

LOCAL NEWS • News

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3rd attempt to overturn San Bernardino County fire tax set for March 2024 election

Special tax first enacted in 2006 pays for 19% of county's fire protection services



A San Bernardino County firefighter opens the roof during an apartment building fire in Upland on Monday, Jan. 17, 2022. (File photo by Watchara Phomicinda, The Press-Enterprise/SCNG)



By **BEAU YARBROUGH** | byarbrough@scng.com | San

Bernardino Sun

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Some San Bernardino County voters will get the chance to cut their taxes — and possibly their firefighting services — next year.

For the third time in four years, voters on March 5 will consider repealing a special tax that supports the county [Fire Protection District's FP-5 service zone](#) that covers large swaths of the High Desert and mountains as well as several cities in the San Bernardino Valley.

At their Oct. 24 meeting, county supervisors voted 4-0, with First District Supervisor Paul Cook absent, to refer to voters an initiative to repeal the tax.

First authorized in 2006 at a rate of \$117 per parcel, along with an annual 3% cost of living increase, the annual tax had risen to \$166.84 per parcel as of 2022, [according to the proposed ballot language.](#)

[Originally much smaller in area,](#) the [Fire Protection District now covers large parts of San Bernardino County,](#) including much of the High Desert, except where cities such as Victorville and Barstow have their own fire departments, and most of the San Bernardino Mountains. County fire also provides service in San Bernardino, Upland, Bloomington and Grand Terrace.

“Thousands of parcels in the Mojave Desert are being taxed approximately \$160 per year for which they will never receive services as it is barren land,” initiative backer Al Vogler, who has long been active in High Desert politics, wrote in an email. “Nothing to burn including brush or structures.”

Proponents of the repeal also object to the way FP-5 has been expanded by the Board of Supervisors over the years, imposing [new taxes on residents of San Bernardino in 2016, Upland in 2017](#) and elsewhere without voters getting to weigh in directly.

“Simply put, it is an example of taxation without representation,” Vogler wrote.

Repeal backers are making a third attempt to overturn the tax.

In November 2020, the first attempt to repeal the tax, Measure U, [got 48% of the vote](#). The next attempt, June 2022’s Measure Z, [passed with 58% of the vote](#), but [legal challenges have stopped it from being implemented](#).

“I’ll wait to see how much more tax money will be spent by the Board of Supervisors to again fight in favor of FP-5,” Vogler wrote.

Proponents of the new ballot initiative gathered 11,255 signatures by Aug. 29. A random sampling of 500 of them by the Registrar of Voters office predicted that 8,441 of the signatures were valid — more than 110% of the required number of valid signatures from the service zone to qualify for the ballot.

Last week, supervisors accepted the results and referred the initiative to voters.

“We’re not agreeing on this item,” Fifth District Supervisor Joe Baca Jr. said after the vote. “We’re just putting the item on the ballot for a vote of the people. The people are ultimately going to decide.”

The [issue will be put before voters on March 5](#), the same ballot as the [2024 presidential primary election](#).

The tax raises \$46.5 million annually, according to a [report created by county staff for the supervisors](#). That’s equal to 19% of the Fire Protection District’s 2023-24 budget.

Voter approval of the repeal “would result in less fire protection, less service to the public,” Fire Chief Dan Munsey told the board on Oct. 24. “We are a special district, we are not a department of the county. Thus we are not guaranteed any sort of funding. ... Sometimes, you can only cut so far before you have to close a fire station.”



SCAG awards \$2.5 million for innovative approaches to housing



By Steve Lambert
The 20/20 Network
11/01/2023 at 05:36 AM

Los Angeles – The Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG) Regional Council on Thursday, October 5, approved allocation of \$2.5 million to six projects in the Inland Empire that support increased housing production, sustainable land-use strategies and multimodal communities.

1 Photos

In all, \$12.3 million was awarded to 22 projects across the six-county SCAG region. Funds come from the state's Regional Early Action Planning (REAP 2.0) grant program and Senate Bill 1. The bulk of that competitive grant funding – just over \$8 million – is programmed through SCAG's Housing Infill on Public and Private Lands (HIPP) Pilot Program. The remaining \$4.3 million awarded today is programmed through SCAG's Sustainable Communities Program – Civic Engagement, Equity and Environmental Justice (SCP CEEJ) call. The money itself is coming from a combination of the state's Regional Early Action Planning (REAP) 2.0 grant program and Senate Bill 1.

These two funding programs are part of SCAG's larger REAP 2.0 program, designed to implement Connect SoCal, SCAG's regional plan for the future of Southern California, by supporting integrated and transformative planning and implementation activities that realize the region's mobility, land use, housing and environmental goals.

"We congratulate these awardees for the innovative approaches they're taking in addressing housing and land-use across the Inland Empire and Southern California and applaud the collaboration and hard work that went into securing this critical funding," said Curt Hagman, First Vice President of SCAG's Regional Council and a San Bernardino County Supervisor.

The Inland Empire awardees were:

HIPP Awardees:

San Bernardino County Transportation Authority/San Bernardino County Council of Governments. Public Land-to-Residential Project--Inventory, Analysis & Toolkit for Workforce and Teacher Housing (\$720,000). This project includes a comprehensive assessment of public lands in San Bernardino County to identify sites ready and available for residential development. It also includes a toolkit to help public agencies use the Surplus Land Act to make sites available for affordable housing development with a focus on educators and the regional workforce.

City of Rialto. Catalytic Housing Initiative for Downtown Rialto (\$193,875). This project will accelerate development of affordable housing on public and private lands in Rialto's downtown by identifying site-specific constraints and solutions for utilities, financing and residential and mixed-use development. This initiative will include details such as land-use composition, total square footage of different uses, number of units, unit size and number of parking spaces, potential social services resources and developer relationships. There is an anticipation of issuing up to three Request for Proposals (RFPs) for the development of infill sites during the project expenditure period.

City of Riverside. Missing Middle Prototype Plans for Infill Housing Sites (\$500,000) This project will expand mid-scale housing stock through prototype plans for infill development sites. The project will include options for ministerial-approval-ready, 100% construction level drawings and supporting calculations for two to four-unit clustered and low-rise infill residential projects, which can be used by developers as a means of improving efficiency through streamlining the permit process.

SCP CEEEJ Awardees:

City of Jurupa Valley: Pedley Town Center Plan – Implementation (\$478,894). This project will result in the development of mixed-use zoning in the Pedley Town Center Plan area, accelerating infill, mixed-use, affordable and/or commercial development near a Metrolink station, reducing vehicle-miles traveled.

City of Moreno Valley: Pedestrian Access Plan (\$294,018). This project will develop a citywide Pedestrian Access Plan that will lay out the pedestrian routes to access major employment centers, shopping centers, regional transit centers, schools and residential neighborhoods. It also will identify non-Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliant locations throughout the city and provide safe routes for pedestrians and other vulnerable road users such as people with disabilities, older adults and children.

San Bernardino County Transportation Authority / San Bernardino Council of Governments. Active Transportation Priority Projects Outreach and Engagement (\$294,765). This project will leverage outreach and community engagement to identify priority active transportation projects and inform planning efforts. Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice is co-awardee.

As the metropolitan planning organization representing six counties, 191 cities and a population of nearly 19 million people, SCAG has a critical role in addressing the housing crisis and climate change, and helping local jurisdictions overcome barriers to build more housing.

SAN GABRIEL MOUNTAINS

Biden sending official to hear views on monument

Public input sought on proposal to expand site designated by Obama



Zaid Martinez, 2, left, and his siblings Jair, 10, and Jamie, 7, of Bellflower play in the San Gabriel River along the East Fork of the Angeles National Forest in 2021. The area is part of the San Gabriel Mountains National Monument. SARAH REINGEWIRTZ — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



Chantry Flat, a hiking and picnic spot north of Arcadia and Sierra Madre closed for several years, is proposed for the San Gabriel Mountains National Monument. PHOTO BY TREVOR STAMP

BY STEVE SCAUZILLO

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The White House is sending a top-level cabinet member who oversees the U.S. Forest Service to the San Gabriel Valley this week to hear from the public as to whether President Joe Biden should expand the San Gabriel Mountains National Monument.

Homer Wilkes, undersecretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture for natural resources and environment, will listen to a discussion about adding historical sites from the Great Hiking Era of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, plus areas that contain ancient tribal relics. Both were left out of the monument declared by President Barack Obama on Oct. 10, 2014.

The public is invited to hear from Wilkes and Jennifer Eberlien, regional forester for the U.S. Forest Service's Pacific Southwest Region, as well as Roman Torres, supervisor of the 700,000-acre Angeles National Forest, which includes the monument.

All three are making a rare public appearance in Southern California at the meeting on Tuesday at the California Army National Guard Building in Azusa.

“It is a chance for the community to speak directly to the Biden administration,” said Daniel Rossman, California deputy director of The Wilderness Society and a Pasadena resident. “The fact that they are coming is a testament to growing community support that has been building since 2014.”

Biden nominated Wilkes as undersecretary in 2021, and he was confirmed by the Senate on Feb. 8, 2022. The veteran administrator with the USDA has a history of working on conservation and restoration of public lands. In 2010 Wilkes oversaw the cleanup of the Gulf of Mexico after the vast BP oil spill, caused when the oil drilling rig Deepwater Horizon exploded and sank.

As undersecretary, Wilkes has been meeting with senators from New Jersey, Illinois and, recently, Nevada, and providing grant money for forest projects, including \$4 million for post-wildfire restoration at the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest in Nevada.

Support for expanding the San Gabriel Mountains National Monument comes from 55 elected officials, including resolutions of support passed by the cities of Alhambra, Monterey Park, Santa Clarita, South Pasadena and Glendale. Support also comes from the Fernandeano Tataviam Band of Mission Indians, the Gabrieleño Band of Mission Indians-Kizh Nation, and the Gabrieleño-Tongva tribe.

Last month, Gov. Gavin Newsom wrote to Biden requesting that he use his powers to expand the national monument, the U.S. Forest Service reported.

Twin bills from Rep. Judy Chu, D-Pasadena, and Sen. Alex Padilla, D-Calif., introduced in May propose adding 109,167 acres of Angeles National Forest land to the 346,179-acre San Gabriel Mountains National Monument, an increase of about one-third. The monument includes 342,177 acres of the Angeles National Forest and 4,002 acres of neighboring San Bernardino National Forest.

The bills would also designate more than 30,000 acres of protected wilderness and add 45.5 miles to the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System.

Both legislators wrote letters asking Biden to bypass congressional approval and add to the monument, using the parameters in their bills. The president could do so by signing a declaration using the Antiquities Act of 1906. The president has the authority to preserve natural and historic places via that 1906 law, first used by Teddy Roosevelt to preserve open space in perpetuity.

If Biden did so, he would prevent new roads or mining on the protected land, preserving it for habitat and recreation.

The president wants to make sure the community is behind the idea, said Chu on Wednesday.

“This is part of the process to extend a national monument,” Chu said. “I think it is a very good sign. It shows we are making progress on this issue.”

Just before Obama came to the San Gabriel Valley to sign the proclamation nine years ago, some of the most historic and most-used trails in the southwestern part of the Angeles National Forest were removed from the monument map, to the dismay of Chu, environmental groups and local cities.

The current expansion would add southwestern sections of the Angeles National Forest to the monument, including areas north of Sylmar and east of the Newhall Pass. It would include the Arroyo Seco, a historic tributary of the Los Angeles River running through Pasadena, as well as the Tujunga Wash.

A key addition is Chantry Flat, a popular hiking and picnic spot north of Arcadia and Sierra Madre that has attracted thousands of visitors on weekends but has been closed for several years due to damage from rainstorms and lack of resources to make repairs.

Also included in the proposed expansion is the site of Thaddeus Lowe’s funicular, the Mount Lowe Railway, which from 1893 to 1938 took people on a roller-coaster type ride high into the mountains above Pasadena, as well as historical trails that were created as part of the Great Hiking Era.

The idea of setting aside part of the San Gabriel Mountains as a national monument began as a bill in 2003 by then-Rep. Hilda Solis, now a Los Angeles County supervisor, who served as secretary of labor under Obama. A study by the U.S. National Park Service found the area had a unique ecology that included endangered species such as the Santa Ana sucker fish and the mountain yellow-legged frog, as well as historical sites such as the Mount Wilson Observatory, where Edwin Hubble discovered that the universe was expanding.

When Solis left office, the effort was transferred to Chu. The National Park Service held hearings in 2012 and 2013, and Chu met with numerous groups, including cities and water agencies, to gain support, which resulted in the creation of the monument.

Belén Bernal, executive director of Nature For All, says the process seems to be repeating itself.

“It is my understanding similar meetings took place with the first designation of the national monument several years ago,” Bernal said in an interview on Wednesday. “The goal is to officially take public comments. Then that will be shared with the (Biden) administration.”

A monument designation is not attached to a budgetary line item, but it adds prestige, and that can leverage dollars from public and private sources, Rossman said.

After the Obama designation, donations of about \$3 million flowed to the National Forest Foundation. A year later, Coca-Cola made a \$900,000 donation. Recently, the U.S. Forest Service has used private funds to improve the Castaic Lake campgrounds. Chu has put in seed money of about \$995,000 to start a public transit shuttle service into key monument recreation sites.

“Articulating this as a special place in the past has allowed us to leverage private funding,” Rossman said. “This would allow us to prioritize recreation needs in a higher way.”

The USDA listening session focused on efforts to expand the San Gabriel Mountains National Monument takes place from 5-7:30 p.m. at the California Army National Guard Building, 1351 W. Sierra Madre Ave., Azusa. Doors open at 4:30 p.m.

https://www.fontanaheraldnews.com/news/officials-are-concerned-about-alarming-rise-in-pedestrian-deaths/article_d918915c-7bff-11ee-a633-97f781ea6398.html

Officials are concerned about alarming rise in pedestrian deaths

Nov 5, 2023



Jordyn Hicks, a 14-year-old Rialto resident, died after being struck by a car in Rialto earlier this year. He is one of many pedestrians who have been killed in traffic collisions in the Inland Empire.

Walking is strongly encouraged by doctors because it provides many health benefits. But unfortunately, it can sometimes result in tragedies.

The number of pedestrians killed by vehicles continues to rise in the Inland Empire, statistics show.

In fact, the Riverside-San Bernardino-Ontario metropolitan area is the 14th most dangerous metro area in the United States for pedestrians, according to a report by Smart Growth America.

A recent incident took place on Oct. 23 near the border of Fontana and Rancho Cucamonga. Destiny Brumback, a 21-year-old Fullerton resident, died while walking at Etiwanda Avenue and San Bernardino Avenue at 4:47 a.m., according to the San Bernardino County Sheriff Coroner's Division.

The pain and heartbreak felt by loved ones of deceased pedestrians was seen on Nov. 2, when residents implored the District Attorney's Office to pursue charges in the tragic death of 14-year-old Rialto resident Jordyn Hicks.

Hicks lost his life on June 25 of this year when a driver who was allegedly speeding and running a red light struck him with his vehicle as the teenager attempted to cross the intersection of Willow and Riverside avenues in Rialto, said attorney Allison R. Bracy.

Hicks was a student at Norton Science and Language Academy and loved video games, sports, and music, according to a news release issued by Bracy.

"Jordyn meant the world to me. He was my angel, my heart," said Mercedes Murray, Jordyn's mother. "He possessed immense potential and had so much to live for. A beautiful, intelligent, and compassionate boy, he had countless contributions to offer the world. He adored his family, friends, school, and hobbies. He had dreams and aspirations he yearned to fulfill."

----- OCTOBER was National Pedestrian Safety Month, but sadly, there were several pedestrian deaths in the local area during that month, including a man who was struck by a vehicle in the area of Cedar Avenue and Foothill Boulevard in Rialto on Oct. 29.

According to the Sheriff Coroner's Division, other incidents included:

- On Oct. 22 at 1 a.m., Joseph Anthony Childress, 58, died on the Interstate 10 Freeway west west of the Riverside Avenue exit in Colton;
 - On Oct. 14 at 7:41 p.m., Fernando Estrada, a 50-year-old Bloomington resident, died in the area of Jurupa Avenue and Cedar Avenue in Bloomington;
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- On Oct. 13 at 11:02 p.m., Bernardino Gutierrez Jr., a 54-year-old resident of Rancho Cucamonga, died at N. Grove Avenue and Ninth Street in Rancho Cucamonga;
- On Oct. 8 at 5:50 a.m., Victor Martinez, a 29-year-old resident of Rancho Cucamonga, died on Foothill Boulevard, east of Mayten Avenue in Rancho Cucamonga.

During the previous month in Fontana, pedestrians were killed in incidents on Sept. 29 and Sept. 21.

NEWS • News

As Israel-Hamas war rages, tension rises in Southern California

Past rounds of violence in the Middle East have played out locally as verbal conflicts. But this time might be different, and fear is rising.



Two men argue during a rally organized by California State University Long Beach students in support of a free Palestine and against Israel's military counterattack on the Gaza Strip in Long Beach on Tuesday, October 10, 2023. . The younger man was crying for people to do their research on the subject of Palestine and Israel while the older man spoke of his first-hand knowledge and years of experience. (Photo by Brittany Murray, Press-Telegram/SCNG)



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News

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The flood of local headlines since [Hamas' Oct. 7 attack on Israel](#) has shown, yet again, how conflict in the Middle East can play out as a proxy war in Southern California.

This time, though, the tone of the argument sounds more dangerous.

Consider:

[“L.A.’s Jews are buying guns, some for first time.”](#)

[“Muslim Americans facing new wave of bullying”](#)

[“Death threats, gag orders and outrage: Israel-Hamas War sparks conflict in Manhattan Beach.”](#)

In some ways, it’s a replay of tension that played out locally when shooting wars erupted between Israel and Hamas forces in Gaza in 2014 and 2021. During those periods, the squabbles in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside and San Bernardino counties mostly happened on college campuses or online. And while the anger was white hot, those disputes remained wars of words (mostly), with threats and name-calling substituting (mostly) for bloodshed.

Now, some suggest violence might be closer.

Locals with relatives in Israel and Gaza and other parts of the Middle East say the anger that's risen locally since Oct. 7 is less about short-term right and wrong than it is about long-term survival.

"I wouldn't be surprised if somebody gets killed," said Jamar, a student at Long Beach State who said he supports "justice for Palestinian people, and for everybody else" and doesn't want to disclose his last name because he fears for his family's safety.

"I'm not in favor of (violence). Please make that clear," Jamar said.

"But people aren't just angry. It's bigger than that. It's existential."

Or, Eran, the adult leader of a Jewish student group at UC Riverside put it:

"I'm not a fearful person. Probably the highest emotion I have right now is frustration, if that's an emotion.

"But from the perspective of a 19-year-old, who might not understand what their actions might lead to, the things people are saying now – and the lack of meaningful dialogue – is concerning to me in a way that's not just about frustration.

"If I were 19 years old right now, I'd be afraid."

Threats, similar words

It's not just theoretical, and it's not just local.

Antisemitic and anti-Muslim threats around the country have prompted a wave of calls to law enforcement agencies. That, in turn, has caught the attention of agencies that handle national security threats.

A recent directive from the Department of Homeland Security included:

"As the Israel-Hamas conflict continues, we have seen an increase in reports of threats against Jewish, Muslim, and Arab communities and institutions. Lone offenders, motivated by a range of violent ideologies, pose the most likely threat. We urge the public to stay vigilant."

On Thursday, Nov. 2, [Cornell University in upstate New York called off classes](#) after an anonymous online poster wrote they were “gonna shoot up” the Jewish Living Center on campus, an idea that elicited supportive messages from users with online handles such as “jew evil” and “kill jews.” Similar threats had been made earlier against the Jewish student center at [Columbia University](#).

On the same day that Cornell called off classes, the Council on American Islamic Relations in Anaheim issued a report the group leaders said detailed a surge of Islamophobic incidents and threats directed against children in Southern California.

And while hate crimes have been rising all year in Los Angeles County, the LAPD tracked a jump in the two weeks following Oct. 7, with reports of 49 hate crimes during that period directed at Jews or Muslims. That was 14 more such incidents than during the same two-week stretch of 2022.

For some people caught up in the maelstrom – including refugees from people who arrived in Southern California in recent years after fleeing years of shooting wars in their home countries – the rhetoric and rising anger looks familiar.

“In Syria, the killers don’t announce themselves. So I don’t think that’s happening yet,” said Ahmed Bilal, an engineer whose family left Syria in 2017 and wound up in Buena Park.

“But the things I’ve been hearing in the past few weeks, it sounds a lot like the arguments we escaped from,” he added. “It’s not encouraging.”

Since Oct. 7, several Southern California campuses – UC Riverside, UC Irvine, UCLA and Cal State Long Beach, among others – have seen heated, not violent, discourse.

People connected to all sides of those debates suggest the end result has been frustration, not two-way dialogue. And their complaints about “the other side” aren’t just similar; they’re almost identical, down to the word.

“We’re not listening to each other,” said Omar Aziz, who directs the Middle Eastern Student Center at UC Riverside, which provides support to about 2,000 students.

“We’re open to talking, but nobody is listening,” said Eran, leader of the Hillel Center at UC Riverside, which supports about 500 Jewish students with faith services, food, socializing and, this month, safety. (Eran, like Jamal, said he doesn’t want his last name used for safety reasons.)

They even use similar language when describing what they'd like to see for the people they support in the Middle East.

“What is wanted is freedom for Palestinians; to live without occupation, to have the freedom to live their lives, with the dignity they deserve as human beings,” Aziz said.

“What people want in Israel is to live free of violence and threats,” said Eran. “As all human beings do.”

Beyond fighting

Not every debate since Oct. 7 has turned ugly. And some locals are trying to find new ways of framing ancient ideas.

Tamar Shinar, an Israeli-born associate professor who teaches computer graphics and scientific computing at UC Riverside, said arguments about the current conflict shouldn't use terms like “Jews” and “Muslims.” Instead, she suggests, people should be viewed by their goals, and that those goals can include people from any religion or nation.

“The sides of this conflict, in my view, are those who favor peaceful coexistence versus those who are not interested in that,” Shinar said.

Shinar, 46, has lived in the United States most of her life and lived through previous waves of heated debate during Middle East conflicts. The post-Oct. 7 episode, she fears, is potentially more violent and more enduring.

“If you break this down by age group, you'll see support for Israel decreases among young people and that's a concern. That's why college campuses are really the flashpoints for these debates,” she said.

“And while I think there's a flareup every time there's a war, this one is motivating people much more than any of the past ones.

“From Israel's perspective, (the attack of Oct. 7) was a watershed event. And it'll lead to a reconfiguration of the Middle East.”

Or of Fullerton.

Scott Spitzer, an associate professor of political science at Cal State Fullerton, has taught a course on the politics of the Arab-Israeli conflict for five years.

Spitzer, who is Jewish, said his goal is to make the class as objective as possible, bringing in all perspectives – from Israeli and Palestinian to different world powers – into the discourse, and discussing facts that invite students to make interpretations for themselves.

His students are from different backgrounds, including Jews, Asian and Latino Americans; and people from the Middle East, including Palestine. Keeping the dialogue open and unburdened by historic grievances is Spitzer's biggest goal.

“We need to have real conversations, not yelling at each other. Neither side is ‘right’ – both sides are right,” Spitzer said. “And there’s more to it than that.”

On Oct. 23, Spitzer took part in an academic panel hosted by Cal State Fullerton's College of Humanities and Social Sciences, where he opened the discussion talking about the political, historical and social context of the conflict, including the ongoing Israel-Hamas war.

“I want students to understand the complexities and the widespread disagreements among the chief protagonists in this intense 100-plus-years conflict. The current situation is not just about war and death and destruction, which I am horrified by, but it's also about change,” Spitzer said at the event.

“We're in the middle of changes in the Middle East that are going to be incredibly long-lasting and affect your generation and generations thereafter.”

Ella Ben Hagai, an associate professor of psychology, also talked about the importance of holding different perspectives on the conflict, and even finding empathy on both sides.

But the panel – and a candlelight peace vigil to honor the lives lost in the Israel-Hamas war that followed – was met with some criticism from Jews, Palestinians and allies.

Spitzer said that, in the more than 15 years he's been teaching at Cal State Fullerton, he has never seen a demonstration this charged, or campus tensions as “emotionally powerful.”

“It all feels very close to home; it's very scary,” he said. “I think that everybody, especially those with connections to Gaza and to Israel, are feeling so much pain, even from 8,000 miles away. It still feels like these are our brothers, sisters, cousins; people we've never met.

“It feels personal.”

NEWS • News

Suspensions push foster and homeless youth out of SoCal's classrooms

Students with unstable home environments miss the most days of school due to suspensions, study finds



By **CLARA HARTER** | charter@scng.com

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Homeless and foster youth are some of Southern California's highest need students, but they are also the students who find themselves excluded from classrooms the most.

A [recent study](#) from UCLA's Civil Rights Project and the National Center for Youth Law found in district after district that suspensions fuel dramatic disparities in class instruction time for students with unstable homes or disabilities.

The Los Angeles Unified School District has emerged as an exception to this pattern, reserving suspensions for the most extreme forms of misbehavior and using counseling and other in school interventions to address most behavioral issues, district officials said.

In the 2021 to 2022 school year, students in California lost about 10 instructional days due to suspensions per 100 students enrolled, the study found.

Foster youths lost 77 school days, almost eight times as many days as the state average, while homeless students lost 26 school days and students with disabilities lost 24.

Losing significant time in the classroom not only exacerbated learning loss during the pandemic, but also severed students' connections to vital school resources, the study's authors concluded.

"Kicking them out, even for one day, might cause them to miss the day of the week that they get counseling services or the day they receive intensive reading instruction," said Daniel Losen, co-author and the senior director at the National Center for Youth Law. "For a homeless student, they might literally be kicking them out onto the streets."

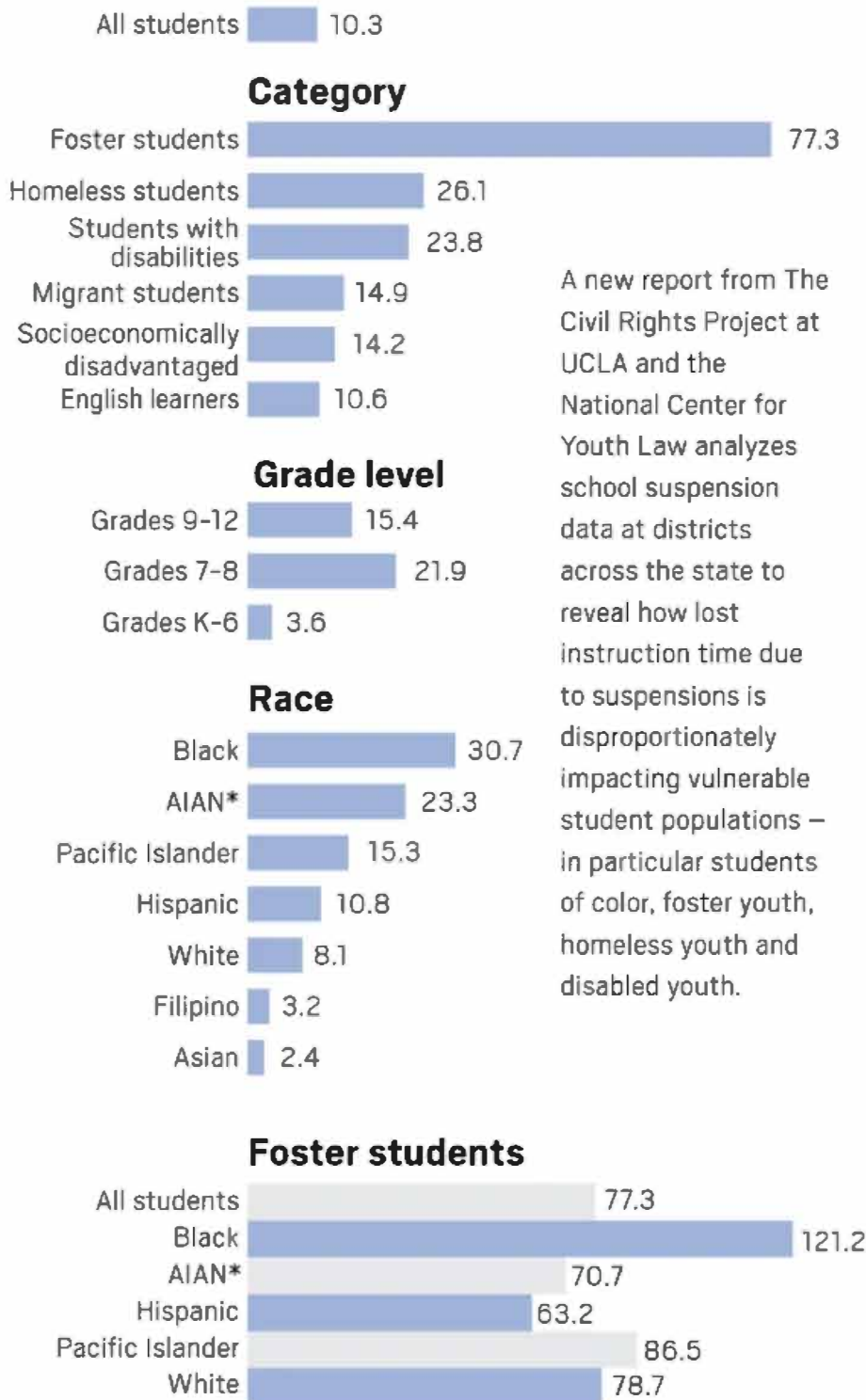
Foster youth, in particular, are more likely to exhibit behavioral challenges resulting in suspensions, because of the high levels of stress, trauma and instability they experience, Losen said. Suspensions can have dramatic consequences such as putting their foster family placements in peril, the study notes.

That, he argues, makes it even more essential that schools adapt alternative approaches to discipline that let foster students remain in school where they are provided with the stability of a daily routine, reliable meals, access to counselors and other vital resources.

The disparities between students' lost instruction time due to suspensions are even more dramatic when measured based on race. At the state level, Black foster youth lost 133 instructional days per 100 students enrolled – more than any other category of students.

Who's getting suspended in school?

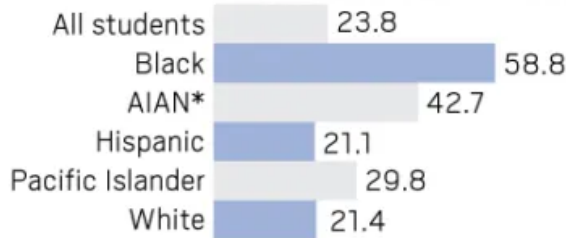
Days lost instruction due to suspensions per 100 students in California.



A new report from The Civil Rights Project at UCLA and the National Center for Youth Law analyzes school suspension data at districts across the state to reveal how lost instruction time due to suspensions is disproportionately impacting vulnerable student populations – in particular students of color, foster youth, homeless youth and disabled youth.

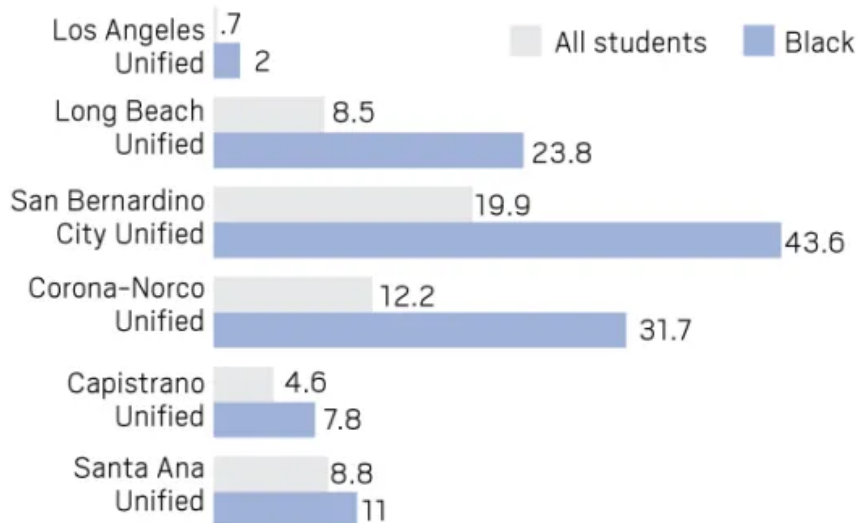


Students with disabilities



*American Indian, Alaskan Native

School district



Source: Civil Rights Project, UCLA

JEFF GOERTZEN, SCNG

“Although California has made substantial strides in its school discipline reform efforts, foster and homeless youth—especially those who are African American—are losing their right to equal educational opportunity because they are being suspended from school in a manner that causes extreme disparities in lost instruction,” study co-authors Losen and Ramon Flores, state in the report.

“There’s a lot we can be doing differently that doesn’t involve kicking students out of school,” Losen added in an interview.

In 2013, LAUSD became the first district in California to ban suspensions for “willful defiance,” a term that encompasses many forms of disobedience and misconduct. In the 2021 to 2022 school year, LAUSD students lost only 0.7 days of instruction due to suspensions per 100 students, compared to 10 days of lost instruction at the state level.

In recognition of LAUSD's successful approach, Gov. Newsom [recently signed a law](#) that requires all districts to implement the ban at middle and high schools by July 2024.

“We applaud Governor Newsom for extending the prohibition on the use of suspension and expulsion to the disruption/defiance category, and urge district administrators to not only fully implement this limit, but to also eliminate other grounds, such as tobacco use, profanity, and vulgarity as grounds for suspension or expulsion,” Losen and Flores state in the report.

The LAUSD school board passed its proactive ban in response to pressure from community activists including members of the parent advocacy organization CADRE, who were alarmed by high levels of suspensions among students of color. In the 2010 to 2011 school year, Black students made up about 9% of LAUSD's student population and 26% of students who were suspended.

By the 2021 to 2022 school year, Black students at LAUSD only lost 2 days of instructional time per 100 students. In comparison, at Long Beach Unified School district, Black students lost 23.8 school days per 100 students.

“We are encouraged by the results of a recent study from UCLA's Civil Rights Project that highlights our work in reducing suspension rates across the District, but especially among vulnerable student populations,” said LAUSD spokesperson Britt Vaughan. “This is not only the necessary step in providing students with the holistic support they deserve, but also increases their instructional time and thereby reduces learning loss.”

To help handle student behavioral issues without relying on suspensions, LAUSD trains its staff in techniques to work with students who have experienced trauma, how to model and reward positive behavior, how to build a community of respect, how to foster positive emotional expression and communication, and how to address harm in the classroom through discussion.

“While the LAUSD is far from perfect, their progress stands as an example that other large school districts can learn from in reducing out-of-school suspensions,” said Losen.

At Long Beach Unified, where Black students are disproportionately suspended, and in many school districts across Southern California suspensions remain a common tool for dealing with student disobedience.

Evia Cano, a spokesperson for Long Beach Unified, said the district “recognizes the importance of fair and just disciplinary actions” and is taking “proactive steps to ensure an equitable and supportive approach to discipline across our schools.” They are training staff in modeling and rewarding positive behavior and support as well as restorative justice programs. The district also offers counseling, social skills groups, dispute mediation, behavior agreements, and anger management services.

Meanwhile, in districts across the Inland Empire, Black students and other vulnerable student populations bear the brunt of missing school days due to suspensions. The study found a high lost of instruction among students of color and students with disabilities in the Corona-Norco Unified School District in Riverside, Riverside Unified School District, and San Bernardino Unified School District.

By contrast, at the Capistrano Unified School District in Orange County the number of instructional days that children lost due to suspensions was about half the state average in the 2021 to 2022 school year.

“We developed a comprehensive approach to minimize learning loss due to student discipline and suspension,” said Ryan Burris, a Capistrano Unified School District spokesperson. “Our approach uses positive behavior intervention, alternatives to suspension, restorative practices, and the creation of district cultural proficiency goals.”

The district’s [cultural proficiency goals](#) outline programs and initiatives to better help vulnerable students including foster students, students with disabilities, homeless students, Latino students, Black students and socioeconomically disadvantaged students.

Among its efforts, Capistrano Unified School District places students who have behavioral issues in classrooms with specialized teachers and counselors. District officials say the students are given dedicated attention and are taught life skills in a therapeutic, non-punitive environment.

The study’s authors say that more alternative approaches to student discipline are needed — especially in light of the negative consequences associated with suspensions. Previous research has found that students with one or more out-of-school suspensions, have a [lower chance of graduating high school or college](#) and an [increased risk of being incarcerated later in life](#).

“There’s this idea that I’ve seen come up time and time again, that you have to kick out the bad kids, but it’s absolutely a false narrative,” said Losen. “It’s never been a research-based approach. It’s purely punitive and it doesn’t work.”

Reporter Kristy Hutchings contributed to this story

Boost for foster kids' college hopes



KYSHAWNA JOHNSON got through college thanks to Jovenes Inc., which helps homeless youths. She's now a live-in resident manager with Jovenes and said she's trying to be that "one caring adult" students need. (James Bernal Hechinger Report)

BY GAIL CORNWALL

Citrus College was Kyshawna Johnson's third attempt at higher education.

She enrolled in a community college at age 18 while living with her grandmother, who was her foster care guardian. But the house was too chaotic for Johnson to be able to focus on studies, and without support, she dropped out. She gave it another go at 19 but said that when foster care support money stopped, she was forced to leave her grandmother's house and college.

Her aunt and uncle offered her a room in 2016, and for nearly eight months, Johnson experienced a stable, calm home.

She enrolled again and excelled at Citrus in Glendora. But her housing arrangement didn't last. All her apartment applications were rejected, even though she could afford the rent from jobs at T.J. Maxx and a movie theater. She bounced from one friend's couch to another. She then lived in her car for six months, each night trying to find a parking spot under a streetlight.

"It was just scary," she said. Her grades fell to Ds, and she thought, "College just may not be for me."

But before dropping out a third time, Johnson connected with Jovenes Inc., an Eastside nonprofit that helps homeless youths. The organization paid for her to stay in a room in a woman's house. Finally, she had a place "just to be, and focus."

For many former foster care students like Johnson — young adults with few resources to navigate independence — housing instability is a major impediment to completing a college degree. Nationally, reports indicate that 20% to 40% of youths aging out of foster care lack stable housing. Housing-insecure students take fewer classes, earn fewer credits and are more likely to leave college before graduating, research shows.

California has made significant moves to offer housing assistance to students with foster care experience, yet a comprehensive solution that identifies them early and offers housing well-suited to their needs remains elusive.

One model gaining popularity is “college-focused rapid rehousing,” which got \$19 million in state funding during the 2022-23 school year across California’s three higher education systems. Jovenes sometimes master-leases apartments for students to live in while working with a case manager to find a more permanent solution. Other times, as in Johnson’s case, the organization offers a rental subsidy. The goal is to provide a place to live right away and a path to self-sufficiency. For example, a participant might at first pay little or nothing for their living space, then housing costs incrementally increase.

Another fix is dorms. But such housing is a rarity at community colleges, where most former foster care students begin their higher education. With state funding help, several of California’s community colleges have plans to build housing, but space is not specifically dedicated to students from the foster care system.

Advocates say investing in both the Jovenes model and a new type of dorm designed for community college students with foster care experience could significantly change their dim college prospects.

Students with foster care backgrounds often must overcome hurdles rooted in their K-12 education. In California, these youths, who disproportionately identify as LGBTQ+ and Black, are more likely to be chronically absent, attend high-poverty schools and experience disruption due to transfers.

Challenges to college attendance

Those who enter college are often less academically prepared and more likely to require significant financial and mental health support. Like Johnson, they typically work more hours than is ideal for a college student.

Among 18-year-olds with foster care experience, more than 80% said they wanted to complete a degree from a four-year college. But only 4.8% had attained that goal four years later, according to the California Youth Transitions to Adulthood Study.

“Housing is probably the No. 1 challenge that foster students face,” said Debbie Raucher of John Burton Advocates for Youth, a California nonprofit that helps youths who have been in foster care or homeless.

A 2015 study found that students who had experienced homelessness were 13 times more likely to have failed college courses and 11 times more likely to have withdrawn from them or failed to register.

Johnson said Jovenes “gave me a chance, and my life turned around.” Her grades shot up to all A’s. She applied to Oral Roberts University in Oklahoma and received a full scholarship, including housing.

A major move to disrupt the foster-to-homelessness pipeline at the federal level began with legislation in 2008 that helped states extend foster care services to age 21 from 18.

Since then, California lawmakers have passed a slew of budget expansions and laws to benefit students with foster care experience. In 2009, for example, the state passed legislation requiring many schools to give them priority for on-campus housing. In 2015, the state required some colleges to allow them to stay in dorms for free over academic breaks.

California has also gradually expanded their financial aid and increased funding for campus-based support programs, which include NextUp and Guardian Scholars. Recently, the state increased foster student rent subsidies in higher cost-of-living areas.

But holes remain. Young people who exited the foster system before age 18, for example, typically don’t qualify for extended services, including a government program that gives housing support through age 24.

For those who qualify for rental subsidies, the California market is so tight that appropriate units, especially close to campus, are rarely available. Plus, students with foster experience struggle to find landlords who will rent to them because they rarely have co-signers, solid credit histories or first and last month’s rent.

Some research suggests that on-campus housing offers the most stable living arrangement for them. But even increased financial aid often doesn’t cover all housing costs, said Raucher. Dorms can also be hard socially, because these students tend to be older, and many have children.

A big boost from Jovenes

This is where Jovenes — and others like it — come in. The organization’s College Success Initiative supports students attending 10 L.A. County colleges. At least 30% of Jovenes clients have known foster care experience, said Eric Hubbard, a Jovenes leader.

Jovenes case managers meet with their counterparts on college campuses to give students with foster care experience the support others often get from parents: help connecting with therapists and finding apartments to rent, vouching for them with landlords and financial support.

Academic achievement “skyrockets,” Hubbard said, “once you place someone in an environment where you don’t have to worry about where you’re going to sleep.”

When students at Cerritos College were housed by Jovenes, they became far more likely than the rest of the student body to receive a degree in two years and matriculate at a four-year institution, he said.

In 2019, California passed legislation meant to replicate the Jovenes model, and the number of students served has grown.

During the 2021-22 academic year, eight CSU campuses referred students and funneled about \$5.2 million to Jovenes and eight other housing providers. The program served 1,598 CSU students in 2021-22, up 40% from the year before. Those helped showed a 91% retention or graduation rate, according to a CSU report.

However, the Jovenes model is expensive — roughly \$10,000 to \$20,000 a year per student, according to Hubbard — because it covers not only housing but also support services and program administration.

Some are advocating for community college-based dorms dedicated specifically to students with foster care experience as a more sustainable solution.

Raucher sees cause for optimism. The state recently allocated funds to build subsidized dorms on community college campuses and passed additional legislation to fast-track it.

And a bill introduced in the state Senate in February that is eligible to move forward next year would amend California’s financial aid programs to guarantee housing for students with foster care experience.

Johnson, who graduated from Oral Roberts in April 2022, said she is devoted to turning around the lives of students whose experiences she knows all too well.

She accepted a job with Jovenes as a live-in resident manager, and she said she’s trying to be that “one caring adult” research shows is so important to the educational success of students.

Cornwall writes for the Hechinger Report, a nonprofit, independent news organization focused on inequality and innovation in education.

Critics push for supervisors to ‘rein in’ Sheriff’s Department

Demands for greater oversight by board — called baseless by sheriff — follow jail deaths, arrests of deputies

BY JEFF HORSEMAN

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The office of Riverside County supervisor doesn’t come with a sheriff’s badge.

But following recent jail inmate deaths and arrests of sheriff’s personnel, critics ranging from a former supervisor to the ACLU of Southern California are calling on the Board of Supervisors to exercise greater oversight over the largest law enforcement agency in America’s 10th-most populous county.

It’s time “to rein in the unchecked power of the Riverside Sheriff’s Department,” Eva Bitran, an ACLU staff attorney, told the board Tuesday.

Also Tuesday, the ACLU and a coalition of social justice groups sent the board a letter demanding “immediate action to address harms committed by the fatally dysfunctional Riverside County Sheriff’s Department.”

The same day, the Southern California News Group published a commentary by former Riverside County Supervisor Bob Buster, former Riverside Community Police Review Commissioner Chani Beeman, and Deborah Wong, of the Riverside Coalition for Policy Accountability, calling for independent oversight of the department.

“It is often claimed that oversight of law enforcement is inherently biased,” the commentary states. “We view it as simply good government.”

Tuesday’s board meeting featured several public speakers calling for greater supervision, including the Rev. Jane Quandt.

“I come from a tradition that kind of believes in the possibility of redemption,” she said. “And (jail inmates) aren’t going to have that opportunity if they’re dead.”

In an emailed statement, Sheriff Chad Bianco defended his department, calling it “arguably one of the most professional and transparent organizations in the country, even outside of

law enforcement.”

“Outlandish allegations by ill informed or completely dishonest attorneys, activists and politicians do not change that fact,” he said, later adding that “facts are extremely detrimental to propaganda spread by ill-intended, agenda-driven individuals and a biased media.”

Bianco said his department is routinely scrutinized by, among other agencies, the state and county auditor’s offices, California’s state and community corrections bureau and a court-appointed auditor who oversees jail health care.

Bianco’s department, the main police force for a county of 2.5 million people in an area rivaling New Jersey in size, has come under increased scrutiny in 2023.

More than a half-dozen lawsuits have been filed in U.S. District Court in Riverside this year on behalf of inmates who died in the county’s five-jail system, including three filed since Oct. 11. One lawsuit was filed by the parents of a transgender woman they say was found beaten and strangled to death in her cell.

In September, a correctional deputy was arrested on charges he engaged in sex acts with female inmates on home detention as part of an extortion scheme. Two women who said they were sexually extorted by 32-year-old Christian Phillip Heidecker of Menifee have filed a legal claim against the county, which is often a precursor to a lawsuit.

Also in September, another correctional deputy, 25-year-old Jorge Alberto Ocegüera-Rocha of Banning, was arrested on suspicion of having more than 100 pounds of fentanyl pills in his vehicle. Authorities said Ocegüera-Rocha was trafficking for a Mexican drug cartel.

Riverside County paid almost \$80 million between 2010 and 2020 to settle police misconduct lawsuits, including \$63 million involving allegations of excessive force cases and \$12 million for allegations involving false arrests, according to a Washington Post investigation.

In his statement, Bianco said that “statistically you are at a minimum 20 times more likely to die outside of (the) Riverside County Jail system than while in custody” and that a 2022 state audit found that “county jails would be best served by implementing policies and procedures following Riverside County.”

It was his department that “discovered recent transgressions of employees and promptly arrested them” and fired them, added Bianco, who has been sheriff since 2019 and is set to remain in office through at least 2028 thanks to a quirk in a recent state law.

In February, California Attorney General Rob Bonta announced his office would pursue a civil rights investigation into Bianco’s department over jail conditions and allegations of

misconduct. Bianco, a Republican, blasted the probe by Bonta, a Democrat, as politically motivated.

As an elected official, Bianco can't be fired by supervisors. But the five-member board has considerable influence over the sheriff's finances by funding \$416 million — about 41% — of the department's roughly \$1 billion fiscal 2023-24 budget.

Bianco, who was re-elected in 2022 with 61% of the vote, can provide a political boost to supervisors who ran on promises to bolster public safety. Supervisor Chuck Washington, who is up for reelection in 2024, touted Bianco's endorsement on social media and his campaign website.

The sheriff's deputies' union is another factor. The Riverside Sheriffs' Association strongly backs Bianco, and its endorsements and campaign donations are highly sought after by political candidates.

"We strongly believe that department oversight must rest with an individual directly answerable to the electorate," association President Bill Young said via email. "In 2022, an overwhelming majority of Riverside County voters reaffirmed their unwavering support for Sheriff Bianco's leadership and oversight of the department."

This isn't the first time in recent years the department has faced calls for greater scrutiny.

The wave of nationwide protests in 2020 following George Floyd's murder by Minneapolis, Minnesota, police spurred calls for an independent panel to oversee Riverside County deputies.

Supervisor V. Manuel Perez proposed a review of sheriff's procedures in June 2020, but his idea failed to gain traction with other supervisors. At the time, Bianco said he would form a citizen's panel to discuss policing.

That hasn't happened, Beeman told the board Tuesday. Bianco said a "community advisory council" whose members are recommended by supervisors, has been in place since July 2021.

Joining calls for reform was former Democratic Assemblymember Jose Medina, who has announced a 2024 county supervisor run.

"The number of deaths in our county jails in the last two years, the number of recent arrests for wrongdoing of Riverside County (sheriff's deputies) and the failure of this Board of Supervisors to hold the Sheriff's Department accountable has brought me here today," Medina said.

The demands for reform by the ACLU and others in their letter include:

- Establishing an “independent oversight body with subpoena power” and an inspector general’s office “to enable greater transparency and accountability from the Sheriff’s Department to the community.”
- Pursuing alternatives to jail, especially for those who have not been convicted of a crime and are awaiting trial.
- Separating the coroner’s office from the Sheriff’s Department. It’s a conflict of interest for the sheriff to investigate jail deaths or deaths resulting from deputies’ actions, critics argue.

Despite calls for reform, the board of supervisors appears reluctant to form an oversight panel.

Perez, who sought the review of sheriff’s procedures in 2020, said by phone that reform advocates would be better off seeking a dialogue with the sheriff.

Supervisor Karen Spiegel said via email that as “an independently elected official, the sheriff is subject to a countywide oversight committee in the form of the electorate, who have the right to dispense their review by voting a sheriff in or out of office every four years.”

The same people calling for more oversight also have called to cut the sheriff’s funding, Supervisor Kevin Jeffries said via email.

“It’s hard to take some critics seriously when they are oblivious to the consequences of reducing patrol deputies,” Jeffries said. “Additionally the blatant partisan nature of some of the attacks on the elected county sheriff have polarized the matter, thereby complicating any reasonable discussions that could be occurring.”

Jeffries said that next month, he’ll offer a plan that, if the board approves, would ask the county executive office to look into separating the sheriff from the coroner.

“We need to know the advantages, disadvantages and financial costs of standing up a new stand-alone department,” he said.

Supervisor Yxstian Gutierrez said in a statement that he was concerned with “the large number of deaths” in jails.

“Oversight is needed in every county agency, and I certainly believe that we need to reexamine procedures related to our jails,” he said, while praising the county’s law enforcement employees.

Washington said via email that jail deaths are up in other parts of California as well.

“The sheriff is an independently elected position, and I recognize his constitutional authority,” Washington said, adding he will work with the department “to find solutions to

incarceration challenges.”

Council must decide how much rents can rise in 2024

With pandemic freeze ending, debate heats up on what is right balance in L.A.

BY JULIA WICK

Nine months ago, Los Angeles City Council passed its most sweeping tenant protections in decades. The move came under the gun: This was late January, and the city's long-standing COVID-19 anti-eviction rules were set to expire at the end of the month, potentially setting off a wave of evictions.

Now, a city beleaguered by a brutal homelessness crisis finds itself at the next crossroads in the long tail of the COVID-19 emergency. Come February, landlords will be able to raise the rent on many tenants for the first time since the emergency protections went into effect in early 2020. The rules apply to units that fall under the city's Rent Stabilization Ordinance, which generally applies only to apartments built before October 1978 and account for roughly three-quarters of all multifamily rental units.

Tenant advocates argue that allowing landlords to raise rents by 7% (or up to 9% if landlords pay utilities) could be catastrophic. It would push even more Angelenos into homelessness at a time when the city has been desperately trying to keep its most vulnerable renters housed, they say. Housing providers contend that they've already been unable to raise rents for more than three years, at a time of soaring inflation and many other increased expenses.

Last month, Councilmember Hugo Soto-Martínez introduced a proposal to freeze RSO rents for another six months, giving the city Housing Department time to complete an economic study on the formula setting for allowable rent increases in RSO units. Soto-Martínez has described himself as the only tenant on the City Council and lives in an RSO unit in East Hollywood. Along with Councilmember Eunisses Hernandez, who seconded the motion, Soto-Martínez is part of a nascent progressive bloc on the council that has been particularly staunch on tenant issues.

That proposal was the subject of heated debate Wednesday in the city's housing and homelessness committee, which is chaired by Councilmember Nithya Raman, another progressive who led the city's earlier tenant protection efforts.

For roughly an hour, tenants gave impassioned testimony in English and Spanish about their fears of losing their homes if rents rise, and housing providers spoke about the difficulties they've faced maintaining buildings and paying rising fees as rents remain stagnant. Ultimately, Councilmember Bob Blumenfield proffered a compromise "that nobody's gonna like" but would still allow the council to move forward, he said.

Raising potential legal issues about a continued rent freeze, Blumenfield suggested capping the amount at 4% instead of 7%. (Under that formula, the allowable increase would rise to up to 6% in situations where landlords pay utilities.)

"There's no good answer here," said Councilmember Marqueece Harris-Dawson. "Any city where we've frozen rent for four years, and the cost of living has still gone up to the point where we're close to New York — the idea of raising anybody's rent is a terrible idea."

On the other hand, he said, housing providers have to be able to pay for trash, utilities and upkeep, and the city still sends inspectors out to fine landlords because they haven't done work "that we are not allowing you to raise money in order to do."

Raman spoke about the precarious situation faced by the city at the moment, with more people falling into homelessness daily, even as hundreds of millions of dollars are spent to stanch the crisis, along with the challenging environment for small landlords. She supported Blumenfield's amendment, she said, because she didn't think the item would move forward otherwise and she wanted it to get to the full council.

The compromise proposal will come before the full council on Wednesday, according to City Council President Paul Krekorian spokesperson Hugh Esten. That vote will be the council's next major test on tenant protections, and it's unclear whether Soto-Martínez may try to float another proposal before then or during the meeting.

"We're looking at our options, and if we have the chance to fight for something better, we'll do it," Soto-Martínez spokesperson Nick Barnes-Batista said Friday morning.

But it's unclear whether Soto-Martínez and his allies would have the political will for a compromise that tenants like better than Blumenfield's. Doing so would be an uphill battle; the amended version passed the committee on a 3-2 vote.

Councilmembers John Lee and Monica Rodriguez both voted against it, raising concerns about disincentivizing housing providers from operating in the city and having them disproportionately shoulder the burden. If the council doesn't accept Blumenfield's 4% proposal or come up with something else, landlords will be able to raise rents in RSO units by 7% in February.

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