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Department of Justice

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Justice Department Concludes That Los Angeles County Jails System Has Made Progress, but Serious Deficiencies Continue

The Justice Department today released its latest compliance assessment of mental health services at the Los Angeles County Jails based on a memorandum of agreement (MOA) designed to protect the constitutional rights of prisoners with serious mental illness at the jails. The department concluded that, despite progress in some areas of the MOA, the county of Los Angeles fails to provide sufficient suicide prevention practices to protect prisoners from

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self-harm. The department also found that other serious deficiencies in the mental health care delivery system remain and combine with inadequate supervision and deplorable environmental conditions to deprive prisoners of constitutionally-required mental health care.

The Los Angeles County Jails system is the largest jail system in the country, housing approximately 19,000 pre-sentenced and sentenced prisoners in seven facilities throughout the county. The Los Angeles Sheriff's Department operates the jails system and supports the delivery of mental health services within the jails by the county's Department of Mental Health. In 2002, the department entered into the MOA with the county to resolve a long-standing civil investigation into conditions of confinement at the jails under the Civil Rights of Institutionalized Persons Act (CRIPA). The MOA gives the department access to personnel, documents and prisoners to evaluate the county's compliance with the MOA. The department is assisted by expert consultants in correctional mental health care and suicide prevention, and provides ongoing technical assistance as part of its monitoring activities. The county has cooperated fully and openly with the department.

The comprehensive assessment released today confirms that certain conditions and practices have not been remedied under the MOA and continue to violate the constitutional rights of prisoners with mental illness. There have been 15 completed suicides at the jails in less than 30 months and the department concluded that some of the deaths may have been preventable with proper suicide prevention practices. The department's assessment also reveals widespread lapses with regard to basic supervision of prisoners at risk; deficient mental health care for prisoners with clearly demonstrated needs; deplorable environmental conditions, most acutely at Men's Central Jail; and a suicide review process that often includes inaccurate information and fails to remedy evident and repeated problems in order to prevent similar incidents in the future.



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At the same time, the department's assessment reveals that the county has achieved substantial compliance with certain aspects of the MOA. For example, the county has implemented nearly all provisions related to mental health screening at intake, developed a robust electronic medical records system, increased the number of clinical and support staff and ensured that custodial staff receive initial and ongoing training in the identification and custodial care of prisoners with mental illness. The county has demonstrated a sustained level of acceptable performance and improvement in these areas, which will no longer be subject to evaluation under the MOA.

"The Los Angeles County Jails have an obligation to provide conditions of confinement that do not offend the Constitution and to take reasonable measures to protect inmates from harm," said Acting Assistant Attorney General Jocelyn Samuels for the Civil Rights Division. "Although the county has consulted with the Justice Department for years, our latest assessment reveals serious deficiencies that require further corrective action. We are hopeful that county officials will continue their long-standing cooperation to ensure that sustainable reforms are implemented fully."

The department intends to enter into discussions with county officials from the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department and the county's Department of Mental Health to address the results of the evaluation. The department expects that those MOA requirements that are in substantial compliance will terminate and no longer be subject to monitoring. The department will propose additional corrective action in the form of a court-enforceable agreement to address the remaining areas with serious deficiencies that violate prisoners' constitutional rights. The department's compliance letter includes a comprehensive list of recommended remedial measures that are designed to ensure adequate mental health treatment, supervision, suicide prevention and conditions of confinement for prisoners throughout the jails.

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The challenges that the county faces in providing constitutionally adequate mental health services at the jail are driven in part by a rapid increase in the number of prisoners who are seriously mentally ill. The county has begun to take steps to expand diversion programs that will provide community supervision and treatment in a manner consistent with public safety. The department applauds these efforts.

CRIPA was enacted in 1980 to eradicate egregious and harmful conditions that result in a pattern or practice of civil rights violations in jails, prisons, juvenile justice facilities and other public institutions. CRIPA authorizes the department to investigate and, if necessary, initiate a civil action to guarantee the federal and constitutional rights of institutionalized persons.

The MOA is enforced by the Special Litigation Section of the Civil Rights Division and the U.S. Attorney’s Office for the Central District of California, Civil Division. A copy of the MOA can be obtained on the [department's website](#) and additional information about the Civil Rights Division’s enforcement activities under CRIPA can be found at [the division website](#) .

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Graduates, and Fellows

Diversity Policy

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Archive

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Office of the

Inspector General

Government

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AGENCIES

BUSINESS

Business Opportunities

Small & Disadvantaged

Business

Grants

Information for Victims
in Large Cases

NEWS

Justice News

The Justice Blog

Public Schedule

Videos

Photo Gallery

Veteran Recruitment

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Quality

Privacy Policy

Legal Policies &

Disclaimers

Plain Writing

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