

# **Santa Rita Jail \$80M mental health expansion sparks protest**

By Lisa Fernandez

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[Santa Rita Jail](#)

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## **Community groups protest \$81 million mental health expansion of Santa Rita Jail**

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**OAKLAND, Calif. - Community groups are voicing their concerns over the mental health expansion at Santa Rita Jail, which is slated to cost \$80 million and has drawn questioning from a top state lawmaker.**

**About 75 members of the Care First Community Coalition rallied outside the Alameda County Administration Building on Tuesday morning to demand that Alameda County supervisors halt the expansion of the project - which has been debated now for nearly a decade - and invest \$171 million in a "continuum of care" that prevents criminalization and jail deaths.**

**"How can Alameda County justify spending \$27 million to fund the expansion of a jail with a track record of negligence and abuse?" said Joy George of Restore Oakland Inc. "We're sick and tired of hearing that there's no money for resources like permanent supportive housing and full service**

**partnerships. These asks are not aspirational, they are essential to providing stability and community safety."**

**None of the supervisors responded for comment early Tuesday morning.**

**Community members point to when Alameda County adopted the Care First Jails Last resolution in 2021, which stated that the county has a responsibility to prioritize the funding of behavioral health and social services.**

**Despite the resolution, Care First members are upset that funding for Santa Rita Jail continues to increase while funding for behavioral health services remain stagnant.**

**Still, the board of supervisors' agenda item last month noted that the county as a responsibility to comply with a federal decree to care for those with mental illness, which is why they need the remodel and expansion.**

**The fight over expanding Santa Rita Jail's mental health units is not new.**

### **[A look at the people who have died at Santa Rita Jail](#)**

Santa Rita Jail based in Dublin, Calif. has the highest number of inmate deaths in the Bay Area. KTVU takes an unprecedented look at who is dying and why.

**In 2015, the state awarded the county \$54.3 million for construction of a new mental health program and services unit at the jail, which would be added to the county's contribution of \$7.2 million, for a total project amount of \$61 million, according to county and state records. The money was supposed to build a mental health housing unit and remodel two other housing units.**

At the time, community groups, including the Ella Baker Center, protested that expansion, too.

Then-Lt. Jason Arbuckle told the supervisors' Public Protection Committee that the jail was built in 1989 and was not designed to treat or house people with mental illnesses.

"Clinical staff is scattered about the facility. It is not at a centralized location," Arbuckle said at the time.

In 2016, the late Supervisor Wilma Chan said she had some reservations about the jail project but voted for it because 1,100 incarcerated people are referred to the mental health wing every month and need to have the best services possible.

However, Chan sympathized with critics of the jail project, saying that, "So many social service programs have been cut in recent years that it caused a lot of incarceration that wasn't necessary."

Supervisor Keith Carson added during that meeting: "There are an increasing number of people at the jail who need emotional, psychological and behavioral care and we have to respond to them and provide that care."

Carson said the improvement project "is not the perfect model, but it's a step to a model that's more humane."

Over the years, the costs have risen, but the debate has remained largely the same. Should mentally ill people receive care in jail or out of custody in a psychiatric community facility?

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Dozens of residents and grassroots groups opposed the spending, saying the jail shouldn't be turned into a psychiatric institution and that mental health is better treated in the community, not in a cell.

**What's changed is the scope and the cost of the project.**

**Now, the county is proposing a separate stand-alone building at an additional cost to the county of \$19 million, bringing the total cost to \$81 million, records show.**

**The county's portion of this increase has risen to \$26 million, which the board of supervisors approved on May 9.**

**The state would not put in any more funds.**

**Still, following the supervisors' approval of this increase in May, State Sen. Nancy Skinner, who chairs the Senate's Budget and Fiscal Review Committee, wrote a letter to the Department of Finance director, asking to move this budget request hearing to August and answer her questions before moving forward.**

She asked how this expansion can help meet the conditions of federal oversight of the jail, known as the Babu consent decree, as it pertains to mental health care, what types of long-term living units will be available for people with serious mental illness while they are incarcerated, what the new staffing plan will be, and who will run this new unit, the sheriff or Alameda County Behavioral Health Care Services, as some examples.

The federal oversight came about as a result of a legal settlement stemming from the "cruel and unusual" treatment of people with mental disabilities, specifically by locking them up in isolation for long periods of time.

A KTVU analysis in 2019 showed there was a high correlation between in-custody suicides and those people who had been locked in isolation. Today, many of the in-custody deaths stem from drug overdosing and people not getting the proper medical care, including mental health treatment, according to KTVU reporting.

A total of 67 people have died at Santa Rita Jail since 2014.

Community members don't want any more in-custody deaths, and they argue that housing mentally ill people in jail isn't the answer.

"An \$80 million expansion that is designed to house a significant number of behavioral health staff, at a time when the county is struggling to hire those staff and the jail population is decreasing, makes little fiscal sense," said John Lindsay-Poland of the American Friends Service Committee. "It is also tone-deaf: the \$27 million that the County will use to front the cost of construction would be better spent on building permanent supportive housing."

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*EDITOR'S NOTE: Reporter Lisa Fernandez's spouse works in Skinner's office.*