

# Los Angeles Times

## Editorial

### Use state funds first on alternatives to jail

June 7, 2015

By **[THE TIMES EDITORIAL BOARD](#)** *contact the reporter*

[A California board](#) with \$500 million to award for jail construction is set on Wednesday to begin a two-month process under which counties can apply for the money. Perhaps not coincidentally, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors [has before it on Tuesday](#) reports from the sheriff and other officials on their plans for a \$2-billion replacement project for Men's Central Jail, as approved in principle by the supervisors a year ago. The timing might appear perfect. It's not. Both processes are moving too quickly and are too likely to result in construction of expensive new jails built around outmoded thinking, outdated circumstances and nonexistent needs.

The inmate population in California has changed drastically in the last several years, first due to a continuing drop in crime, then because of state laws adopted in 2011 that made counties and their jails responsible for many low-level felons who previously had been housed in the state prison system. The Board of State and Community Corrections grew out of that process of “criminal justice realignment” and is charged, in part, with making sure counties have what they need to handle their new responsibilities.

But the point of realignment was never to merely dump the state's problems onto the counties, nor to empty overcrowded state prisons just by moving the inmates to overcrowded county jails. The point was to reduce reliance on incarceration as a cure-all for crime and to allow the

local governments that bore the expenses of policing and prosecuting to also make decisions about how best to reduce recidivism and reduce the burden that crime places on their communities.

Realignment, then, would not be furthered but rather undermined by a large program of county jail construction. Such a program would make it all too easy for counties to shirk their obligation to focus on treatment and other alternatives intended to prevent people from returning to crime after they serve their sentences.

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State board officials argue that their marching orders are to allocate money to build any number of criminal justice facilities, including treatment centers, day reporting centers and other alternatives to incarceration — precisely those projects needed to make realignment a success. And that's great, as far as it goes. Los Angeles and the state's 57 other counties need that kind of help.

But the money also is available for jails. And by including in its process such a rapid turnaround time for counties to put in their bids, and by offering the money on a use-it-or-lose-it basis, the board is encouraging counties to quickly grab the funds and move forward with the projects they know best: jails. The board should provide a longer application period and assistance to counties in assessing their needs.

Meanwhile, the need for jail beds has shrunk even further, most dramatically with the voters' [adoption six months ago of Proposition 47](#). That initiative converted six felonies to misdemeanors and thus shortened the potential jail time for many thousands of inmates, decreasing the need for traditional lockup but increasing the need for alternative programs and facilities.

The legislation authorizing the construction funding was signed more than a year before Proposition 47 was adopted. The money should be offered, and counties should be able to apply for it, only after they have had sufficient time to fully assess the new criminal justice landscape, including their reduced need for jail beds and the savings they are sure to realize from no longer prosecuting as many felonies.

And Los Angeles, as the county that sends about a third of all of California's inmates to state prisons and local jails, should not seek the funding for its massive Men's Central Jail replacement project without making full use of programs that can reduce the jail population and thus decrease the size and the cost of building, financing, managing and maintaining the jail.

The county should, for example, finalize and implement Dist. Atty. Jackie Lacey's [plan for diversion](#) of many accused and convicted people whose crimes are a consequence of their mental illness and who can and should be treated as patients rather than inmates. It should authorize the sheriff to [release people awaiting trial](#) if they are eligible for bail but simply don't have the money. And it should get some greater experience with Proposition 47, and better understand its effect on the need for jail space, before the supervisors make expensive decisions about what to build and how much to pay.