged-as-aclu-seeks-federal-intervention](https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2022-09-08/barbaric-la-county-jail-conditions-alleged-as-aclu-seeks-federal-intervention); Sam Levin, “If I Could Buy Freedom, I Would’: LA Residents Who Can’t Afford Bail Sue to Change System,” *Guardian*, November 14, 2022, [perma.cc/HDHG-UL9U](https://www.permac.cc/HDHG-UL9U); and Keri Blakinger, “Three Inmates Died in Los Angeles County Jails in Just over a Week,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 28, 2023, [latimes.com/california/story/2023-03-28/three-inmates-died-in-the-los-angeles-county-jails-in-just-over-a-week](https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2023-03-28/three-inmates-died-in-the-los-angeles-county-jails-in-just-over-a-week).

² Vera Institute of Justice (Vera) interviews with anonymous Los Angeles County officials, April 1, 2022, on file with Vera.

³ Sheena Liberator and Maria Jose Vides, *Investing in Supportive Pretrial Services: How to Build a ‘Care First’ Workforce in Los Angeles County* (New York: Vera, 2023), [perma.cc/AP8L-N43W](https://www.permac.cc/AP8L-N43W). For more on the “care first” vision, see Motion by Sheila Kuehl and Mark Ridley-Thomas, “Building a System of Alternatives to Incarceration,” Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, March 10, 2020, [perma.cc/8RLK-MTP9](https://www.permac.cc/8RLK-MTP9).

⁴ Vera, *Los Angeles County Should Invest \$220 Million of American Rescue Plan Act Funds for Pretrial Services* (New York: Vera, 2022), <https://www.permac.cc/C4XF-59H2>.

⁵ Kuehl and Ridley-Thomas, “Building a System of Alternatives to Incarceration,” 2020.

⁶ Sheena Liberator, *Implementing Safe and Effective Pretrial Services: Steps L.A. County Can Take to Decrease the Pretrial Population* (New York: Vera, 2023), [perma.cc/C4XF-59H2](https://www.permac.cc/C4XF-59H2). Currently, the FY23–24 proposed budget includes 167 budgeted positions for pretrial services under the Probation Department, but only three for the Justice, Care, and Opportunities Department’s (JCOD) Pretrial and Prevention Services division. See County of Los Angeles, *2023-24 Recommended Budget, Submitted to the Board of Supervisors April 2023, Volume 1* (Los Angeles: County of Los Angeles, 2023), 333, 401, [perma.cc/7WYC-DYEB](https://www.permac.cc/7WYC-DYEB).

⁷ Alternatives to Incarceration Work Group, *Care First, Jails Last: Health and Racial Justice Strategies for Safer Communities* (Los Angeles: Alternatives to Incarceration Work Group, 2020), 11, [perma.cc/XZ7V-28MC](https://www.permac.cc/XZ7V-28MC); and Memorandum from Christina R. Ghaly, director, Department of Health Services, Jonathan E. Sherin, director, Department of Mental Health, and Barbara Ferrer, director, Department of Public Health to Sachi A. Hamai, chief executive officer, County of Los Angeles re: Development, Design, Right-Sizing, and Scoping of the Proposed Mental Health Treatment Center, August 5, 2019, 6, [perma.cc/WT4C-VCA7](https://www.permac.cc/WT4C-VCA7).

- ⁸ For social workers in Los Angeles, see Indeed, “Social Worker Salary in Los Angeles, CA,” accessed June 1, 2023, [indeed.com/career/social-worker/salaries/Los-Angeles-CA](https://www.indeed.com/career/social-worker/salaries/Los-Angeles-CA). For county-employed social workers, see Los Angeles County, *Los Angeles County Class and Salary Listing* (Los Angeles: Chief Executive Office, 2023), perma.cc/35AU-WWU2.
- ⁹ Motion by Holly J. Mitchell and Sheila Kuehl, “Leveraging the County’s Position as a Market Participant to Promote Equity in County Contracting,” Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, April 20, 2021, perma.cc/4ZAK-2Q35; Los Angeles County Alternatives to Incarceration Office, *ATI Incubation Academy Fact Sheet* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Chief Executive Office, 2021), perma.cc/3MPV-KJ8H; and Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) National, “Frequently Asked Questions,” perma.cc/9AL5-LFPT. See also LISC, “ATI Incubation Academy Fact Sheet,” 2022, on file with Vera: in its first and second cohorts, the Incubation Academy received 339 applications and graduated 47 participants. Since then, LISC has supported third and fourth cohorts of housing provider organizations made up of 21 and 25 organizations, respectively.
- ¹⁰ Revised Motion by Holly J. Mitchell and Sheila Kuehl, “Implementing the Priority Strategies of the Equity in County Contracting Project Team,” Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, August 9, 2022, 2, perma.cc/RA5K-STJ3; and Fesia Davenport, “Report Back on Leveraging the County’s Position as a Market Participant to Promote Equity in County Contracting,” County of Los Angeles Chief Executive Office, August 20, 2021, perma.cc/HZN2-YE89.
- ¹¹ JCOD’s organizational structure does not appear in its official materials, but it is documented in the 2023–2024 recommended budget. See County of Los Angeles, *2023-24 Recommended Budget, 2023*, 333, perma.cc/7WYC-DYEB.
- ¹² Janet Coffman, Timothy Bates, Igor Geyn, and Joanne Spetz, *California’s Current and Future Behavioral Health Workforce* (San Francisco: Healthforce Center at UCSF, 2018), 6, perma.cc/542H-4KEP.
- ¹³ Motion by Janice Hahn and Kathryn Barger, “Student Mental Health Trainees,” October 18, 2022, Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, perma.cc/4HTY-URXJ; Motion by Janice Hahn and Kathryn Barger, “Incentivizing Hiring for Los Angeles County’s Alternative Crisis Response,” Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, April 4, 2023, perma.cc/YWQ7-AJA6; and Letter from Lisa H. Wong, interim director, Los Angeles Department of Mental Health, to Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors re: “Report Response on Access to Mental Health Services,” October 14, 2022, perma.cc/67P2-WU5W.