

MEDIA ADVISORY FOR: Wednesday, May 24, 2023 at 10 AM

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**Inhumane Conditions Prompt Picket Line and Rally Outside Men’s Central Jail,
LA County Jail Healthcare Workers Will Tell Federal Judge Dean Pregerson:
‘You Need to Take Another Jail Tour’**

Union Workers Will Propose Accompanying Judge on Unannounced Jail Tour to See True Scale of Overcrowding and Understaffing Crisis in Correctional Facilities

LOS ANGELES – LA County correctional healthcare workers will picket directly outside Men’s Central Jail on Wednesday morning to propose that they accompany Federal Judge Dean Pregerson on a second, unannounced tour of the facility.

Judge Pregerson recently toured the jail on an official excursion managed by county officials. But correctional health services staff, all members of labor union SEIU 721, claim his visit was too orchestrated to be effective. **They want Judge Pregerson to take another, unannounced look in order to see the true scale overcrowding and understaffing – and speak directly with frontline staff. Only true observation, interviews and assessment of both inmate and staff working conditions can produce meaningful solutions that will fundamentally address systemic problems throughout LA County’s jails.**

WHO: Members of SEIU 721 working at Correctional Health Services (**CHS**) – **a division of the LA County Department of Health Services (DHS)** – including Nurse Practitioners, Dental Hygienists, Ultrasound Technicians, Radiologists, Psychologists, Social Workers, Housekeeping Staff, Inmate Crew Leaders and more.

WHAT: Picket Line and Media Availability Outside Men’s Central Jail to Tell Federal Judge Dean Pregerson: “You Need to Take Another Jail Tour”

WHEN: Wednesday, May 24, 2023 at 10 AM

WHERE: Men’s Central Jail, 441 Bauchet St, Los Angeles, CA 90012

VISUALS: Union members (many in uniforms or official work attire) will rally outside Men’s Central Jail carrying picket signs with slogans such as “Union to Judge Pregerson: We’ll Take You On A Real Jail Tour,” “Healthcare Workers Demand Real Solutions That Save Lives,” and “Respect Us – Protect Us – Pay Us.” Jail healthcare staff will be available for interviews.

BACKGROUND:

LA County's Integrated Correctional Health System is a mandated program with "discretionary service levels" managed by the county's Department of Health Services, with more than 2,000 budgeted positions. Most workers in the health units of county jails are members of the SEIU 721. The workforce is diverse and stretched thin. Presently one in three positions are vacant and staff are overextended to address the needs of an overall jail population that routinely exceeds capacity on any given day by at least 20%, with medical dorm beds well over 200% of capacity (for example 80 people in a 48-person dorm).

These workers show up each day to provide healthcare to incarcerated individuals, many of whom have yet to be tried in a court of law and are in jail solely because of their inability to make bail. Regardless of their circumstances, they all rely on the members of SEIU 721 for care — including Nurse Practitioners, Dental Hygienists, Ultrasound Technicians, Radiologists, Psychologists, Social Workers, Housekeeping Staff, Inmate Crew Leaders, Medical Case Workers and more. This is the same workforce that kept the frontline intact throughout the jail system during the COVID pandemic because they are compassionate and believe that inmate healthcare is an essential right.

Currently, many of these staff are being denied a new "recruitment and retention" bonus being paid to many other correctional health staff — a disincentive for these excluded groups to stay in a working environment in which the health and safety of both inmates and staff is in jeopardy during day, evening and night shifts. The new bonus should be extended to all CHS/DHS and LASD correctional health employees.

Correctional health is a specialty of healthcare, and the acuity of often long-neglected conditions this workforce sees and treats requires skills that no nursing school or private community hospital can produce. Working "on the inside" requires thick skin, decorum and the capacity to treat even the most foreboding of clients with respect and compassion.

These healthcare and support staff must learn to navigate a hierarchical, safety-oriented culture and promote dignity when the conditions they work in — like extreme overcrowding, hygiene issues, sanitation challenges, as well as systemic and personal despair — can feel like fighting an uphill battle. It is not uncommon for staff to fight back nightmares during their sleep as the vicarious trauma takes its toll during their waking hours. With suicides among inmates amongst the highest in the nation, workers often feel powerless, and yet — even during the full-scale lock down of COVID — they continued to show up to work, and still do.

LA County is well aware of the personal sacrifices that healthcare workers make. After being chastised by US District Judge Kimberly J. Mueller — who indicated that "tight labor markets do not relieve defendants of their constitutional obligations" to the Eighth Amendment — the county has decided to pay a one-year temporary "recruitment and retention" bonus to retain key staff servicing inmate care areas that were under judicial review.

The union takes issue with the slapdash and divisive way that candidates for the bonus were identified and notified. SEIU 721 strongly asserts that the proposed duration of the bonus is simply to respond to corrective action measures that are “corrective” in name only. The bonus must be equitable to all healthcare workers – including blue collar classifications that are critical to the ongoing sanitary and functional operation of correctional health, such as ensuring potable water and flushing toilets.

The staffing situation pre-pandemic was bad enough. In 2017, the jails suffered from an estimated 450 vacancies. Today, there are 721 vacant positions, nearly one third of the 2,268 budgeted positions in the LA County jails.

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