

October 28, 2020

Dear San Mateo County Supervisors and County Manager:

The People's Alliance of San Mateo County (PASMOC) stands in solidarity with the masses of people around the country rising up to protest police violence against Black people. We share the perspective of the Movement for Black Lives, that, "The deaths of Black people by law enforcement and vigilantes is the result of centuries-old anti-Black attitudes flanked by prejudicial legislation and a "Wild Wild West" approach to law and order meant to intimidate Black people and control our behavior." The PASMOC joins the growing calls around the nation to defund law enforcement, to end police militarization, and to invest real resources in community-based solutions to systemic inequalities in health, safety, education, housing, and employment.

**I. Our San Mateo County communities are not immune to police violence or harm**

The current protests have spread all over the country, from large cities to suburbs and rural areas. This reflects the pervasiveness of the problem in American society and, we hope, a new stage in the long-running fight against racism in our criminal justice system and white supremacy more broadly. We are encouraged to see that residents in cities across San Mateo County are also standing up and marching to say, "Enough!" San Mateo County is not immune to the problems afflicting the nation and will need to do our part to dismantle systems of injustice. We have our own history of racial discrimination in housing, in education, in health and in the policing of Black and Brown communities.

While Black people make up less than 1% of the population in San Mateo County, they account for 11% of all arrests and 27% of those killed or seriously injured by the Sheriff's Department. Similarly, Latinx people make up 18% of the population in SMC but account for 43% of arrests and 47% of those killed or seriously injured by the Sheriff's Department. Our Sheriff's Department has a higher rate of use of deadly force than 87% of police departments in the state of California, and showed more racial bias in arrests and use of deadly force than 92% of all other departments in the state. Unfortunately, while we do not have disaggregated data about Pacific Islanders specifically, anecdotal evidence indicates that they are also disproportionately targeted for similar treatment by law enforcement in the county. The 2014 killing of Errol Chang, the 2018 killings of Ramsey Saad, Warren Ragudo and Chinedu Okobi by officers, and our Sheriff's continued collaboration with United States Immigration and Customs

Enforcement (ICE), attest to the racialized violence by law enforcement in our communities.

We are obligated to confront this legacy and the ways it continues to shape all of our lives.

On Tuesday, June 23, 2020, the San Mateo County Board of Supervisors voted unanimously to adopt a resolution supporting the Black Lives Matter movement and reaffirming the County of San Mateo's commitment to racial equity. At that same meeting, however, the Supervisors also approved \$1 million to purchase new tasers for the Sheriff's Department, the exact weapon that was used in the killing of Okobi. The Supervisors also approved a \$12 million budget increase for the Sheriff, while cutting funding for various social service programs. A resolution affirming that Black lives matter is symbolic and entirely devoid of meaning unless it is coupled with concrete and proactive steps to further the cause of racial justice and anti-racism in our county. After the community pushed back and pointed out the glaring contradiction between the Board's adoption of the BLM resolution and the subsequent approval of its budget, members of the Board of Supervisors committed to doing better and studying and enacting concrete policy changes.<sup>1</sup> We are here to ensure that the Supervisors follow through with that promise and move with deliberate speed to take meaningful action.

As the Board recognized on August 4, 2020, racism is a public health crisis. A crisis requires swift and decisive action to remedy the harm. Below, PASMCM has outlined a number of actionable steps the County should take in order to demonstrate that it values Black lives and that it is committed to achieving equity for all its residents.

## **II. There are numerous ways we can immediately alter the role policing plays in our communities.**

We are encouraged by the recent [decision](#) by the Sheriff's office to ban carotid restraint even as we realize this is just one small step in the direction of fundamentally changing how we think about and work towards public safety and personal security for all. There is still much to do if we are serious about moving away from punitive approaches to mental health, homelessness, school safety, immigration, and economic inequality. We can no longer expect police to be the frontline responders to a multitude of social problems for which they

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<sup>1</sup>This County voted to recognize Black Lives Matter. Then it OK 310 more tasers.  
<https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-06-27/silicon-valley-tasers-while-recognizing-black-lives-matter>

are not trained nor intended to address. This is a disservice to the public and an acute danger to communities of color.

PASMC has identified several immediate changes that could be implemented throughout cities and the County in order to recalibrate the presence and function of law enforcement in our communities. Some immediate changes for which the PASMC calls include, but are not limited to:

### **1. Shift funds away from law enforcement to broader social and community services.**

The goal should be to gradually and strategically reallocate resources, funding, and responsibility away from law enforcement agencies and toward community-based models of safety, support, prevention, and life-affirming resources. This strategy acknowledges that the majority of crime occurs due to poverty and the inability to meet basic human needs. By diverting money away from the police and toward services that actually meet basic human needs, less crime will occur. Basic human needs are best served through the provision of affordable housing, job opportunities, well-funded schools and hospitals, mental health resources, after-school programs, extracurricular programs, safe spaces for the community to congregate, crisis intervention, addiction services, etc.

Rather than armed police, mental health providers, social workers, religious leaders, educators, neighbors, victim/survivor advocates, and the like, should be called to resolve issues that arise in the community. Examples of other jurisdictions that have recently taken steps to divert money away from law enforcement in response to cries from the community:

- a. The Cities of San Francisco and Los Angeles both recently vowed to replace police officers with trained unarmed professionals to respond to calls for help on noncriminal matters involving mental health, the homeless population, school discipline issues, and neighbor disputes. Los Angeles will also redirect \$250 million away from police toward healthcare and jobs programs.
- b. BART pledged to divert \$2 million away from sworn officers and fare inspectors, and instead spend it on “unarmed ambassadors,” which they have identified as uniformed staff who patrol the trains and make riders feel more welcome.
- c. The City of Berkeley recently approved a partial defund of its police department, and agreed to move forward with a plan that would significantly shift the responsibilities of its police department. The most unique piece of the plan is a proposal to stop using police officers to make traffic stops and instead use unarmed city employees. Furthermore, police would also stop responding to homeless outreach and mental health crisis management calls.

These duties would be transferred to a newly-created unarmed community safety coalition.

- d. The City of Eugene, Oregon funds a program called Crisis Assistance Helping Out on the Street (“CAHOOTS”). CAHOOTS provides a mobile crisis intervention van that responds to non-criminal situations, such as substance abuse, mental/emotional crisis, welfare checks, and dispute facilitation. They provide assessment, intervention and transport to services as needed. Less than 1% of the calls to which CAHOOTS responds end up requiring police assistance.

## **2. Cease Sheriff Bolanos’ ongoing collaboration with ICE.**

Our County must stop transfers to ICE. The practice punishes people who have served a sentence for the crimes they committed twice, and is unduly punitive. Data from the San Mateo County Coalition for Immigrant Rights shows that 51 people were transferred to ICE in 2018, at least 42 in 2019 and 4 this year during the pandemic. These individuals were almost exclusively people of color. During the same timeframe, San Mateo County ranked ninth out of the 58 California counties for the highest number of voluntary transfers. These numbers may actually be higher, since there exists a lack of transparency by the Sheriff’s Department about how many transfers are made to ICE annually. This data must be disclosed to the public.

The collateral consequences of a criminal record and justice system involvement are universally harmful, and Counties need not voluntarily subject those without legal status to further punishment and disenfranchisement. Sheriff Bolanos should immediately halt all transfers and notifications to ICE now, as has already been done in Santa Clara County and San Francisco Counties.

On April 23, 2020, Sheriff Bolanos admitted to transferring two San Mateo County residents, who were eligible for release, to ICE during the COVID-19 pandemic. For many, this is a death sentence. Right now, the Otay Mesa ICE detention center in California has the highest number of COVID-19 cases in the country, with over 100 people testing positive. People in detention across California have engaged in hunger strikes, sharing stories of crowded rooms and medical mistreatment. Nevertheless, Sheriff Bolanos has chosen to collaborate with ICE, tearing apart our immigrant communities and subjecting countless people to heightened risk in the midst of a global public health crisis.

## **3. Eliminate law enforcement presence in schools throughout the County.**

Funding for police in schools should be reallocated to alternative methods, such as restorative justice strategies and mental health professionals, to address conflict and behavior in schools. An ongoing law enforcement presence at our

community schools is injurious to the educational environment and disproportionately and negatively impacts students of color, and particularly Black students. The school-to-prison pipeline--a disturbing national trend wherein children are funneled out of public schools and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems<sup>2</sup> including by calling police and using court referrals as a means of disciplining students at school--is fortified by constant police presence on school campuses.

School safety is, and always should be, a priority; however, the presence of police at schools does not make campuses safer. Rather, this widely accepted practice has extremely detrimental effects for students of color, who are disproportionately surveilled, policed, and disciplined at school. Law enforcement methods are antithetical to the educational environment and the needs of children. Discontinuing law enforcement contracts with school districts and instead investing in mental health professionals, counselors, higher teacher salaries, after-school programs, extracurricular activities, and community engagement programs would be a much better use of school district funds and a more effective way to keep students, staff, and faculty safe at school. Additionally, restorative justice models have been proven to strengthen campus communities, make students feel safer, prevent bullying, reduce student conflicts, and reduce suspension and expulsion rates.

Moreover, the community ought to participate in envisioning what school safety would look like, and engage students, parents, faculty and administration, community leaders, and community based organizations in this conversation. Community youth organizations could create a needs assessment for youth safety and survey various stakeholders.<sup>3</sup> While we do not see a need for school resource officers, should the community decide otherwise, there should be clear policies, guidelines, and transparency around the operation of police in community schools. First and foremost, there should be a uniform grievance procedure to report complaints about school resource officer encounters and an official public repository tracking complaints against school resource officers.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the County (and local city jurisdictions) should collaborate with the various school districts to revisit each district's memorandum of understanding

<sup>2</sup> ACLU definition on school-to-prison pipeline

<https://www.aclu.org/issues/racial-justice/race-and-inequality-education/school-prison-pipeline#:~:text=The%20ACLU%20is%20committed%20to%20juvenile%20and%20criminal%20justice%20systems.&text=The%20ACLU%20believes%20that%20children%20should%20be%20educated%2C%20not%20incarcerated.>

<sup>3</sup> Example survey from MERCED YLI youth programs (Girls and Woman of Color and Rise and Lift)

<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScxw5eEZZ5YsQETJtI8C0ISkmE27LFPHbgliUESwTtEmQLMHA/viewformhttps://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScxw5eEZZ5YsQETJtI8C0ISkmE27LFPHbgliUESwTtEmQLMHA/viewform>

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Yanira Serrano Program, item C resource line:

[https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScZNYuH4PRrZf0x8KtLCqCVL6eMrMsrafiTIKJ0E9fPwuj\\_PQ/viewform](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScZNYuH4PRrZf0x8KtLCqCVL6eMrMsrafiTIKJ0E9fPwuj_PQ/viewform)

(MOU) with the Sheriff's Department (and any local police departments) to ensure uniformity across the various MOUs. Of particular concern for this uniformity check should be a mandate in the MOU that law enforcement provide a detailed report with interactions with students, including the number of home visits each semester, the number of parent conversations each semester, and the number of formal police investigations each semester.

Lastly, the County should begin the process of shutting down the juvenile hall facility in San Mateo. The funds that are presently allocated to operating the juvenile hall and the facilities that currently house the youth should be repurposed to further education, after-school programs, mental health resources, extracurricular opportunities, post-secondary opportunities, etc. The reallocation of these funds and an investment into life affirming resources and services best serve youth, families, and communities. Juvenile justice facilities disproportionately cage youth of color, where educational supports are severely lacking and negative outcomes are only accelerated.

**4. Cancel the [order](#) for 310 new tasers at a cost of almost \$1 million and invest these funds in community-led alternatives to policing such as [CAHOOTS](#) (refer to subsection II(1)).**

On June 24, 2020, the County Board of Supervisors approved a budget allocating \$1 million to purchasing new tasers. Oakland Police Officer Michael Leonasio helped Oakland Police implement TASERS. When asked whether he'd implement TASERS today, he said, "I'd have a hard time justifying it." Studies show that police departments equipped with TASERS do not show a reduction in the use of lethal force.<sup>5</sup> A [2011 Justice Department report found](#) officers resorted to stun guns too quickly in situations that could be de-escalated with words or softer tactics. Tasers aren't replacing guns, they're being used in addition to, and more broadly than, guns. Reuters has documented [over 1,000 deaths due to tasers](#), and [3 people were killed by tasers in San Mateo County within 10 months](#) (Chinedu Okobi, Warren Ragudo, Ramzi Saad). Because the bar for using "less-lethal" weapons is low, tragedy is more likely to result. Current "limited use" policies enacted after 2019 are not the same as de-escalation.

**III. There are also longer term solutions that the County should adopt.**

Some long-term policies that the County should begin to consider and develop:

1. *Reinvestment priorities.* Develop comprehensive plans with community partners for a transition to community-based alternatives to policing. Emphasis should be on communities disproportionately affected by

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<sup>5</sup> "Tasers Might Not Reduce Lethal Force Incidents or Injuries to Suspects After All" Stanford Criminal Justice Center (2015)  
<https://law.stanford.edu/press/tasers-might-not-reduce-lethal-force-incidents-injuries-suspects/>

policing and immigration enforcement. As an example, Hayward will establish a city-wide, participatory committee that will help dictate how to allocate 10% of the police budget to non-police, community-based services.

2. *Election rules.* Elected officials and candidates for office should take clear public positions about reform of our local criminal justice institutions. To the extent constitutionally permitted, candidates for political office should be barred or limited in the amount of money they can fundraise from law enforcement and police lobbies.
3. *Civilian oversight commission.* Related to policing and public safety with robust language accessibility. This commission should handle community complaints about policing and law enforcement policies. County and City staff should research effective civilian oversight commissions including, consulting with their colleagues in jurisdictions where these types of commissions have been the most successful.
4. *Data collection and evaluation.* Commission an independent evaluation of policing, race and socio-economic status in the county. This evaluation should be updated annually. Additionally, the County should maintain a public database of complaints against law enforcement, including making public documentation of harassment, brutality, and killings.
5. *Secure housing.* We know that stable housing is a key determinant of criminal justice outcomes. People experiencing homelessness are both more likely to have been incarcerated and more likely to face future involvement with the criminal justice system.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

The policy suggestions that we have outlined above are not comprehensive. However, these policies should be a jumping off point for the County and city governments as you take concrete action to back your symbolic proclamations in support of the Movement for Black Lives. We encourage you to engage in a robust ongoing dialogue with the community around these issues, and look forward to the opportunity to meet with you personally to discuss these demands further.

Sincerely,

The Undersigned Organizations, as members of the People's Alliance of San Mateo County

4 North County

Community Legal Services in East Palo Alto

Democratic Socialists of America - Peninsula

Faith in Action Bay Area

Housing for All Burlingame

Legal Aid Society of San Mateo County

One Redwood City

One San Mateo

Pacifica Housing for All

Pacifica Progressive Alliance

SEIU 521

Unite Here Local 2

Urban Habitat

Youth Leadership Institute

Youth United for Community Action

Contact: [peoplesalliancesanmateocounty@gmail.com](mailto:peoplesalliancesanmateocounty@gmail.com)