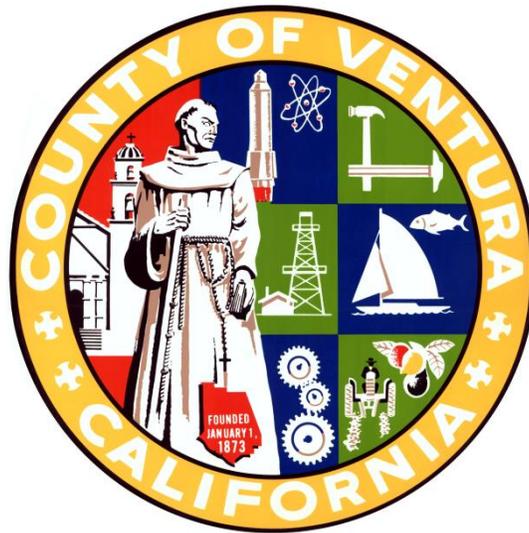


# **Ventura County Grand Jury 2018 - 2019**



## **Final Report**

### **Ventura County-Contracted Narcotic Treatment Programs May 2, 2019**

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# **Ventura County-Contracted Narcotic Treatment Programs**

## **Summary**

The 2018-2019 Ventura County Grand Jury (Grand Jury) received a complaint regarding the narcotic treatment programs (NTP) in Ventura County (County) and opened an investigation into the oversight and administration of the NTP clinics by Ventura County Behavioral Health (VCBH).

The Grand Jury investigation focused on Aegis Treatment Centers, LLC, (Aegis) and Western Pacific Med Corp. (Western Pacific), which contract with VCBH to provide services to people who are addicted to opioids. These privately owned providers offer initial assessments, medication-assisted treatment (MAT) and counseling.

On December 4, 2018, the Ventura County Board of Supervisors (BOS) authorized VCBH to award contracts worth more than \$5 million over a seven-month period to Aegis and Western Pacific. These entities operate a combined total of five clinics in the County.

VCBH has oversight responsibility over the administration of the contracted programs provided by these clinics. The Grand Jury concluded that VCBH does not provide data to the public on the performance outcomes of these programs. The Grand Jury also concluded that VCBH does not document all of its site visits, further indicating a lack of adequate oversight.

The Grand Jury concluded that VCBH defers a significant part of the oversight to state and federal agencies and recommends VCBH more closely monitor these clinics as contracted.

The Grand Jury also recommends VCBH evaluate security at the contracted NTP clinics.

## **Background**

The State of California (State) Narcotic Treatment Program Directory dated November 2018 lists 167 treatment locations, of which 127 are for-profit. The State licenses NTP clinics and provides multimillion-dollar funding through the Medi-Cal program to counties, which select, contract and monitor these clinics.

Aegis and Western Pacific are for-profit entities that provide medication-assisted treatment (MAT) using methadone and Suboxone. These substances are used as a replacement therapy for opioid dependency and have a dual purpose. They not only block the effects of other opioids, but also relieve cravings and withdrawal symptoms. While these medications can cause physiological dependence, they help prevent the life-threatening conditions caused by opioid drug abuse and help some people to sustain recovery.

## **Methodology**

The Grand Jury reviewed VCBH contracts with Aegis and Western Pacific, as well as neighboring county contracts with other Aegis treatment clinics. The Grand Jury conducted interviews with County officials, local law enforcement and representatives from the Drug Enforcement Administration. The Grand Jury conducted internet research and reviewed marketing materials from the Aegis and Western Pacific websites.

The Grand Jury also made unannounced visits to the treatment clinics to collect informational brochures. The Grand Jury reviewed independent audit and compliance (utilization) review reports submitted to VCBH and the State over the period 2013 to 2019.

## **Facts**

- FA-01.** The Aegis and Western Pacific clinics are contractually required to provide detailed reports of services provided and outcome data to VCBH. However, VCBH does not make any of this information available to the general public. (Ref-01)
- FA-02.** For the past several years VCBH has contracted with Aegis and Western Pacific to provide narcotic treatment and counseling services in the County. The contract requires VCBH to "...conduct at minimum an annual review of the facility, policies, and documentation of compliance, conduct a survey of clients and staff, tour the grounds, and address any concerns or issues found." (Ref-01)
- FA-03.** An internal audit by VCBH conducted of Aegis and Western Pacific records from February 4, 2013, through August 22, 2018, showed consistent problems with documentation. Most notably, at one of the clinics, more than half of 100 reviewed files revealed that methadone dosage was not charted as required.
- FA-04.** The Aegis website states that "80% of our patients are drug free within 90 days." It also states that "88% of our patients stop using illicit opioids within 90 days." These two statements are conflicting. They are also incompatible with VCBH's stated aim, which is not to cure, but to "treat" or stabilize NTP patients so they can be healthy and productive members of society. (Ref-02)
- FA-05.** A Harvard School of Medicine expert, among other researchers, has drawn parallels between "opioid use disorder" and type 2 diabetes, i.e., both requiring lifelong management. (Ref-03)
- FA-06.** The Grand Jury interviewed law-enforcement and city-government officials. It was learned that incidents involving people loitering, trespassing, passing out, and drug dealing occurred in the immediate vicinity of some of the clinics. VCBH acknowledged that illicit drug use might occur outside some clinics but had no knowledge of any of these incidents involving clinic patients. VCBH stated that of the five NTP clinics, only the Aegis clinic in Oxnard maintains security personnel on site.

**FA-07.** VCBH staff said they conducted unannounced site visits in 2018-2019, but did not document them.

## **Conclusions**

**C-01.** The Grand Jury concluded that opioid addiction could result in a lifelong MAT regimen. Aegis marketing materials and VCBH's stated aim are confusing with regard to the effectiveness of MAT and the cure rate for opioid-addicted patients. (FA-04, FA-05)

**C-02.** The Grand Jury concluded that VCBH does not provide any data to the public on measurable outcomes of the NTPs in the County. (FA-01)

**C-03.** The Grand Jury concluded that VCBH does not conduct sufficient unannounced site visits and facility inspections. When conducted, site visits were not documented. (FA-02, FA-07)

**C-04.** The Grand Jury concluded there is lack of oversight by VCBH regarding adequate documentation by NTP clinics in Ventura County. This could put at risk future government funding. (FA-03)

**C-05.** The Grand Jury concluded that some NTP clinics lack sufficient security for the safety of patients and the public. (FA-06)

## **Recommendations**

**R-01.** The current VCBH contracts require one site visit per year by VCBH staff. The Grand Jury recommends more unscheduled visits and documentation of those visits upon completion. (C-03)

**R-02.** The Grand Jury recommends that VCBH fulfill its contractual obligation in oversight of each clinic. (C-03, C-04)

**R-03.** The Grand Jury recommends that the Ventura County Auditor-Controller conduct a timely performance and compliance review of Aegis and Western Pacific contracts. (C-03, C-04)

**R-04.** The Grand Jury recommends that VCBH adhere to all federal, State and County contractual policies and procedures in order to ensure continued funding for the administration of narcotic treatment programs. (C-04)

**R-05.** The Grand Jury recommends that VCBH improve its existing educational materials regarding the goals and reasonable expectations of MAT programs. (C-01, C-02)

**R-06.** The Grand Jury recommends that VCBH provide performance outcome data to the public on its contracted MAT programs. (C-01, C-02)

**R-07.** The Grand Jury recommends that VCBH enhance security at contracted NTP clinics. (C-05)

## **Responses**

### Responses Required From:

Ventura County Board of Supervisors (C-01, C-02, C-03, C-04, C-05) (R-01, R-02, R-04, R-05, R-06, R-07)

Ventura County Auditor-Controller (R-03)

### Responses Requested From:

Ventura County Behavioral Health, Department of Ventura County Health Care Agency (C-01, C-02, C-03, C-04, C-05) (R-01, R-02, R-04, R-05, R-06, R-07)

## **References**

**Ref-01.** Aegis and Western Pacific contracts

<http://bosagenda.countyofventura.org/sirepub/cache/2/jvvybvn3w34tfqpeyiw0euii/71132504302019043006464.PDF>

Accessed April 30, 2019

**Ref-02.** Aegis Treatment Center website

<https://www.aegistreatmentcenters.com/treatment/>

Accessed April 30, 2019

**Ref-03.** "Can Opioid Addiction Be Cured?" May 19, 2017, Vanessa Shipani

<https://www.factcheck.org/2017/05/can-opioid-addiction-cured/>

Accessed April 30, 2019

## **Glossary**

<b><u>TERM</u></b>	<b><u>DEFINITION</u></b>
Aegis	Aegis Treatment Centers, LLC
BOS	Ventura County Board of Supervisors
County	County of Ventura
Grand Jury	2018-2019 Ventura County Grand Jury
MAT	Medication-assisted treatment, which combines behavioral therapy and medications to treat substance use disorders
Methadone	Schedule II opioid analgesic used to relieve chronic pain and reduce drug cravings in those addicted to substances such as heroin and other prescription drugs
NTP	Narcotic treatment program
State	State of California
Suboxone	A prescription medicine use to treat adults who are dependent on opioids.
VCBH	Ventura County Behavioral Health
Western Pacific	Western Pacific Med Corp.