

## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

May 13, 2020

### Press Contacts:

Ashley Chambers, Ella Baker Center  
[ashley@ellabakercenter.org](mailto:ashley@ellabakercenter.org)

Amber Akemi Piatt, Human Impact Partners  
[amber@humanimpact.org](mailto:amber@humanimpact.org)

## Alameda County Supervisors Fail to Meet Demands for Healthcare over Policing

### *County Approves \$318 Million Additional Funding for Sheriff during COVID-19 Pandemic*

**Oakland, CA**—Despite widespread advocacy for Alameda County to prioritize health care and community resources for residents amid the COVID-19 pandemic, Alameda County Board President Richard Valle led the county in [approving an outrageous \\$318 million funding request](#) from the Alameda County Sheriff's Office (ACSO) and Behavioral Health Services for more than 450 new jail staff over the next three years. This action came after hours of public comment and testimony during the May 12 meeting of the Board of Supervisors where public health advocates, faith and social justice groups, and community members unanimously opposed the Sheriff's request for additional staff as Santa Rita Jail fails to manage a devastating COVID-19 outbreak.

In the several weeks since the county's stay-at-home orders went into effect, a coalition of organizers and advocates have continued to [take action digitally](#), demanding the release of incarcerated people inside Santa Rita Jail and urging the Board of Supervisors to invest in healthcare, housing and food security for county residents over policing and incarceration.

Supervisors considered these requests despite projections of at least a \$71.9 million deficit in the coming year and of substantial cuts to state and federal funds for the county. Indeed, Supervisor Wilma Chan asserted during the hearing that she wishes there was extra money available for health-affirming community resources instead of more jail staff, but the funds simply do not exist. She and Supervisor Keith Carson voted against the jail budget increase.

"The Board majority chose the most expensive and most harmful way to treat people with mental illness. Sheriff deputies in Alameda County are paid more than in 7 out of 8 other Bay Area counties, and a lot more than mental health clinicians," said John Lindsay-Poland of the American Friends Service Committee. "The Board failed to use expert recommendations that the County address litigation by reducing the jail population. And they showed no leadership to end the revolving door for people with mental illness between homelessness, inadequate services, and the jail."

“It is unconscionable, disgraceful, and immoral that the Board during the global pandemic crisis sets its priority on incarceration,” said Jose Bernal, Organizing Manager with the Ella Baker Center.

“We are not only experiencing a novel coronavirus that has already wiped out thousands of human lives across the country including right here in our county, we are also experiencing a massive economic crisis. We now have unemployment numbers that are only comparable to the Great Depression. Thousands of people are experiencing food insecurity. People don’t know where their next paycheck is going to come from,” said Jose.

To date, 50 people incarcerated at Santa Rita Jail have tested positive for COVID-19, which is 22 times the rate of infection in the rest of the county. In fact, a recent [ACLU study](#) shows that decarceration is the only viable solution for saving lives from COVID-19 nationally, both inside jails and beyond.

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*The Audit Ahern coalition was formed in 2017 and has been demanding a transparent fiscal and performance audit of the Alameda County Sheriff’s Office. It is currently comprised of the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, California Immigrant Youth Justice Alliance, Urban Peace Movement, Causa Justa Just Cause, Public Health Justice Collective, Restore Oakland, Human Impact Partners, American Friends Service Committee, SURJ - Bay Area, APTP, ACLU- Norcal, Justice Reinvestment Coalition, Unitarian Church of Oakland, and the Wellstone Democratic Renewal Club.*

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Ashley Chambers, Ella Baker Center  
[ashley@ellabakercenter.org](mailto:ashley@ellabakercenter.org)  
510-285-8227 (NOT FOR PUBLICATION)

Amber Akemi Piatt, Human Impact Partners  
[amber@humanimpact.org](mailto:amber@humanimpact.org)  
510-473-2248 (NOT FOR PUBLICATION)

## Board of Supervisors Deny

**Oakland, CA**—As the COVID-19 pandemic impacts the Bay Area and communities across the globe, advocates continue to organize demanding the [release of incarcerated people inside Santa Rita Jail](#) and in opposition to the Alameda County Sheriff's Office (ACSO) under-radar attempt to increase his budget by [\\$318 million per year](#) for new jail staff.

This action came after hours of public comment and testimony during today's meeting of the Alameda County Board of Supervisors where organizers, public health advocates, faith and social justice groups, and community members unanimously urged the supervisors to vote down the Sheriff's request for additional staff as Santa Rita Jail manages a COVID-19 outbreak inside.

In the several weeks since the county's shelter-in-place orders went into effect, organizers and advocates with the Audit Ahern Coalition have continued to take action digitally, demanding the release of incarcerated people inside Santa Rita and pushing for the Board of Supervisors to invest in healthcare and community resources for county residents over policing.

### Quote

To date, 50 people incarcerated at Santa Rita Jail have tested positive for COVID-19, according to the Sheriff's Office. While county officials have released one-third of the population inside Santa Rita, Wellpath — which has a county contract to provide health services inside Santa Rita — is still working through protocols to provide adequate testing as people enter the jail.

There is a pattern in how this [pandemic continues to impact jails](#) and prisons across the country, such as Cook County Jail and Rikers Island. Powerful testimony shared from people inside Santa Rita during Tuesday's meeting also spoke to unsanitary conditions, deputies' refusal to wear protective equipment, limited testing and lack of social distancing, among other issues.

While housed in Santa Rita Jail and showing symptoms of COVID-19, a person in custody shared: "The jail threw me into solitary confinement, the cell they put me in was so filthy. All I

could do was sit on a small metal stool for hours until they finally brought me some cleaning supplies. On April 30, 2020 I tested positive [for COVID-19]. In solitary confinement, I get nothing — no cough drops, no extra blanket, no Tylenol, no hot drink, nothing. Just to be in that room and suffer.”

As this public health crisis ravages through communities and behind bars, there is a need for increased protective equipment for healthcare workers, food and housing security, and swift action to release people inside Santa Rita and save lives. In such a time of desperate need, advocates stress that county officials prioritize the health and safety of residents by denying ACSO’s request for additional staff, releasing people from Santa Rita Jail, and investing in unmet housing and healthcare needs for county residents.

Quote

A recent [ACLU study](#) shows that decarceration is imperative for saving lives nationally, both inside jails and beyond — their epidemiological analysis shows that failures to adequately decarcerate will double the national COVID-19 death toll.

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