

Editorial

Men's Central Jail should be demolished. But what should replace it?



A Los Angeles County Sheriff's deputy look over a cell module at Men's Central Jail in downtown L.A. last August. (Los Angeles Times)

By **THE TIMES EDITORIAL BOARD** *contact the reporter*

- Editorials
- Opinion
- Crime
- American Civil Liberties Union

Men's Central Jail needs to go, but how should L.A. County replace it?

The price tag makes the jail construction project the most expensive in county history

"Can we get some better light in here?" asks a man sitting on his bunk in a cell at Los Angeles County's Men's Central Jail. He has given up trying to make out the words in a paperback book and directs his question to Assistant Sheriff Terri McDonald, who is leading visitors down a corridor straight out of an old prison movie. Inmates grab the bars of cells lined up on one side. Deputies can't peer in from a safe distance and must repeatedly walk the floor to spot any problems.

McDonald's response to the lighting question reaches past the issue of bulbs and wiring to the design and condition of Men's Central Jail. "I want to tear this place down," she tells the inmate (who eagerly offers his assistance).



After three years of turmoil arising from abuse of jail inmates, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors on Tuesday agreed to outside monitoring of nearly all aspects of its jail operation. (The Times editorial board)

And she repeats this to the visitors as they move through other wings of the jail, where inmates sit on bunks jammed into dorm rooms instead of cellblocks. "If I accomplish one thing while I'm here, it's to take this place down," she says. "And replace it."

And replace it — there's the rub. Virtually no one defends the dungeon that is Men's Central Jail, built in 1963 and expanded in the 1970s. But replace it with what? How big a facility? At how high a cost?

The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors spent the last decade putting off those questions. Then, in May, it [adopted a \\$2-billion plan](#) to demolish the complex and build a new 4,800-bed downtown jail designed around the clinical needs of the large number of inmates with mental health and substance abuse problems, as well as the security requirements of inmates who pose a high risk of harm to others. Also part of the plan is a 1,600-bed campus-like women's jail in Lancaster.

[IRelated](#)



EDITORIAL

L.A. sheriff's overseer should be independent and focus on disclosure and accountability

SEE ALL RELATED

The supervisors chose the plan from among several [presented by Vanir Construction Management Inc.](#), a firm in the business of building such facilities. The price tag makes the construction project the most expensive in county history.

The updated design would certainly be an improvement over the current jail, yet it remains rooted in questionable estimates and bygone practices. It ignores the conclusions of a [2011 jail population study](#) commissioned [by the board](#), then for all practical purposes forgotten.

If they build a jail, they will fill it.-

The Vera Institute of Justice report noted that the safest and most efficient use of the jails required that each county agency that sends people there — the district attorney, city attorneys, the Probation Department, plus the courts — reduce unnecessary incarceration as much as possible. And it laid out ways to achieve that goal.

The county jails on any given night house more than 3,000 people diagnosed with severe mental illness, and Los Angeles County Dist. Atty. Jackie Lacey, leading a task force to do the kind of diversion the Vera report recommended, contends that a smart diversion and treatment program could lower that population by 1,000.

Other factors already lowering the jail population, or with potential to lower it, include:

[cComments](#)

[ADD A COMMENTSEE ALL COMMENTS](#)

[18](#)

- Release of low-risk inmates awaiting trial. Sheriff's officials are studying an extremely modest pilot program for release of 25 inmates who remain in jail only because they can't pay bail. But criminologists have estimated that there are 1,000 inmates similarly situated and who present much lower flight risk than some of their more violent counterparts who can afford bail.
- Proposition 47, the November initiative that reduced six felonies, including simple drug possession and shoplifting, to misdemeanors — meaning that conviction of those offenses will result in shorter sentences. The measure already has reduced the jail population by hundreds, mostly former felons who already had done their time under the reclassification.
- Split sentencing. Beginning Jan. 1, judges imposing sentences for a category of felonies deemed non-serious must divide the felons' time between jail and supervised release, or else state on the record why they opted not to do so.



Proposition 47, adopted last month, turned six drug possession and low-level property felonies into misdemeanors, setting in motion some rejiggering of California's criminal justice system. Among the changes in Los Angeles is the transfer of caseloads among jurisdictions: Many crimes formerly... (The Times editorial board)

In pushing forward with a new jail that could keep as many people locked up as were, say, two years ago, the Board of Supervisors is in effect making an astounding policy statement: The current jail population is the correct one, despite the [theoretical embrace of mental health diversion](#), the ability to authorize some no-bail, pretrial releases, and the recent reduction of sentences for some crimes. And the \$2 billion — or perhaps twice that, when including bond interest — should all be spent on incarceration [rather than more effective, and cost-effective, alternatives](#).

Such a statement is both incorrect and potentially self-fulfilling: If they build a jail, they will fill it. In other words, the supervisors won't have the incentive — or the money — to build out the county's capacity for more just, more efficient and more effective community-based programs to end the cycle of recidivism.

Supporters of the Vanir plan point out that Men's Central Jail is so over-capacity that inmates serve only 20% to 40% of their sentences. They argue that the space freed up by mental health diversion and all the other ways of reducing the jail population should be used to ensure that inmates serve their full time. But even if they do, the potential reductions would outpace the need for jail space.

Men's Central Jail should be demolished. But again, replaced with what? A jail that will house just as many people as the current one, or a scaled down version that permits smarter use of limited resources?

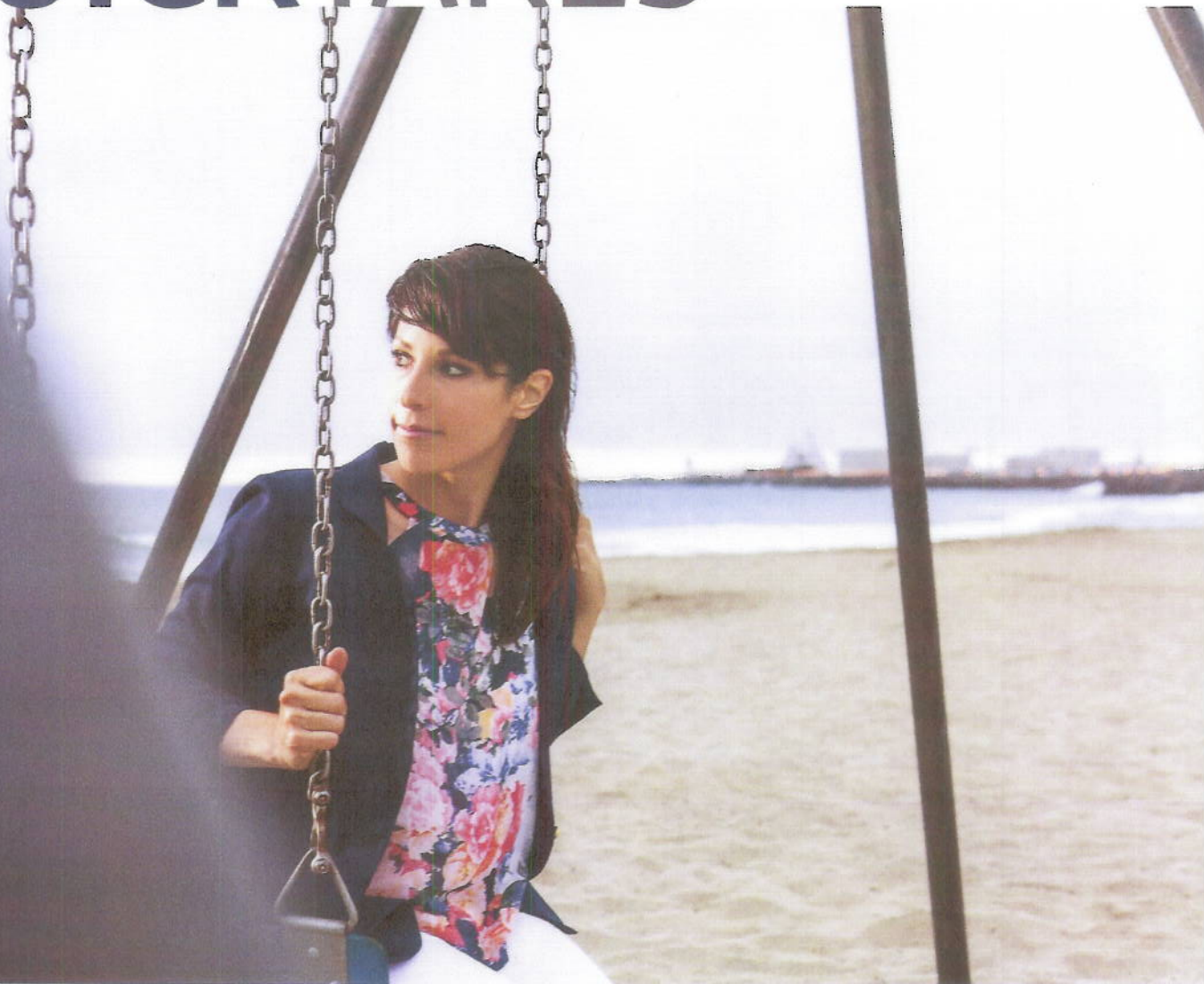
The Board of Supervisors, reconstituted following November's election, should rethink the plan adopted in May. In fact, it may have to; an [American Civil Liberties Union of Southern California complaint on file with Lacey's office asserts](#) that the action was not properly agendaized and violated state open-meeting laws.

The supervisors should grant the sheriff pretrial release authority, launch Lacey's diversion program, study the effect of Proposition 47 and split-sentencing, and take a sober look at the county's options. Somewhere between Vera and Vanir, they should find a better, more affordable way forward.

Follow the Opinion section on Twitter [@latimesopinion](#)

Copyright © 2015, Los Angeles Times
by [Taboolaby Taboola](#)

QUICKTAKES



A SLAVE NO MORE

"DON'T USE THE WORD 'PROSTITUTE.'"

After introductions are made, that's the first thing Carissa Phelps M.B.A./J.D. '07 says. She's referring to the thousands of girls and boys in the U.S., victims of human trafficking, whom adults have forced into the sex trades through systematic rapes and abuse. For Phelps, it's an important, sometimes misunderstood, distinction that's intensely personal and essential for her current work.

Phelps did not publicly discuss her own saga until she was a graduate student at UCLA. Since then, she's been the subject of an award-winning documentary, *Carissa* (directed by UCLA Anderson classmate David Sauvage M.B.A. '07 and viewable at [\[vage.com\]\(http://www.davidsauvage.com\)\), and written a memoir, *Runaway Girl: Escaping Life on the Streets, One Helping Hand at a Time*. It's the kind of story one wishes were fiction, because it's painful to know that Phelps' harrowing story is true.](http://www.davidsau-</p></div><div data-bbox=)

Phelps was a runaway by age 12, escaping a troubled and dangerous home life. She fell under the control of a pimp and began a life of forced sex and drug use, ending up arrested multiple times by age 14. That did it. She began taking steps to rise above the streets.

Encouraged by a youth counselor at juvenile hall and a math teacher, she returned to school after a three-year absence, eventually graduating from high school and Fresno State University, where she earned a B.A. in mathematics, with honors. Then she became a

high school math teacher and ultimately made her way to UCLA. There she began to tell her story.

"When I was at UCLA Anderson, I planned to go into private equity," Phelps says. "I wanted to start a fund through local investing that would focus on costly social questions. But I stepped away, went back to Fresno, wrote the book and formed Runaway Girl in early 2012."

Runaway Girl, a California FPC, or for-profit entity with a "special" or social purpose, creates employment opportunities for former runaways and survivors of human trafficking. The company hires survivors to work as trainers, consultants and advisers with local and community-based organizations that help victims of human trafficking. Trainers also work with legal, medical and law enforcement groups to teach them to see the girls and boys they meet not as prostitutes committing a crime, but as victims. "We get them to treat survivors as experts instead of criminals," Phelps says.

According to the Polaris Project, a nonprofit, nongovernmental organization, there were 27 million people in modern-day slavery in 2007. Phelps believes the numbers are higher, because many victims don't come forward out of shame. "Anyone can be trafficked, from skilled workers to college students from stable, loving families," Phelps says.

"Basically it is a buyers' market, and whatever buyers demand is what will be sold. Putting a price on a person's heart and mind is bad, but what's worse is some of the physical and mental control tactics that traffickers use."

Through Runaway Girl, Phelps restores some control to the victims. The company currently has 24 trainers and experts-in-training, including Rachel Thomas, a survivor who is also a Bruin (M.Ed. '08). Though Phelps' organization is predominantly California-based, Runaway Girl collaborates with trainers and organizations across the country, including in Oregon, Georgia, Virginia and Kentucky.

Phelps' passion for her work becomes palpable when she is discussing the success of those she supports. "Some of our trainers get hired by our partners," she says, adding that three of them were hired without high school diplomas because they were considered experts.

"Most of us are uncomfortable with impossibly cheap labor and young children as sex symbols, but being uncomfortable is not enough," Phelps says. "What we buy, what we watch and what we talk about is up to us. We decide when doing nothing is no longer an option. We decide when to act, and of course I believe the time is now."

— Paul Feinberg '85



Carissa Phelps turned tragedy into triumph as she rose from runaway to holder of an M.B.A. and a law degree from UCLA. Now she helps other former runaways and survivors of sexual exploitation.