

## **SECURITY OF VENTURA COUNTY COURT FACILITIES**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Committee conducted an investigation into the adequacy of security precautions at the Ventura County Court Facilities.

### **SCOPE**

This investigation was primarily concerned with the screening systems in place to maximize the safety of people within the building and restrict entry of unauthorized persons. The security systems at Ventura County Court facilities were evaluated and compared with those in place in other counties.

### **INQUIRY**

The following materials were reviewed:

A report from the U.S. Department of Justice, United States Marshals Service, District of Arizona, detailing considerations to be taken when securing a judicial facility

A Los Angeles Times article, Ventura County edition, March 4, 1997, interviews with county officials expressing security concerns at the Ventura County Hall of Justice

A Ventura County Sheriff's Department, Court Services Bureau, memorandum submitted to the Grand Jury detailing their planned proposal for full screen entry

Traffic study reports made available contained the number of persons entering the building Monday through Friday, as well as Saturday and Sunday. Included in this report was the Law Library entrance

We considered a 1994 security consultant's report which was presented to the Board of Supervisors

We interviewed staff from the following:

- Executive Officer of the Ventura County Courts

- General Services

- Law Library

- Superior/Municipal Courts

- Sheriff

- Public Defender

- District Attorney

- Chief Administrative Office

- Correction Services

- Judicial Security Panel

We visited courthouses in the cities of:

- Van Nuys

- Los Angeles

- Orange

- Riverside

- Simi Valley

## FINDINGS

- Department of Justice recommendations include identifying interior and external problem areas, combining both personnel and physical security through the use of electronic detection systems.
- Officials within the Ventura County Hall of Justice have a renewed sense of urgency since the December 1993 Employment Development Department shooting which resulted in the deaths of four county employees.
- In May 1995 the Court Executive Officer submitted a Capital Project Request to the Chief Administrative Officer supporting full entry screening. The Courthouse Construction Fund was identified as a possible source of revenue necessary for the installation and construction. This request was not supported by analysts of the 1995/96 budget because "the fund had been previously committed to other projects."
- A Hall of Justice traffic study report made in 1995, revealed that foot traffic through the North Door, South Door and Law Library Entrance Door totaled 2,065 for a typical weekday.
- During our investigation we found the most chilling testimony relating to the seriousness of the present lack of security within the Ventura Hall of Justice Building. A few of the concerns addressed were:
  - No visitor screening for weapons, except at the entry to the fourth floor
  - Congestion in the hallways outside emotional child support hearings
  - Witness/waiting rooms are shared by citizens, police officers and gang members waiting to testify
  - Building lighting is automatically turned off after 6:00 p.m. which, in some cases, has caused employees to use flashlights to find their way out of the building
  - the change of make-up in the public which uses the Law Library present a new threat to personnel
  - No protection at the Information Desk to deter a visitor from climbing over the counter.
- The Van Nuys Courthouse has long lines of people waiting to pass through the metal detectors. No identification is required by Court staff.
- The Federal Courthouse in Los Angeles seems to be the epitome of security systems. Everyone passes through detectors—no exceptions. The system is in service twenty-four hours.
- The Riverside Courthouse has metal detectors at the door as well as an x-ray device for the screening of all materials coming into the building. This complex does differ from Ventura County's in that this is only a courthouse; there are no other tenants in the building. A private security force works with the sheriff to monitor detection devices in all parts of the courthouse, including the holding area for prisoners awaiting court hearings.
- The Orange County Courthouse, like Ventura County, has many tenants. It has a detection system similar to Riverside's. There are no exceptions to screening of individuals or parcels.

- The Simi Valley Courthouse has no metal detectors anywhere in the building. It lacks even the most basic precautionary measures, which makes it the most vulnerable of all the courthouses we visited.
- Supportive statements of concern regarding the safety of all individuals within the Ventura County Court Facilities were received from:

Sheriff's Department

General Services Agency

Office of the District Attorney

Corrections Services Agency

Presiding Judge of The Superior Court

Executive Officer, Ventura County Superior and Municipal Courts

Presiding Judge, Ventura County Municipal Court

Judicial Security Panel

## CONCLUSIONS

1. Courts around the world have a recent history of becoming places where violence is occurring. It would seem to be only a matter of time before an incident happens in Ventura County. Security measures must be enhanced to minimize possible occurrences in Ventura County.
2. The safety of the judges, lawyers, sheriffs, jurors, county employees, and the general public should be accorded the highest priority so that all employees and visitors to the Hall of Justice may have a safe environment in which to conduct the business of the courts.
3. The existing private security personnel assigned to the Hall of Justice are not equipped to address the potential possibility of violence that could occur within the court complex.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Review, initiate, and implement a total security system at all County Ventura Court Facilities.
2. All persons entering the courts must be required to pass through metal detectors; the contents of any boxes, briefcases or purses searched with an x-ray screening machine. Hand-held metal detectors must be made available for additional searches.
3. A minimum of two screening lanes should be provided for this purpose. Provisions for exiting, handicap access, including seeing-eye-dogs, and employee accommodations will be provided.
4. Provide roving security details manned by deputy sheriffs to spot check grounds, restrooms, hallways, and library seven days a week at the Hall of Justice, as well as Simi Valley.
5. The Sheriff's Department should provide random canine searches to detect explosives.

COMMENDATION

We would like to thank the members of the Sheriff's Department for their cooperation and advice concerning this report. Without their help, this report would not have been possible. The support of the judicial staff gave us the motivation to present this study for immediate consideration by the Board of Supervisors. The Ventura Office of the Federal Bureau of Investigation gave us the initial information needed to proceed with our investigation. To all other agencies and personnel our sincere appreciation.

RESPONSE REQUIRED

The Ventura County Sheriff's Department  
Chief Administrative Officer of Ventura County  
Presiding Judge of the Superior Court  
Judicial Security Panel  
Ventura County Board of Supervisors