

Safety and Security of Santa Paula PSSA Office

REASON FOR INVESTIGATION

The Grand Jury launched an investigation into the safety and security of the Public Social Services Agency (PSSA) offices in the County. During the scheduled visit to the Santa Paula office, numerous deficiencies and hazards were noted.

BACKGROUND

The County PSSA has 591 permanent allocated positions. The approximately 400 employees, whose job title is Eligibility Officer and Supervisor, interview persons to determine their initial and continuing eligibility for welfare benefits. The employees also contact other agencies and write the information on the correct forms. Interviews are conducted in private interview rooms in order to insure the mandated confidentiality.

This County PSSA office administers mandated Federal, State and County social welfare programs. The public assistance programs are: Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), General Relief, Food Stamps, Medi-Cal, and Foster Care payments. The 1995-96 budget for these programs totals \$81,508,200.

The Santa Paula PSSA office occupies all of the building located at 1320 East Main Street. It was constructed in 1950. The County has leased the building since 1977. It is located in the eastern part of town and there is on-street parking as well as a parking lot on the west side of the building. A County Medical Clinic has been set up recently in mobile office buildings across a parking lot on the east.

The office in Santa Paula has a staff of between 50 and 63 employees. It serves Santa Paula, Fillmore, Piru and the unincorporated area near these towns. A large percentage of the client population is unemployed or is employed in seasonal work and is eligible for benefits. The office serves approximately 1500 clients each month.

PROCEDURES FOLLOWED

- Interviewed PSSA Director regarding security measures.
- Interviewed Chief Administrative Officer regarding safety and security factors as well as the possibility of moving to new quarters.
- Interviewed Program Management Analyst regarding repairs and replacements and availability of different location.
- Made two walk-through inspections of office.
- Conducted two in-depth interviews with staff of Santa Paula office.
- Reviewed records and documents.

FINDINGS

The first inspection in January revealed the major problem areas listed below:

- The building that houses the Santa Paula office is 46 years old. There have been no major renovations. The agency has occupied the space for 14 years. The number of staff and clients has increased, but the available space has not expanded.
- There are nine interview rooms for approximately 100 clients. The result is that there are many people waiting in the small waiting room for long periods of time. This could lead to frustration and possibly violence.
- The small interview rooms are located in a separate section of the building and do not have telephones or an inter-communication system. Two of the nine rooms are so far away that a shout for help could not be heard by the staff.
- There is no security guard inside nor in the parking lot.
- There is no available space for staff meetings. Training meetings are mandatory and approximately 35 employees are expected to attend regular meetings. When these meetings occur, the aisle is blocked with chairs, creating an evacuation hazard.
- Files are stored in paper file boxes stacked on the floor in the staff area. The boxes sit next to the desks and the aisles, which would hinder evacuation. Files are also stored on open shelves in the staff area. This creates a fire hazard as well as the danger of falling on someone during an earthquake.
- There is no efficient evacuation route in case of a bomb threat or violent intruder.
- There are no overhead sprinklers nor smoke/fire detector alarms.
- There are at least 150 people present at any one time in the building. This includes staff and clients. Many of the clients bring their children with them to the office.
- The large plate glass windows in the waiting room and in two of the interview rooms are not shatter-proof glass. One window has a crack running halfway across it. The front door is plate glass which is not shatter-proof.
- The sidewalk in front of the building is broken and uneven in places.
- There are cracks, bumps and a large "pot hole" in the parking lot.
- The roof guttering and down spout on the front of the building direct the rainwater onto the public telephone and the front door.
- A tour of the building and meetings between County officials and the Santa Paula City Manager took place in November, 1995 and February, 1996. A Memorandum of that meeting (Nov. 20, 1995) stated that, due to the lack of existing rental space in Santa Paula, the County should consider three methods of constructing a new building: (1) Purchasing land and building an adequate office, (2) Leasing a newly constructed building from Santa Paula Redevelopment or (3) Leasing or buying a new building from a private developer.

PROGRESS TO DATE AND COMMENDATIONS

- Security measures are being upgraded in the form of bullet-proof "barrier glass" enclosing the information counter in the waiting room. This was completed in February.
- Digital locks: In February, digital, push-button locks were installed on the front door and the door leading from the waiting room to the staff area.
- Disaster supplies: A large trunk contains supplies such as blankets, flashlights and first aid supplies for use in case of an earthquake or other disaster. Employees may purchase a small, individual kit for a nominal fee. These are kept at the employees' desk or in their cars.
- Disaster training: Classes have been offered to employees for the past two years. These include instruction in first aid & procedures for safety during a disaster. There is a wide variety of classes and they are well attended.
- PSSA has agreed to purchase drinking water as part of the Earthquake Kit.
- The two large interview rooms which had been closed off for two years, are now in use. In March, the asbestos was removed, the ceiling was replaced and the walls were painted. The adjoining hallway walls were also repainted.
- The County Chief Administrative Officer and the Program Management Analyst conducted a walk-through inspection on November 9, 1995. A "Safety Inspection List" of 41 deficiencies was compiled. As of March 24, 1996, 24 have been remedied. Many minor problems were taken care of in January, 1996, by the General Services Agency (GSA).
- The above named officials have provided the Grand Jury with this list and also memos with an update of repairs made and work to be done.
- The Santa Paula Fire Department made an inspection on February 27, 1996 and found two minor violations. It will be asked to calculate the "maximum occupancy load" for the building in order to assure safety.
- The new, month to month, lease will state that, if the landlord does not carry out his responsibilities for repairs, the County will have the repairs made and deduct the cost from the rent.
- According to the new lease, the County will assume responsibility for maintenance and custodial service. A written policy will be developed that defines the responsibility of both the General Services Agency (GSA) and PSSA.
- The County is currently working with a real estate agent to locate possible rental buildings or building sites in Santa Paula. Six sites are designated for further investigation. If these efforts fail, the County should locate sites for construction in Santa Paula and the surrounding areas.
- PSSA has agreed to consider revising some operational procedures in order to alleviate the crowded condition. These include: Expanding client hours, instituting a 5 day week, utilizing another office, providing a cost estimate for modular partitions and furniture and also for hiring a person to facilitate the movement of files to and from a storage area.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The 1995/96 Grand Jury recommends:

1. The remaining items from the Safety Inspection List prepared by the County should be resolved. Some of these are:
 - a. Secure file cabinets and television cabinet to the walls.
 - b. Add emergency lighting.
 - c. Supplement First Aid and Earthquake Kits. (This should include a supply of drinking water, but not that which is purchased by the employees.)
 - d. Replace large windows with safety glass and secure them.
 - e. Add smoke/fire detector alarms.
 - f. Repair sidewalk and parking lot.
2. A transparent "vision panel" should be inserted in the interior door (in the east hallway) so that no one is hit when it is opened from the other side.
3. A "panic button" device should be provided to employees using the most distant interview rooms. This requires no wiring. It is an electronic pendant worn on a cord around the neck.
4. The County Chief Administrative Office should make every effort to obtain better housing immediately. Mobile office buildings should be set up if a permanent site cannot be obtained within the next 2 months. The office of the Program Management Analyst should continue to keep the Grand Jury informed of progress.
5. Five years ago, the Recommendation of the 1990-91 Grand Jury was that the office be relocated to an "upgraded and larger building". At that time, a plumbing problem was solved and two interview rooms were added. Problems remaining were those of overcrowding, inadequate file storage space and the unfinished storage room.

In 1990-91, the response from PSSA was that, while they concurred with the recommendation to relocate, there was not any suitable commercial property in Santa Paula. It was also stated that Santa Paula preferred to keep the agency in the same part of town (the east side). It stated that the long-range plan included new housing in a "multi-service county facility within five years."
6. It is our recommendation that our County employees be provided with decent surroundings in which to work. Both the employees and citizens deserve a safe and pleasant facility.

It has now been 5 years. In spite of the recent improvements listed above, the building is 46 years old and crowded. It is inefficient, uncomfortable, and only marginally safe. It stands in stark contrast to the modern PSSA offices in Oxnard and Ventura. The more expensive of the recent improvements, the barrier glass and the digital locks, can be transferred to another building.

It would appear that the only good thing about this office is the location, which is convenient for the clients and for some of the employees.

RESPONSE REQUIRED

PSSA Director

County Chief Administrative Officer

Board of Supervisors