

NO MENTAL HEALTH JAIL BY ANOTHER NAME: PUBLIC LETTER TO LA COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

June 5, 2019

Dear Supervisors,

As we know, there has been great collaborative work between county leadership, county departments, and community stakeholders. We once again urge you to reconsider and rescind your February 12th, 2019 decision to approve a contract for construction of the Mental Health Treatment Center (MHTC). On that same day, you made a clear decision – siding with the will of the people and numerous health advocates – to vote against the then-proposed plan for a mental health jail named the Consolidated Correctional Treatment Facility. In doing so, you boldly set LA County on a new path towards providing care in communities and investigating alternatives to imprisonment. Unfortunately, at the very same time, the Board of Supervisors signed a contract with McCarthy Building Companies Inc. which, against the stated intention of your own body, continues to roll LA County forward on a path to more imprisonment. Following this decision, a Design Agreement was executed between the Department of Public Works and McCarthy to begin designing the Mental Health Treatment Center.

Next week, the Alternatives to Incarceration workgroup, initiated by the Board, will come before you with a robust set of proposals to reduce imprisonment and bolster community-based treatment and vital services. It is important to stay open to the widely agreed-upon vision of decentralized community-based service and care settings throughout the county. **We urge you to prioritize proposed Alternatives to Incarceration and drop all plans to construct the single facility version of the Mental Health Treatment Center and any other so-called mental health treatment that is tied up with criminalization and punishment. LA County cannot in good faith simultaneously invest in infrastructure for alternatives to imprisonment while continuing to advance the design-build process for a mega-jail disguised as a mental health hospital.** We believe that the McCarthy construction contract must be halted now in order to allow for these robust alternatives to be fully considered and implemented. As described by the February 12th Motion introduced by Supervisors Hahn and Ridley-Thomas, the Mental Health Treatment Center was *to be informed by research on mental health challenges experienced by justice-involved individuals, support a treatment-first approach, implement appropriate security measures, and work towards diversion to community based mental treatment.* **As public health workers, clinicians, and architects/planners, we do not believe the above-stated intention can be implemented through the project being considered on the site of Men's Central Jail. Thus, the Mental Health Treatment Center is doomed to function as a jail for the following reasons:**

- A large-scale **complex** is not conducive towards fostering improved mental health conditions. Large-scale complexes are not nimble enough to fulfill the varied mental health needs of a diverse population. Smaller models of care allow for people in mental health crisis to work with specialists who have the capacity to hold and honor each client's individuality and humanity, rather than relating to them as a number or an inmate.
- **One single centralized site** does not promote community or social support and contributes to isolation from neighborhoods, families, work, or other stability supporting health. In such a large county as Los Angeles, long traveling distances create significant barriers to visit loved ones who are all held in one place. Within the single-site model, individuals who are held at the MHTC would have limited contact with social support systems that are necessary for their immediate mental health and success after release.
- A requirement for criminal justice involvement will mean people will have to come through the criminal legal system in order to get care, and will have to also be 'released' through this system. This model continues to criminalize and punish people of color and low income people for the symptoms of mental illness, while creating conditions conducive to deterioration, not recovery. Public health research shows that when health services for incarcerated people, including mental health services, are primarily under the purview of law enforcement agencies rather than public health, behavioral health, or social service agencies, they are

consistently shown to be ineffective in supporting recovery from illnesses and can often exacerbate existing or lead to the development of negative health conditions.

- **Mental health care providers will be contracted to work with and within the legal system**, increasing the possibility for compromising the therapeutic alliance between provider and patient. When compliance is a determinant of the patient's freedom and ability to access the life-sustaining resource of community support, it becomes impossible for the patient to truly consent to treatment.
- **The role and involvement of law enforcement** in security, classification, or general oversight is currently unrestricted within the proposal leading to concerns around the impact of their presence on people with mental health needs. A sense of personal agency is critical for success in improving mental health conditions, and this will be stripped away with the creation of a large-scale complex that will involve multiple security standards.
- **Certification and building standards for construction would be granted by the Board of State and Community Corrections (BSCC)**, the agency empowered to certify on standards of imprisonment, rather than by standards of provision of mental health care that are needed for the design and construction of a suitable place of care. If this project is to be a treatment-first approach, it should be certified as a treatment facility by a public health agency, not certified as a jail by BSCC.

We applaud your previous courageous decision to move forward a different model for LA County, and we ask you to make that decision a reality. We have come too far to allow expediency or political convenience to push LA County residents experiencing mental illness back into jail.

Halt the design of the Mental Health Treatment Center, cancel the contract with McCarthy, and allow for a decentralized, community-based model to truly take root.

Sincerely,

Architects/Designers/Planners for Social Responsibility

Psychologists for Social Responsibility

Public Health Justice Collective