Redlands school board to discuss possible book ban

Members of the Redlands Unified school board during a meeting on Tuesday April 25, 2023. (Photo by Milka Soko, Contributing Photographer)

By MADISON HART | mhart@scng.com
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The Redlands Unified School Board will be discussing a potential book-ban at its meeting tonight, March 12.

The school board is scheduled to meet at 6 p.m., March 12, at 25 West Lugonia Ave., Redlands.

Parents, community members and students are expected to turn out for discussion on the potential policy.

At least one community group has been vocal about its efforts to ban books like “The Bluest Eye” by Toni Morrison. Others are concerned about RUSD entertaining book-bans.

Board meetings in Redlands have been polarizing as the board has taken up discussion on pride flags in schools as well as how the district has handled sex-abuse investigations over the years. Tensions have grown between parents’ sharing different opinions toward books in school libraries.
State’s battle over COVID refund

Lawmakers ask FEMA to reimburse cities and counties $300 million for homeless housing.

BY ANDREA CASTILLO

WASHINGTON — California cities and counties might be on the hook for more than $300 million they spent placing thousands of homeless residents in hotels in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the time, local officials made the unprecedented move under the impression that the federal government would reimburse much of their cost for offering shelter, without time limits, to unhoused people at elevated risk of severe symptoms. But the Federal Emergency Management Agency says that they were mistaken and that the agency had agreed to pay only for hotel stays of up to 20 days.

Now, concerned members of the California delegation want answers. A Monday letter by Rep. Robert Garcia (D-Long Beach), signed by 34 other Democratic members and one Republican — Rep. David Valadao of Hanford — asks FEMA Administrator Deanne Criswell to reconsider and reimburse cities that are already strapped for cash.

“We’re talking about the single largest loss-of-life event that we’ve had to go through in over a generation,” Garcia said. “This idea that we’re not going to, in this massive emergency, fully reimburse cities and counties for housing folks ... is crazy. FEMA has a responsibility to fix this problem.”

Los Angeles stands to lose out on $60 million spent from its general fund, nearly a third of the $194 million submitted to FEMA for reimbursement. The city already faces hiring limits due to a budget shortfall.

“Every dollar would help us fill some of those vacancies,” assistant city administrative officer Ben Ceja said.

The issue stems from a letter sent Oct. 16 from FEMA Regional Administrator Robert Fenton to Nancy Ward, the director of California’s Office of Emergency Services.

Gov. Gavin Newsom terminated California’s statewide pandemic stay-at-home order June 11, 2021, at which point more than 70% of adults had received at least one vaccine dose.
Fenton told California officials that FEMA would limit reimbursements during the two years after the order was lifted to hotel stays of up to 20 days. That’s “in accordance with the [Centers for Disease Control’s] recommended isolation and quarantine period,” he wrote.

Emergency hotel placements were offered to people who had been exposed to or tested positive for COVID-19 and had nowhere to isolate, and those who were considered high risk, such as people older than 65 or with underlying health conditions. Unhoused people in encampments and congregate shelters broadly were at higher risk of exposure to the virus.

Fenton wrote that the rules for reimbursement were laid out in letters to California as early as March 27, 2020. Those requirements did not change, he said, though the prior letters don’t explicitly lay out the 20-day cap.

The COVID-19 pandemic was the largest disaster response in FEMA’s history. The agency said that it has provided California more than $9.4 billion in COVID-19-related assistance, and that all states and local governments are subject to the same policy and reimbursement process for sheltering homeless people.

“FEMA under its Public Assistance Program works closely with state, tribal, territorial and local governments to provide all eligible and available funding for reimbursement, and will continue to do so for those impacted during the pandemic,” said acting FEMA press secretary Daniel Llargués.

California officials tell a different story.

After declaring a state of emergency over COVID-19, Newsom launched Project Roomkey in April 2020 to help unhoused people safely isolate themselves in hotels and motels to prevent the virus from spreading.

Some 62,000 people were sheltered through the program.

Local counties and cities fronted the cost of hotel leases and food and service providers with the expectation that they'd be reimbursed. FEMA’s commitment was crucial to California’s ability to protect its residents, Garcia’s letter states.

Initially, FEMA agreed to cover 75% of eligible expenses, but in January 2021 the agency agreed to reimburse all costs.

Fenton’s letter in the fall came as a shock.

“This October 2023 policy decision comes long after local governments across our state had already expended significant local resources under Project Roomkey with the full expectation for reimbursement,” the members of Congress wrote. “We note that no previous cap had ever been noticed by FEMA.”

California officials argue that the indefinite length of stay was important for public health and to allow residents to transition to different housing. The program wasn’t perfect; in Los Angeles, it never got close to the goal of securing rooms for all estimated 15,000
eligible homeless people, though it maintained a long wait list and many of those housed left without explanation.

The reimbursement losses range from hundreds of thousands to millions: $114 million for San Francisco city and county, $22 million for Ventura County and $200,000 for Madera County. Some jurisdictions that already received compensation could be forced to pay back the money.

Garcia said he’s intimately familiar with Project Roomkey from his days as Long Beach mayor. Long Beach stands to lose $6.2 million it spent housing homeless residents.

The situation erodes trust between California localities and FEMA, he said.

“I remember being at the table when cities like mine were being told they’d be fully reimbursed for this,” Garcia said. “So it’s quite disturbing and quite frankly not acceptable that counties and cities across the state essentially could lose more than $300 million for previous expenditures that we had all the reason to believe would be reimbursed.”

In January, the Governor’s Office of Emergency Services sent FEMA a letter urging it to reconsider the cap.

“California is committed to maximizing federal aid to communities and has been aggressively pushing for FEMA to rescind the decision to deny promised assistance to local governments,” Emergency Services spokesman Brian Ferguson said.

Had there been clearer guidance, Los Angeles would have recommended the program be limited to stays of 20 or fewer days, City Administrative Officer Matt Szabo said.

Wendy Huff Ellard, a disaster recovery attorney who represents four California counties seeking FEMA reimbursement, as well as others in Texas and New York, said some localities will face significant difficulty recovering from the loss of the funds they spent.

“The cities and counties in this case have relied on FEMA providing funding for the program,” she said. “It’s impossible to go back and change what they’ve done.”

Ellard said California is at the forefront of what she thinks will be denials across the country. When reimbursement requests started rolling in, she said, “I think FEMA realized how big the programs were and that it perhaps should have issued more specific parameters.”

Llargués, the FEMA spokesman, said that’s not true.

“FEMA did not revise eligibility for non-congregate sheltering or any other COVID-19 related activities in order to reduce costs,” he said.

Once FEMA issues application decisions, California governments that receive denials can begin an appeal and arbitration process. That could take close to a year, Ellard said.
Opponents of Newsom’s Prop. 1 mental health bond concede likely defeat

Newsom's $6.4B measure for mental health treatment and homeless housing appears poised to narrowly pass

Governor of California Gavin Newsom speaks during a press conference on Wednesday, Jan. 3, 2023, at the Los Angeles General Medical Center to urge support for Proposition 1 on the March 5, 2024 ballot. The proposition would overhaul California’s mental health funding system, and a $6.4 billion bond will expand access for hundreds of thousands of Californians, fund substance abuse treatment, and help get those suffering from mental health crises off the streets and into care. (Photo by Hans Gutknecht, Los Angeles Daily News/SCNG)
Governor Gavin Newsom's mental health bond measure Proposition 1 continues to hang on to its narrow lead, prompting leaders of the opposition movement to concede likely defeat on Tuesday.

The measure, which requires a simple majority to pass, was supported by 50.4% of voters and opposed by 49.6% as of Tuesday afternoon's vote update.

**See the latest election results.**

“We almost took down the bear, but it looks like we will fall short. Today, as the principal opponents of Proposition 1, we concede that it is almost certain to pass,” said Californians Against Proposition 1 in a Tuesday morning statement.

Prop. 1 is a $6.4 billion bond measure that seeks to overhaul the state’s approach to mental health by vastly increasing the number of treatment beds and supportive housing facilities.

It would direct $4.4 billion to create 10,000 new mental health beds and $2 billion for homeless housing projects. Half of the new housing units would be reserved for veterans with mental illness or substance use issues.

In addition, the measure would require counties to spend 30% of revenue from the Mental Health Services Act on housing. This voter-approved act generates between $2 billion and $3.5 billion a year for mental health services through a 1% tax on incomes greater than $1 million.

Newsom touted the measure as a way to “fix our broken mental health system and provide those living on our streets and suffering from substance abuse the care they need.”
He raised over $20 million to promote the measure and rallied the support of many influential groups including the National Alliance on Mental Illness California, California Hospital Association, labor union SEIU California and the California Chamber of Commerce.

The “No on Prop. 1” campaign raised very little in comparison. It was led by mental health advocates such as Disability Rights California, who feared that changing funding priorities for the Mental Health Services Act would result in service cuts to existing mental health programs. The groups also objected to funding mental health treatment beds that could compel people to accept involuntarily treatment.

Other opponents, such as the Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association, objected to the high amount of government spending.

“Our grassroots campaign was hard-pressed to compete with $20 million on the ‘yes’ side, a campaign so overconfident and overstuffed with cash that they ran a Super Bowl ad,” the opposition statement said. “Still, we almost won. Our message and our truth were that powerful.”

While initial polls indicated that two-thirds of likely voters in California were in favor of the measure, that support slipped to 59% in the weeks before the election, according to the Public Policy Institute of California.

Supporters of Prop. 1 have not yet declared victory. Its passage would be a major political win for Newsom, who had opted to put the measure on the March ballot so that it would not have to compete for attention with other measures in November.

That decision almost proved disastrous as the primary electorate skewed conservative and the measure teetered on the edge of failure during successive ballot updates. At one time, there were just 13,000 votes, in a state with 22 million registered voters, standing between its passage and its failure.

Nevertheless, the share of ballots favoring the measure has ticked up in recent updates and it appears to be poised to narrowly pass. The secretary of state’s office will continue providing periodic vote updates and is scheduled to certify results by April 12.
OPINION

John Phillips: I mean it this time. Move California’s primary back to June.

California Representative Adam Schiff greets supporters on Election night Tuesday, March 5, 2024. Schiff will face Republican Steve Garvey in the Nov. election for the senate seat formally held by Dianne Feinstein. (Photo by David Crane, Los Angeles Daily News/SCNG)
And now a word about the lesser known March Madness: California's stupid decision to move our primary election from June to March.

I hate to say I told you so….but….moving our primary back four months every four years is almost as stupid as moving our clocks forward an hour every March.

In the pages of this publication in September of 2023, I wrote a piece arguing, "California's primary should be in June, not March."

In that piece, I explained that in September of 2017, then California Governor Jerry Brown signed legislation that moved California's presidential primary elections to the beginning of March, three months ahead of when they were held in 2016.

The motivation behind the move was to increase the state's influence in deciding who would be the Democratic and Republican presidential nominees.

At the time, then California Secretary of State Alex Padilla celebrated the move by saying in a statement, "Candidates will not be able to ignore the largest, most diverse state in the nation as they seek our country's highest office...California has been a leader time and time again on the most important issues facing our country—including immigration, education, and the environment. The Prime Time Primary Act will help ensure that issues important to Californians are prioritized by presidential candidates from all political parties."

My conclusion, on the other hand, was that “moving up the primary was a pretty dumb idea, even by Governor Moonbeam standards...because now we get the worst of all worlds: our voice in the presidential race is meaningless and everyone appearing in down-ballot races has to speed everything up – including qualifying for the ballot, fundraising, and securing endorsements.”

Lo and behold, I was right.
Let's review what happened in Tuesday's election.

-The presidential primaries for both major U.S. political parties were effectively over before Californians cast their ballots.

-And worse, turnout was very low. The last reported tally from the California Secretary of State's office said that 4.8 million ballots have been counted, with 2.5 million still to go.

According to reporting from Cal Matters, the total of nearly 7.3 million votes means a turnout of about 33 percent, well below the norm for presidential primaries.

There was no enthusiasm in this election.

In fact, the only way it could have generated less enthusiasm would be if they had called it “The 2024 Grammy Awards.”

Rhetorical side note: How pathetic is it that it takes this long to count ballots?

The fact that there aren't overnight results of the voting makes Californians even less excited to vote. Remember, this is an electorate that becomes enraged when the DoorDash guy takes longer than 15 minutes to bring their shrimp tikka masala.

-Members of Congress decided to retire from office based on their own timetable, and didn't seem to take the sped up primary into account. This created massive headaches and administrative barriers for the candidates seeking to replace them.

Just look at the mess in Kern County. Former House Speaker McCarthy announced his retirement from his Bakersfield-based congressional seat on December 6th, two months after becoming the first House Speaker to be dumped in U.S. history, and two days before the state's December 8th filing deadline.

This unexpected and last-minute vacancy caused a scramble among Central Valley politicians, including Assemblyman Vince Fong, who had already filed to run for re-election to the California state legislature. Ultimately, a judge had to decide that Fong could appear on the ballot.

-And finally, there were uncorrected errors on the ballot. These errors were due to either the incompetence of the Secretary of State Shirley N. Weber or were otherwise her fault. So really, same blame, regardless...
For example, instead of describing U.S. Senate candidate Christina Pascucci as, “Local Television Journalist,” the ballot incorrectly described her as “No Ballot Designation.” This error clearly damaged Pascucci’s chances with voters.

If we’re serious about boosting voter turn-out, we’re going to have to tell Californians that voting is non-GMO and gluten-free. That’s the only way it’s going to happen.

And while we’re at it, it’s time to stop voting in March, and go back to voting in June. Voting in June certainly won’t fix all of our problems, but it’s far superior to what we have now.

*John Phillips can be heard weekdays from noon to 3 p.m. on “The John Phillips Show” on KABC/AM 790*
California state government could use more sunshine

Gov. Gavin Newsom signs the fast food bill surrounded by fast-food workers at the SEIU Local 721 in Los Angeles on Sept. 28. Republican leaders in California are calling for an investigation into why a new state law requiring a $20 minimum wage for fast food workers includes an exemption for restaurants like Panera Bread. DAMIAN DOVARGANES – THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

It’s National Sunshine Week, launched in 2005 by the American Society of Newspaper Editors to highlight the importance of public access to government information.

In California, we’re marking it by trying to figure out how a new law raising the wages of fast food workers ended up with a controversial and disputed exemption for Panera Bread restaurants, and why everyone in on the negotiations had to sign a non-disclosure agreement.
So the outlook for sunshine in California is, at best, partly cloudy.

The story of this new fast food workers law begins in September 2022, when Gov. Gavin Newsom signed AB 257, the Fast Food Accountability and Standards Recovery Act. The law established a 10-member council in the government to establish wages, hours and working conditions in one particular sector of the economy. It applied to fast-food chains.

Before the ink on the governor’s signature was dry, the restaurant industry launched a signature-gathering effort to qualify a referendum for the ballot. That froze the implementation of the law until the voters had the opportunity to decide its fate in the November 2024 election.

This caused great anger among the union special interests that lobbied for the bill, and eventually the result was another bill that aimed to reform the referendum process. Signed into law by Newsom on Sept. 8, 2023, Assembly Bill 421 changed the law to allow the proponents of a referendum to withdraw it from the ballot up to 131 days before the election at which it would go before voters.

This is what enabled the backroom negotiations for a new law. The result was AB 1228, which looks a lot like AB 257, but it removed a provision that made fast-food corporate owners financially liable, along with franchisees, for workplace violations. The franchisees were left with a law that requires a minimum wage increase to $20 an hour effective April 1, and also sets up a government council that functions like a permanent union contract bargaining session, except without the bargaining.

Panera Bread was exempted, Bloomberg News reported, after Gov. Newsom pushed for a strangely specific exemption for fast-food restaurants that produce and sell bread as a stand-alone menu item as long as they were doing it before Sept. 15, 2023. Newsom denies pushing for it, and denies, without evidence, that Panera Bread is exempt.

KCRA’s Ashley Zavala reported that the final negotiations over AB 1228 were conducted by the Service Employees International Union, which demanded that the other parties at the table sign non-disclosure agreements, or NDAs. The other parties were fast food corporations and industry trade groups. Franchisees were not at the table. They were, as the old saying goes, on the menu.

The referendum “reform” that spawned these secret negotiations was modeled on a 2014 law that did something similar for initiatives. Senate Bill 1253 allowed initiative proponents to remove their measure from the ballot after it had qualified, if they were able to work out an acceptable deal with the legislature for something else.

That’s how Proposition 19 got on the November ballot in 2020. The California Association of Realtors originally wanted a measure that would provide portability of property tax bills for longtime owners over age 55 who wished to move to a new home and keep their low
property taxes. After going through the Sacramento sausage factory, the measure that ended up on the ballot had the blessing of the California Professional Firefighters and a massive tax increase on property passed from parents to children.

Other initiatives that qualified for the ballot and then disappeared after private negotiations include 2022 measures that addressed plastic waste and medical malpractice lawsuit caps. In both cases, the Legislature passed a compromise bill.

This process has allowed the direct democracy powers in the state constitution, which date to 1911, to become just one more grind in the sausage factory. Voters can sign petitions all day long, but in many cases all they’re doing is empowering a special interest group to wield leverage with state lawmakers, or other special interest groups, in secret negotiations.

Repeal AB 421 and SB 1253. Let the sun shine.

Write Susan@SusanShelley.com and follow her on Twitter @Susan_Shelley
RIVERSIDE COUNTY

Board won’t split sheriff, coroner

Supervisors rebuff calls for separating offices to avoid conflicts of interest

BY JEFF HORSEMAN

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Riverside County supervisors on Tuesday agreed to keep the Sheriff’s Department and coroner’s office under one roof while supporting measures intended to ease concerns of families whose loved ones have died in jails or through deputies’ use of force.

The 5-0 vote rebuffed requests, including advice from a former supervisor, to separate the offices to solve what critics maintain is a conflict of interest when it comes to the coroner investigating in-custody and use-of-force deaths.

Sheriff Chad Bianco opposed splitting the offices. And a report from the county executive office, which handles county government’s daily affairs, said a split would create more problems than it would solve.

“I'm not certain that the separation that was requested … at this point in time gives us a better result than the refinements and efforts and changes in policies that are being recommended today,” Supervisor Chuck Washington said.

Supervisor Kevin Jeffries, who with Supervisor V. Manuel Perez suggested a feasibility study on splitting the two offices, noted that many jail inmate deaths are drug-related, with Washington lamenting what he called the near-impossible tasks of stopping drugs from being smuggled into jails.

“I’m not completely on board that what the executive office is recommending is the best path,” Jeffries said. “But I’m not sure I know of a better path just yet.”

Bianco’s department, the largest law enforcement agency in the nation’s 10th most-populated county, has come under scrutiny following a wave of inmate deaths — 18 alone in 2022 — in its five jails that have led to lawsuits against the county.

In addition, the California attorney general’s office is conducting a civil rights investigation of the department to determine whether it “engaged in a pattern or practice of unconstitutional policing … relating to conditions of confinement in its jail facilities,
excessive force, and other misconduct,” according to a state justice department news release.

The board ordered the executive office in December to look into separating the coroner and sheriff.

While the sheriff and coroner have been separate for much of the county’s history, supervisors combined it with the sheriff in 1999 amid concerns about mismanagement and a lack of training of coroner employees. Today, 48 of California’s 58 counties have combined sheriff’s/coroner’s offices.

The ACLU of Southern California and the Sheriff’s Accountability Coalition, a group of criminal justice reform advocates, argue that there’s a conflict of interest in having a coroner’s office that reports to the sheriff and is trusted with autopsies and investigations of jail inmate and police-involved deaths.

“An independent examiner would conduct autopsies from a medical standpoint, without the undue influences of protecting the officers or departments involved,” the ACLU wrote in an October letter to the board.

Those calling for separate offices include former Supervisor Bob Buster, who was on the board when the offices were merged. Instead of a coroner, the board could appoint an independent medical examiner to conduct death investigations, Buster told supervisors.

“You can’t allow the biggest department (in county government) to silo itself off from all the rest,” said Buster, who served as a supervisor from 1992 to 2012, when he lost to Jeffries. “Cooperation and openness create their own checks and balances as feedback and debate centers around the best way to meet tough issues.”

Supervisors also heard from the families of deceased jail inmates who talked about the difficulty getting information about their loved ones’ deaths.

One of them was Lisa Matus, whose son, 29-year-old Richard Matus Jr., died in August 2022 after ingesting fentanyl at the Cois Byrd Detention Center in French Valley.

“Families have waited well over a year to get autopsy reports, restricting them from filing suit, and therefore they lose their ability to question or look into what happened to their loved one because most attorneys won’t look at the case without the reports,” said Matus, who is suing the county over her son’s death.

“We as a community are not going to settle for inaction and disregard to the lives of our loved ones,” she added. “If it takes further action, then so be it. Because the corner and the sheriff should never be under the same roof.”
In addition, the board heard from Undersheriff Don Sharp, who defended Bianco and the department’s transparency when it comes to in-custody and use-of-force fatalities.

“I’ve been in this business for 35 years. I’ve worked for many sheriffs,” Sharp told supervisors. “I will tell you, by far … Sheriff Bianco is more transparent than anybody I’ve ever worked with.”

Sharp later added: “This isn’t (a case of) ‘Today, we’re going to start doing something different.’ We’ve been doing that for the last five years (to make) a better department.”

While recommending the coroner and sheriff stay together, the executive office report recommended the sheriff have formal agreements with other counties to conduct independent autopsies of in-custody and use-of-force deaths, something officials said the department is already finalizing.

The board also asked the executive office to work with the sheriff to set up a family liaison office to guide families through the death investigation process. And supervisors want an annual report on how well the department is sharing information with families about their loved ones’ deaths.

“No family should wait a year to hear why their loved one died or how their loved one died,” Jeffries said. “That’s just being mean unless there are some (extenuating) circumstances.”
What Is Orange County’s Law Enforcement Watchdog Investigating?

BY NOAH BIESIADA
3 hours ago

Members of the Orange County Board of Supervisors are starting to ask questions about how much impact their internal auditor for law enforcement, the Office of Independent Review, has on the agencies it’s required to oversee.

“What we’re missing is the implementation piece,” said Supervisor Vicente Sarmiento during Tuesday’s meeting. “Seeing if the things you called into question – have they been cured?”
It’s an office that has long faced questions from county supervisors over how effectively it can do its job, with six employees and a $1 million budget to oversee five departments with a combined budget of $2.6 billion and over 10,000 staff members.

While the office was founded in 2008 to oversee agencies like the Sheriff’s Department and the local District Attorney, it has largely been catatonic for most of its history amidst repeated discussions by county leaders on whether it should exist at all throughout the 2010s.

Those discussions came as the sheriff faced numerous questions over the jail snitch scandal, with the US Department of Justice ultimately ruling the sheriff’s department systematically violated inmates’ civil rights.

Robert Faigin, the current director of the Office of Independent Review, took over in October 2022, and has published a single report, highlighting the sheriff’s department’s work providing healthcare products in county jails.

[Read: Will OC’s New Police ‘Watchdog’ Be Proactive and Transparent? His Background is Sparking Questions]

That report also acknowledged Faigin never had any reason to suspect there was a problem with healthcare in the county jails, and the only reason they started an investigation was because they were asked by Planned Parenthood what services were currently being provided.

“The genesis of this review was not as a result of complaints,” Faigin and staff attorney Rachel Melford wrote in the report. “It appears that a lack of publicly available information regarding the implementation of AB 732 within the OCSD jails prompted requests to OIR for a review.”

At a presentation to the board of supervisors on Tuesday, Faigin said many of the delays were due to how much of a struggle it was to staff his department, noting they’d only reached full staffing in the last three months, and one of their six employees was leaving on Friday.

He also highlighted two more investigations his department is currently conducting – a review of all the deaths at the county jail in 2022 and an investigation on the use of pepper spray at juvenile hall.

“My role is to give the public confidence that what the sheriffs and district attorney’s office are doing is accurate,” Faigin said in an interview ahead of the meeting.
Faigin said his goal moving forward is to publish at least one report a year, but he acknowledged he had to wait until the DA and Sheriff’s Department finished their own internal reviews on issues before he could launch his own investigation.

So far, the DA has issued reports on 12 of the 16 deaths in sheriff custody from 2022, and Faigin’s report said he was still waiting on the DA for any information about the deaths in 2023 and 2024.

When asked by Supervisor Doug Chaffee if the office had enough funding to do its job, Faigin said they would be able to finish the reports he’d already announced.

“I’ll say this supervisor, we could always use more resources,” Faigin said. “As long as we stick to the things in the ordinance and one or two systemic reviews, we can complete those with the staff we have.”

But when asked by Supervisors Katrina Foley and Vicente Sarmiento what reforms had been put in place as a result of Faigin’s work, he said he was too short staffed to follow up on what changes had been made.

“We’ve made several recommendations. I have not, due to resources, gone back to see if they’ve been implemented,” Faigin said. “They’ve been willing and receptive to the recommendations, I just haven’t had the ability to go backwards.”

Both Sarmiento and Foley asked for Faigin to work with the sheriff’s department and the DA’s office on making a public tracker for what impacts his office had on the office’s website.

Right now, most of the office’s website links to dead or empty pages.

Faigin said they were “priming the pump” so more information could come to the website, including the new reports they were working on and other future documents.

“Our goal,” Faigin said, “is to be as transparent as we can and provide as much public information as we can.”

Noah Biesiada is a Voice of OC reporter and corps member with Report for America, a GroundTruth initiative. Contact him at nbiesiada@voiceofoc.org or on X @NBiesiada.
‘We’re throwing the book at criminals’: O.C. aims anti-crime campaign at surrounding areas

The Orange County district attorney’s office has launched a multi-county anti-crime advertising campaign. (Orange County district attorney’s office)

BY HANNAH FRY | STAFF WRITER
MARCH 13, 2024 5 AM PT

Using bumper stickers, billboards and advertisements on public buses, Orange County prosecutors have launched an anti-crime campaign aimed at deterring people from
committing theft there.

In particular, that would be people from Los Angeles and other Southern California counties, whom Orange County officials blame for much of the theft on their turf.

The campaign, which has been underway for more than a week, consists of ads on buses in Los Angeles, Long Beach, Norwalk and Glendale, along with digital marketing targeted at cellphones of people in Orange, Los Angeles, Riverside, San Bernardino, San Diego and Imperial counties. Billboards along freeways and near popular shopping areas feature the message “Crime doesn’t pay in Orange County” in large capital letters. Underneath, they offer those toying with the idea a warning: “If you steal, we prosecute.”

“Over the last several years, Orange County has experienced a significant number of defendants coming from Los Angeles, Riverside, and other surrounding counties with the sole purpose of committing residential burglaries and robberies, smash and grabs, and commercial burglaries,” the district attorney’s office wrote in a news release.

In May 2023, the district attorney’s office announced that it had charged roughly 140 defendants over the course of a year in connection with home invasion robberies and burglaries, commercial burglaries and smash and grab robberies. The majority of those individuals lived outside Orange County, according to a news release published at the time.

In a video announcing the campaign, Dist. Atty. Todd Spitzer took aim at criminal justice reforms, saying legislation passed in Sacramento has made “the risk ... far less
than the reward” for those looking to commit crimes. Supporters of reforms have said the state should continue to put money into programs that advance public safety without perpetuating mass incarceration.

“Sacramento may be rolling out the red carpet for thieves, but here in Orange County, we’re throwing the book at criminals who come here to steal,” he said.

Spitzer has long branded himself as a **law-and-order district attorney** and has been vocal about the issue of retail and residential theft. During his 2022 campaign for the county’s top law enforcement job, he focused on his record of punishing criminals to prevent Orange County from becoming like Los Angeles, using the slogan #NoLAinOC.

Spitzer recently partnered with state Sen. Bob Archuleta (D-Pico Rivera) on SB 923, legislation that aims to increase time spent behind bars for those repeatedly charged with petty theft. The bill, if passed, would reinstate some provisions that were eliminated by voter approval in 2014 of Prop. 47, which turned some nonviolent property crimes into misdemeanors punishable by jail terms of a year or less.

The billboard and bus ads are estimated to cost $150,000 and reach more than 38 million people over their four-week run. The digital marketing campaign is expected to cost up to $75,000. The campaign is being funded using federal asset forfeiture money, according to the district attorney’s office.
The fight over no-camping zones grows more heated

L.A. officials spar over law limiting where homeless can set up tents

AN UNHOUSED man tells police this month that he was not given enough notice to clear his belongings. (Jason Armond Los Angeles Times)

BY DAVID ZAHNISER

For more than a year, Mayor Karen Bass has been telling audiences across the city that she’s been “locking arms” with her fellow elected officials, teaming up with them to ensure the region makes serious headway in the fight against homelessness.

https://enewspaper.latimes.com/desktop/latimes/default.aspx?pubid=50435180-e58e-48b5-8e0c-236bf740270e&_gl=1*1fq6v70*__gcl_au*ODc5NzkyO...
That uplifting message — coupled with dozens of operations moving people out of encampments — has allowed Bass to paper over some of the real policy differences that separate the politicians working with her on the crisis. But those divisions became painfully public last week, with city and county officials throwing sharp elbows.

What precipitated the change? The fight over Municipal Code 41.18, the controversial city law that bars homeless encampments from coming within 500 feet of schools and day-care centers.

Under that law, LAPD officers can issue a citation if an unhoused resident refuses to clear space for a wheelchair or puts a tent within five feet of a doorway. It allows the council to create no-encampment zones around “sensitive” locations, such as libraries, senior centers and freeway overpasses.

On Monday, Los Angeles County Supervisor Lindsey Horvath publicly blasted the law, declaring that 41.18 — which applies only to the city, not the county — is a failure.

“The data is clear,” she declared on X, formerly known as Twitter. “41.18 is a failed policy that has only made our homelessness crisis worse.”

Horvath, who represents parts of the Westside and San Fernando Valley, made those assertions amid an already hot debate over a memo, issued by the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, sharply criticizing 41.18.

That agency, also known as LAHSA, called the law “generally ineffective” at moving homeless residents into permanent housing. In its five-page memo, the agency also concluded that most encampment areas targeted by 41.18 were repopulated within a year.

The document, which is months old but was recently leaked to news outlets, only added to the long-standing tensions between LAHSA, which receives city funding, and some on the council who have voiced distrust in the agency and its handling of data.

On Friday, the council voted unanimously to seek a performance evaluation of LAHSA programs that receive city funding, including data collection and outreach services.

“We’re tired of beating our head against the wall,” said Councilmember Bob Blumenfield, shortly after the vote. “We want to know what are the outcomes, what are the results of our dollars.”

Meanwhile, council members remain divided on 41.18.

Councilmember Hugo Soto-Martínez, who has called for the ordinance to be repealed, welcomed LAHSA’s report, saying it showed that the city is spending millions of dollars on the “ineffective criminalization of homelessness.” Council President Paul Krekorian, a backer of 41.18, took the opposite view, denouncing the report’s contents as “clearly faulty and incomplete, and perhaps even misleading.”

Krekorian said the homeless services authority labeled a 41.18 zone as repopulated even if a single person returned for a single day.
“Considering that many of these sites had been continuously occupied by dozens of tents for months or even years before the amendments to 41.18, to suggest they have been ‘repopulated’ in such circumstances is absurd,” he said.

LAHSA, in its report, acknowledged that the quality of data around 41.18 is low, blaming the city for that situation. The Times raised other issues with LAHSA’s analysis, reporting that, in many locations, the conditions on the ground were very different from those identified by the agency.

LAHSA, in a statement, stood by its work. Meanwhile, the broadside from Krekorian was strong enough to prompt Horvath to issue her rejoinder. Horvath, who sits on LAHSA’s board and is currently its chair, stepped in to defend the agency’s work, calling for an end to “this tired game of finger pointing.”

Horvath declined an interview request. In an email, she told The Times that the ordinance “does not live up to the urgency of the moment.” The city’s “piecemeal enforcement” of 41.18, she said, is “worsening the crisis by directing funds to a program that is not getting people housed.”

Horvath was a council member in West Hollywood before she won her supervisorial seat. That city has a law barring the public from sitting, sleeping or lying on any sidewalk unless they are watching a parade or have a physical disability.

Asked about that law, Horvath said West Hollywood had housing and “substantial services” for its homeless population.

“Every community deserves accessible sidewalks and public spaces, and many jurisdictions have found humane and effective ways to achieve this outcome,” she said in her email.

By the end of the week, other council members had begun defending 41.18, describing it as a critical tool for restoring the public’s access to sidewalks and other areas.

Blumenfield, who represents the West Valley, said he used 41.18 to clear encampments that lined Winnetka Avenue as it passes under the 101 Freeway. Before 41.18, he said, tents occupied the sidewalk on both sides of the street, forcing students heading to and from Taft High School to walk in traffic to get around the encampments.

Blumenfield said his office made offers of shelter to encampment residents before the no-camping signs went up. He also disagreed with the idea that 41.18 had made the city’s homelessness crisis worse.

Once the sidewalks on Winnetka and elsewhere were cleared, it was easier to convince district residents to support new interim housing sites for the city’s unhoused neighbors, Blumenfield said.

“We would never have been able to do that if the underpass was still the magnet for encampments that it had become,” he said.
Councilmember Kevin de León also defended the law, saying it helped his Eastside district see a 7% reduction in unsheltered homelessness. Streets that repopulated, such as the area around the El Pueblo de Los Angeles Historical Monument in downtown Los Angeles, did so because of a lack of law enforcement, he said.

Like LAHSA, the LAPD has been asked to provide information about 41.18 to Chief Legislative Analyst Sharon Tso, who is preparing a larger analysis of that law.

Bass, who spent part of the week in Paris examining preparations for the Olympic Games, has stayed out of the debate so far. When she returns, she will have plenty to contend with on homelessness, and the competing views on how to address it.

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