

Project Background: The Mental Health Services Oversight and Accountability Commission (MHSOAC) is exploring how California serves justice-involved adults with mental health needs. The goal of this project is to reduce the number of individuals with mental health needs who become involved with the criminal justice system, and improve outcomes for those in custody and released from custody.

To support this project, the MHSOAC is facilitating a series of public hearings, public engagement meetings and community forums, and conducting sites visits to understand challenges and solutions, identify needs and gaps, and explore opportunities to build on past and present initiatives with similar objectives.

Site Visit Summary: On September 21, 2016, Commissioners and MHSOAC staff visited the Los Angeles Twin Towers Correctional Facility, also known as the Twin Towers Jail.

The facility was selected for a site visit because it has the reputation of being the largest mental health facility in the United States. The jail has four levels of care reflecting a “step down” approach: inpatient hospitalization, high observation, moderate observation, and general population. Inmates in the high observation unit have a goal of 10 hours per week in group and individual therapy, along with medication. Those in the moderate observation unit receive medication and monthly meetings with clinicians. Care for the general population consists of medication management and follow-ups with clinicians.

<u>LA County Jail Daily Inmate Population Statistics</u>	
L.A. County Jails 2016 Average Daily Inmate Population (Jan –Jun):	16,653
Mental Health 2016 Average Daily Inmate Population (Jan –Jun):	4,130 or 24.8% of total
Average Daily Male Mental Health Inmate Population (2009-2015)	
2009:	2,052
2015:	3,084
+33% Increase	
Average Daily Female Mental Health Inmate Population (2009-2015)	
2009:	524
2015:	626
+16% Increase	
SOURCE: Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health Population Trends Report	

During the site visit, Commissioners and staff were escorted to and observed inmates in the moderate observation, high observation, and inpatient hospitalization areas of the jail.

The site visit also involved meetings with staff including the Assistant Sheriff and Chief of Custody Services Division. These administrators noted that over the years, the jail population has decreased but the proportion of inmates with mental health needs has increased. They discussed how addressing the complex needs of individuals with mental illness is challenging given staff vacancies, turnover, and available space within the facility. The difficulty in hiring and retaining clinicians was attributed to the lack of space for treatment and the stress of treating the acuity of illness in the jail environment. A lack of space to provide both individual and group therapy was identified.

“A significant challenge presented by providing a mental health program to over 4,000 individuals in the Los Angeles County Jail system is that the physical plant was never designed to house the mentally ill nor to provide treatment for them.” – Assistant Sheriff Kelly Harrington, Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department, in a letter to the Commission

Another challenge identified by jail administrators was the lack of time to stabilize and treat inmates prior to release. While some inmates serve lengthy sentences, the period of time from intake to release for others can be quite short, often only a few hours. This “churning” of individuals with complex, behavioral health needs was said to make it difficult (in some cases impossible) to complete thorough assessments of mental health history or current needs, provide effective treatment and develop appropriate discharge plans before release. It was expressed that clinicians do what they can to stabilize what imminent psychiatric conditions are present, but they often have to terminate treatment early because the inmate is ordered to be released. Jail administrators reported that a large percentage of those in need of care had not received mental health services prior to incarceration. If these inmates are not connected to services in the community to maintain treatment, it was reported that they often return to incarceration.

In an attempt to break the cycle of incarceration, inmates with mental health needs, as identified through screening processes during booking, are encouraged by jail staff to create a release plan. Jail staff involved in release planning work with the inmate and his or her treatment team to identify appropriate and available community-based resources that can include full service partnerships, housing, education and job training. However, it was noted that two major challenges with this planning is not knowing when an inmate will be released from custody and where the inmate will reside following his or her release to ensure direct linkage to an accessible local mental health provider.

Commissioners and Twin Tower Jail administrators alike acknowledged that jails are an inappropriate place for those with mental health needs to receive treatment, and yet recognized that the only treatment received for some in need occurs in a custody setting. Community-based alternatives to jails for those detained by law enforcement are an alternative option to incarceration and are being investigated as part of this project. The Commission’s project on mental health and criminal justice will continue to explore alternatives and the ways in which the concerns outlined by Twin Tower Jail staff and observations by Commissioners and staff represent information for identifying methods to improve in custody and release outcomes for those with mental health needs.