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### Title

Unsentenced Deaths in San Diego County Jails

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## **Policy Brief: Unsentenced Deaths in San Diego County Jails**

### **Executive Summary**

San Diego County Jails have been in the news for the past couple of years for having some of the largest number of non-natural deaths in California County Jails. In 2022 17 of these 18 deaths were still awaiting sentencing (Duara). The dire situation in San Diego County Jails has led to community groups, oversight groups, and legislators calling for changes in practices. For such a vulnerable population that is left waiting in jail with no timeline of how long they may be there they shouldn't be receiving a death sentence from the Jails. For this policy brief interviews were conducted with multiple stakeholders and experts surrounding the issue plaguing San Diego County Jails including Analytica Consulting which completed a report for the San Diego County Citizens Law Enforcement Review Board, the State Auditor's office, and the San Diego Sheriff's Department. A recommendation of instituting on site 24 hour health care professionals that can assist intake is made in order to help the problems plaguing the San Diego County Jails.

### **Background**

A 2022 report done by Analytica Consulting on behalf of the San Diego County Citizens Law Enforcement Review Board found that from 2010-2020 that San Diego County Jails had almost double the amount of actual unnatural deaths (deaths due to suicide, overdose/accidental, and other causes) compared to expected unnatural deaths. In correspondence with Michael Marks from Analytica Consulting he shared how the purpose of their study was not to look at the policies and practices of the San Diego County Jails, but to show that in custody deaths were higher in San Diego compared to other County Jails. It is well studied that being incarcerated

decreases your lifespan (Widra), but the amount of unnatural deaths which are specifically isolated to the unsentenced population is alarming. This has caused the issue to come up every year when San Diego County Jails continue to see these troubling numbers. This has caused the State Auditor's Office to call for the State Legislature to take action on what they see as systemic issues.

### **Policy Option 1: 24 Hour Mental Health Care**

Provide 24 hour mental health care at all San Diego County Jail facilities. This was a recommendation from the 2020 State Auditor report that has still yet to be fulfilled by the San Diego County Sheriff Department (Tilden). Being in jail, especially newly in jail for an unknown amount of time, is an extremely stressful event. Along with this some individuals may have mental health concerns that may be heightened by incarceration. Having access to around the clock care from Mental Health Professionals will help to reduce accidental deaths. This does come with a large price tag of creating around the clock care.

### **Policy Option 2: Create a Unified Health Reporting System Countywide**

The County of San Diego would create a health system that is coordinated with local healthcare providers and local governmental agencies. The County currently does not have this, but the Sheriff's Department has said that they are working to gain access to different healthcare record platforms (SD Sheriff Media Relations). Having a Countywide system would allow for intake physicians and nurses to have a better understanding of the care each person needs. This would need to be an action that the County Board of Supervisors completes and then is implemented by most likely the Department of Health and Human Services or Public Health Department at the County of San Diego. This would come with some cost to purchase a secure platform to share such information throughout the County and with other partners.

**Policy Option 3: Require a Mental Health Professional at Intake**

Currently the San Diego County Sheriff Department relies on nurses to complete intake screening for newly incarcerated individuals (Tilden). It would be beneficial to have a Mental Health Professional at these screenings that can better diagnose and understand the health of each individual. Depending on the results of intake screenings it could influence where inmates are housed to best fit their mental health needs. This could go hand in hand with 24 hour Mental Health Care at facilities because intake can happen at all hours. This would come with the cost of hiring Mental Health Professionals that work all hours alongside registered nurses.

**Recommendation**

There is a desperate need for Mental Health Professionals at San Diego County Jails. To meet the needs of such a large and diverse jail population the Sheriff Department, which oversees the incarceration and healthcare of people in San Diego Jails, should invest in hiring Mental Health Care Professionals for intake screenings. This would combine two policy options one and three as these Professionals would be at Jails 24 hours to help with intake while also supporting other incarcerated people. This would be a huge investment by the County and Sheriff's Department, but incarcerated people are under great deal of stress and sometimes suffering from mental health issues that can lead to deaths. This would be the most effective way to ensure individuals are given the treatment that they need and deserve.

**Conclusion**

For over 10 years, San Diego County Jails have been having larger than expected numbers of unnatural deaths especially of unsentenced individuals and recently incarcerated individuals (Analytica Consulting). This is unacceptable to witness as Jail should not be a death sentence. In order to attempt to combat this crisis the Sheriff's Department should provide 24 hour Mental

Health Professionals and enough that can also assist in intake screenings of individuals. This would help to reach the most vulnerable populations in San Diego County Jails and hopefully to meet their mental health needs.

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