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LA County, struggling to supervise 'high-risk' probationers, pleads for help

Probation Department shifted field officers to a troubled juvenile hall and now can't keep up

The Los Angeles County Probation Department, citing a "significant void" in its supervision of dangerous probationers, is desperately calling on local law enforcement agencies to step in and take over key duties from its officers.

Probation Chief Guillermo Viera Rosa sent out a request for mutual aid in late December asking for the Sheriff's Department and the county's more than 45 municipal police departments to use their officers and equipment to conduct "compliance checks" on probationers over the next year, according to documents obtained by the Southern California News Group in a public records request.

The request comes after Viera Rosa shifted a majority of his field officers out of their existing roles and into the troubled Los Padrinos Juvenile Hall in hopes of addressing a critical staffing shortage that had led to the "inadequate supervision" of youth in the county's custody.

"This crisis has created an unsafe environment for juveniles, probation staff, educators, medical personnel, and community organizations, increasing the risk to public safety," he wrote. "To address this, the Chief Probation Officer has redirected all field probation officers to juvenile institutions to ensure adequate staffing. However, this move creates a significant void in the supervision of high-risk probationers, including those convicted of sexual assault, domestic violence, gang-related crimes, and other offenses."

Viera Rosa asked for the equivalent of 150 peace officers for a 12-month period, according to a fact sheet. Probation would provide "an armed liaison" from its Special Enforcement Operations to assist with the compliance checks and to collect and share data, but police officers serving in their cities would be responsible for arrests and performing checks on probationers "during routine or targeted law enforcement contacts."

That work would come with a hefty financial incentive. The department is offering to reimburse participating law enforcement agencies for two hours for each compliance check, plus the actual time it takes to conduct the check. An example included in the request states that if an agency carried out 50 compliance checks over a nine-hour period, the Probation Department would pay that agency for 109 hours of work total.

Probation officials would continue to oversee the addition and removal of probationers to the program, address court orders and reports, and maintain information on the probationers' addresses, work locations and past arrests, the request states.

The Governor's Office of Emergency Services approved the mutual aid request in mid-January, but so far, the wildfires and recovery efforts have prevented the county's sheriff and police chiefs from meeting to go over the proposal.

“The meeting with L.A. officials is pending, but it is expected to take place in the next few weeks,” said Vicky Waters, a spokesperson for the Probation Department. “Our hope is to have a fruitful dialogue and collaboration with our law enforcement partners.”

A tough sell

Eduardo Mundo, chair of the county Probation Oversight Commission and a former probation supervisor, is skeptical. Law enforcement agencies throughout the country are struggling to maintain their own numbers. Pulling officers away from their existing duties to fill in for probation officers, even in a limited capacity, is likely a tough sell, he said.

“I would be surprised if they get any takers,” Mundo said. “LASD can barely field itself. All of these agencies are short.”

Mundo blamed Viera Rosa’s policies for the short staffing in the field. The department, as part of an effort to bolster staffing at Los Padrinos last year, temporarily redeployed hundreds of field officers and placed anyone with work restrictions exempting them from being sent to the juvenile hall on a mandatory leave.

Critics argued those officers, who were forced to use their sick and vacation time, could have continued to work in the field, as it is less physically demanding, but the department took the stance that if an officer couldn’t work in the juvenile hall, he or she couldn’t perform the duties of a peace officer in general.

“They’re digging their hole deeper,” Mundo said. “Just let the officers who are on restrictions come back. There’s no reason they need to be at 100 percent to work in the field.”

Judicial oversight

The department is under the microscope as a Los Angeles County Superior Court judge is weighing whether to force the closure of Los Padrinos. The juvenile hall, which is out of compliance with state standards and should have closed in December, has stayed open in violation of state law, as county officials continue to argue they have no other options left and cannot release the youth — some of whom are accused of murder — back onto the streets.

Following efforts to reduce the population as much as possible, Los Padrinos now holds about 230 predisposition youth, a term that refers to a juvenile who has been accused of a crime but whose court case has not concluded. All of L.A. County’s other juvenile camps and facilities house post-disposition youth specifically sentenced to those facilities by a judge.

The diminished field offices are a direct result of the Probation Department’s attempts to keep Los Padrinos open.

Emergency powers enacted

In December, Los Angeles County enacted emergency powers, typically reserved for disasters, to speed up the hiring and firing of probation officers, and to allow for the deployment of potentially hundreds of county employees into nonsworn roles to free up even more probation officers to serve in Los Padrinos.

During hearings before Superior Court Judge Miguel Espinoza, probation officials argued that their efforts in recent months have stabilized staffing ratios within the juvenile hall, though Espinoza, in response, expressed concerns about the impact it would have on the rest of the department.

The Probation Department's failure to properly supervise probationers has led to disaster in the past.

A scathing report from the Los Angeles County Office of Inspector General in 2023 found that the department ignored a series of red flags about a convicted gang member who later killed two El Monte police officers and then himself in 2022. Investigators concluded the department had been warned that the man, Justin Flores, had become abusive, was using drugs and carrying a firearm more than a week before the deadly encounter, yet had failed to make law enforcement aware of those allegations.

It remains to be seen whether L.A. County's efforts to bolster Los Padrinos at the expense of its field services will be enough. Judge Espinoza, who has now twice delayed a decision to close the facility, has ordered probation officials and their attorneys to return for another hearing Feb. 14. At the same time, the Board of State and Community Corrections, the regulatory agency that found Los Padrinos out of compliance in the first place, is set to begin a multiple-day reinspection of the juvenile hall on Monday, Feb. 3.

Another failed inspection at this point could serve as the final straw for Espinoza, who until now has hesitated to take action due to the potential chaos it could cause.

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