

CIVIC SUCCESSES: PUBLIC SERVICE AT ITS BEST

INTRODUCTION

Every year, 19 people are chosen to act as a “watchdog” group for all San Diego County (County) residents and are sworn in as the San Diego County Grand Jury (Grand Jury) for a one-year term. This group of concerned citizens reviews numerous complaints from the public and after preliminary investigation, votes on whether to study the issue and possibly write a report. The Grand Jury also studies issues of concern to its own members.

Most of the Grand Jury’s work is a result of citizen complaints or jury-initiated interests, and may result in reports with recommendations for changes and/or improvements. From time to time, the Grand Jury finds agencies doing an outstanding job which warrants a commendation.

Such has certainly been the case for the 2010/2011 Grand Jury—it is hoped County citizens will agree there are many public agencies that do an outstanding job.

INVESTIGATION

Grand Jury members work in committees to look into matters of interest and concern. They call upon their life experiences and differing backgrounds while examining agency documents, evaluating data and doing internet research. They pay close attention to news media. Most importantly, they interview and/or visit those who oversee the local or County agencies that have been called to their attention by citizen complaints.

DISCUSSION

Not every matter that is called to the attention of the Grand Jury is developed into a full report. In many cases, the mere fact the Grand Jury is looking into something results in needed changes being made. In other cases, a preliminary investigation may show the complaint to be without merit. Finally, there are those areas that once examined, come through as prime examples of excellent service worthy of being acknowledged and called to the attention of the public.

Helping Hands to Homeless Youth

Homelessness has been the topic of Grand Jury reports for several years. It was also the subject of a book, *A Street Is Not a Home*, written by now-retired San Diego Superior Court Judge, the Honorable Robert C. Coates. One of the main points in the book is the need to differentiate among homeless populations and to develop specific solutions for them.

A recent commentary in the *San Diego Union-Tribune* that raised the issue of homeless youth caught the interest of the Grand Jury. Since it had not been singled out for individual study in the past, the Grand Jury chose to examine homelessness among youth and what is being done to alleviate it.

When the Grand Jury began its research, it found numerous local organizations on the internet and was concerned these agencies might be working at cross-purposes. However, we were pleased to

discover an extraordinary level of communication within and among the different organizations as well as a very high degree of cooperation. The Grand Jury read many internet articles on the issue and decided to gather information in person from several agencies.

Among others, the Grand Jury interviewed staff from the San Diego Regional Task Force on the Homeless, the San Diego County Commission on Children and Families, San Diego Youth Services, South Bay Community Services, Toussaint Youth Villages, the San Diego County Office of Education, and the Monarch School. Additional information on the school is included in its own section of this report.

The San Diego Regional Task Force on the Homeless and the San Diego County Commission on Children and Families are primarily concerned with improving services to help young homeless persons find places to live and to offer them access to services and skills that lead them to successful adult lives. Among its other services, San Diego Youth Services offers day and night shelter for homeless or runaway youth. Educational agencies work diligently to provide means for homeless youth to continue and complete their studies; Monarch School is a prime resource. Toussaint Youth Villages facilitates keeping homeless youth in school while it works on family reunification. Because the homeless problem is so large, it makes sense to break it into manageable segments.

The Regional Task Force on the Homeless estimates there are more than 2,000 young people who are homeless in the County. Agencies concerned with the homeless problem volunteered to participate in a federally mandated homeless census to ascertain how many persons are living on San Diego's streets. More than 100 volunteers spent many hours doing a count. These volunteers are quick to advise the census data are only an estimate as many homeless were not easy to locate or did not want to be found. Equally difficult to determine is the number of beds available for the young people since so many organizations offer some sleeping space.

Grand Jury members met in person with representatives of the agencies listed below. What impressed the Grand Jury most was the level of passion and dedication shown by all involved with the homeless youth segment of the broad homeless problem.

- Health and Human Services Agency: Child Welfare Services
- San Diego County Commission on Children and Families
- San Diego County Office of Education
- San Diego Regional Task Force on the Homeless
- San Diego Youth Services
- South Bay Community Services
- Toussaint Youth Villages

Because internet addresses change frequently, readers interested in learning more may use Google or other search engines with the inquiry: "Homeless Youth in San Diego."

Medical Examiner and Forensic Center

Not all tours and visits taken by the Grand Jury result in full investigations or studies. In many cases, such outings are planned only in order to make personal observations about a department and provide information to the public.

On February 18, 2011, members of the current Grand Jury had the opportunity to tour the County's Medical Examiner and Forensic Center in Kearny Mesa, which opened in late 2009. It is here reports of more than 10,000 deaths are handled annually. This figure includes investigation of more than 2,500 deaths. Additionally, almost 2,000 autopsies are performed. A critically important function of this agency is the issuance of an official death certificate which comes after investigation, especially when the decedent has not been seen by a medical professional in the preceding 20 days, or when the cause of death is suspect.

The forensic center is quite extensive, beautifully maintained and very, very quiet. One feels a sense of reverence from the time one enters the buildings. Lighting is subdued, voices are low and a tone of respect permeates. The informational brochure is tasteful and its opening message is one of condolence to those whose loved ones are here or will be here for autopsies or other after-death procedures. There is a volunteer chaplain to comfort the bereaved.

Our tour was led by the Chief Medical Examiner, and included an informational PowerPoint video and on-site inspection of the many areas of this facility. The tour was unhurried and fact-filled. Jurors were shown state-of-the art diagnostic equipment. We saw areas devoted to examination and research by the some 50 members of the medical examiner's staff. This group is comprised of investigators, pathologists, toxicology and histology (tissue studies) laboratory professionals and clerical support workers. The Medical Examiner informed the Grand Jury they were carrying on all necessary operations, even though considerably understaffed.

It is hoped this brief discussion of our visit will serve to assure the public the work of this facility is of a high quality and demonstrates why it deserves to be one of only three California facilities fully accredited by the National Association of Medical Examiners.

The Grand Jury commends the Chief Medical Examiner and his extraordinary staff for their professional and compassionate care of the living and respect for the dead.

Monarch School

When members of the Grand Jury visited the Monarch School on Cedar Street in downtown San Diego, the first thing noticed was smiling children waiting for lunch and playing games in a sunlit courtyard. By looking at the youngsters, one would never guess they were homeless or otherwise at risk--they all looked so HAPPY with a capital "H." When the Grand Jury noticed the staff had smiles as well—big ones!

The next stop was the classrooms—some small and cramped, some large, each housing a group of children busily paying attention to their lessons, concentrating on studies, reading and generally showing a level of attention not always seen in schools. Classrooms are bright and cheerful,

decorated with student artwork and educational materials. Many of the children work individually with teachers or in cooperative student teams.

The progress these children make is impressive. Many arrive at Monarch more than three years below grade level, but in a mere six months their academic performance improves by more than a grade level. The students consider themselves lucky to be attending a school noted as the largest and most comprehensive program for homeless children in the country. Monarch is in session 51 weeks each year and its daily attendance rate is a whopping 92%.

Monarch School began in 1988 and the staff currently works with 400 children a year from ages of 4-19, kindergarten through high school. The school operates under the auspices of Juvenile Court and Community Schools. It receives most of its funding from the San Diego County Office of Education. In addition to these funds, which cover teachers and curriculum materials, a 501(c)(3) foundation, the Monarch School Project, provides those crucial extras like food, clothing and health care.

In April 2011, the *San Diego Union Tribune* published an extensive article with the long-awaited announcement Monarch School will move into larger quarters in September 2012. The new location will be large enough to accommodate a computer lab, health center and improved, expanded educational and athletic facilities.

Since enrollment is constantly increasing, the new center will ensure the school staff can continue to say, "We have never turned anyone away...."

Polinsky Children's Center

When public agencies work together and with members of the private community, often very good things happen. The Grand Jury found this to be true when it visited the Polinsky Children's Center (PCC), the facility that replaced Hillcrest Receiving Home in 1994.

The center is operated by the San Diego County Health and Human Services Agency (HHS) and partners with *Promises2Kids* to offer children from infants to 19-years-old a safe haven, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Children are brought to PCC by social workers or law enforcement personnel to escape situations beyond their control.

Staff at PCC is committed to working diligently to place children with a dependable relative or in a foster home within a 23-hour window. This avoids having to house a child at PCC and then uproot the youngster yet again. However, because many children do not have a dependable relative available or immediate foster placement is not possible, the average stay is 12 days; many of the children are eventually placed in foster care. PCC can house 204 children, oversees 60 to 90 children on any given day, and serves about 2,500 to 3,000 youngster annually.

If a child is housed at PCC, he or she is seen during the first 24 hours by a pediatrician. There is an on-site clinic to treat every child as needed who is referred to PCC. If there is a suspicion or sure knowledge of sexual abuse, the child is referred to Rady Children's Hospital for evaluation.

San Diego Unified School District operates a year-round school for grades kindergarten through high school. The school relies on dedicated volunteers in the Youth Mentor Program for additional guidance and support.

Grand Jury members were impressed by the conditions of PCC's physical plant. It is spotlessly clean, colorfully decorated and staffed by people who obviously care about their charges. The kitchen received raves and has a chef who loves to provide meals that appeal to the eye and the taste buds of the children.

The Grand Jury commends the staff and volunteers of PCC for providing the children a safe place to live and learn.

San Diego County Department of Planning and Land Use Cutting through the Red Tape

The Grand Jury initiated an investigation of the San Diego County Department of Planning and Land Use (DPLU) based on a complaint about the length of time it takes to split real property for future development in the County.

The Grand Jury learned that the length of time to split a real estate lot in the County might take years, and require thousands of dollars for studies and technical experts to provide the needed engineering reports to the County. This process is complicated by California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) requirements with which the County must comply.

During the lengthy period the complainant's application was being processed, the County was processing many similar applications. Based on the complexity and length of time required for each engineering report, the complainant's frustration increased. The irony is that most of these reports could only be done in sequential order, not concurrently. The Grand Jury also found that landowners did not receive adequate estimates for costs and requirements in advance of the application, and in some cases, the requirements changed based on the individual planner reviewing the case file. It is not surprising that many landowners abandoned the process in frustration.

The Grand Jury learned that the DPLU keeps track of these abandonments, and through a series of process improvements have significantly reduced the application time. The department is now better able to predict the scope of projects for potential landowners, and estimate both time and cost. The DPLU has also implemented a comprehensive complaint resolution system that better affords a landowner with resolution regarding what must be one of the most complicated services the County provides.

The Grand Jury encourages the DPLU to continue its leadership in resolving old cases, and provide the benefit of the doubt to the landowner in regards to the onerous restrictions of CEQA. The Grand Jury was encouraged by the leadership shown by the DPLU Director in dealing with the complex customer service required for these services.

San Diego County Sheriff's Office Crime Lab

In mid-September, the Grand Jury toured a real-life facility where investigations of crime evidence take place. Unlike the multi-faceted television series, *CSI*, cases are not generally solved in a mere hour. [CSI refers to "crime scene investigator."] Instead, the dedicated staff may spend days, months or even years to bring cases to conclusions.

Many San Diegans do not know that in 2008, a pair of retired investigators won the *Best Cold Case Solved* award from California Peace Officers Association for solving a 1995 rape and murder. It took thirteen years, did not feature television personalities or commercials, but did lead to the conviction of the perpetrator.

The forensic disciplines carried out in our County's crime laboratory run the alphabetical gamut from A to T—alcohol to trace evidence. The Sheriff's lab works with more than 30 local law enforcement and criminal justice agencies except the City of San Diego, which has its own lab. It can access the federal DNA database with its eight million DNA samples of convicted criminals.

Among those on staff are expert analysts of DNA, gas chromatography of alcohol and many drugs, bloodstain patterns, latent print development and documents. Lab personnel work with the San Diego Regional Computer Forensics Laboratory. Crime scene investigators document and preserve evidence so that it may be used to identify suspects and be presented to juries during trial.

Examination of firearms is an important portion of the lab's work. It maintains a "library" of firearms and ammunition and is of invaluable assistance in determining what firearm was used, in analyzing projectile paths and evaluating residue.

The supervising criminalist led the Grand Jury tour. He and his many staff associates provided a wealth of information and demonstrated why they are fully accredited by the American Society of Crime Laboratories Directors/Laboratory Accreditation Board.

United Through Reading

When members of the Grand Jury toured the South Bay Detention Facility (SBDF), they learned about *United through Reading*, a volunteer program that helps to ease the separation of inmates and their children and/or siblings. Inmates have a selection of juvenile books they can record as they read to their child or children. When the recorded reading concludes, a Digital Video Disc (DVD) is sent to the inmate's home along with a copy of the book. A correctional counselor manages this program at SBDF and speaks highly of it.

At present, the *United through Reading* program is in effect at several detention facilities. These include Camp Barrett and the Kearny Mesa and East Mesa Juvenile Facilities, George F. Bailey Detention Facility and Facility 8, Las Colinas, South Bay and Vista Detention Facilities.

Participants are carefully selected by facility counselors and are aided by program volunteers to make the reading experience a bonding one for the inmate and his or her family.

Those who take part in the program are encouraged to send comments to the inmate and to *United through Reading*. Responses indicate the program does indeed provide a valuable experience for all concerned and enables families to see inmates in a more positive light. In some instances, this reading experience is the first the families have shared and many plan to continue reading together when the families are reunited.

The Grand Jury recommends this program be expanded so it is offered at all detention facilities and wishes to single out the facility personnel who currently participate, the volunteers and United through Reading for their contributions.

Note: *United through Reading* also has programs for military families and for grandparents. Those who desire additional information should contact them through their website:

[http://: www.unitedthroughreading.org](http://www.unitedthroughreading.org)