CALMATTERS

The Inland Empire

A weekly look at how people in the IE are living, learning and working.

October 21, 2026 | Donate

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County honors local businesses at State of County event



An overpass with "San Bernardino" painted on it on Interstate 210 on April 18, 2024. Photo by Zaydee Sanchez for CalMatters

San Bernardino County supervisors honored eight local businesses and the San Bernardino Valley College (SBVC) at the annual State of the County address Oct. 8.

“San Bernardino is a region full of people who are taking risks, finding problems and finding ways to benefit their communities,” said County Supervisor and master of ceremonies Dawn Rowe.

County supervisors brought to the stage leaders from the community college; Stater Brothers, which was founded in Yucaipa 90 years ago; Colton’s candy shop Logan’s Candies; Chino’s Cold Star Ice; Fontana’s Kaiser Permanente; the waste disposal company Burrtec Waste; Victorville’s aviation repair company ComAv; Colton’s methane detection company Ecotech and the gold mine Castle Mountain Mine, near Needles.

The Castle Mountain Mine is planning to expand, said Luis Plancarte, director of community relations for the mine’s owner, Equinox Gold. The company wants to hire roughly 375 people if its expansion plans are approved by the county.

Many guest speakers said they found success through putting people first.

“We have an amazing team at EcoTech—I think everyone’s going to brag about their teams tonight,” said Alan Vidal, the company’s chief technology officer.

Pete Van Helden, Stater Bros. executive chairman, said the chain has lasted so long because of its staff: the chain is fully unionized and has no plans to replace its checkout lines with automatic checkout. “We really believe in the human-to-human interaction that’s needed in our business,” he said.

Dr. Nathan Gonzalez, Chair of the Board of San Bernardino Valley College, said the college was approved by voters in 1926 by a margin of 30-1, and now has a record enrollment of 30,000 students.

You can watch the presentation **on YouTube**.

PUBLICCEO California's Top News For Local Government Leaders

San Bernardino County Board of Supervisors adopt resolution supporting Legacy Village housing project

October 20, 2026

The San Bernardino County Board of Supervisors unanimously adopted a resolution on Oct. 20 in support of the San Bernardino Community College District's Legacy Village housing project and conditionally committed $28 million from the Foster Youth Campus Reserve toward its development.

The project itself will be led by the college district and include 88 affordable housing units to be constructed by Jamboree Housing Corporation, 180 workforce housing units and 461 student housing beds to be developed by The Annex Group, LLC. Additionally, the development will include approximately 9,100 square feet of space for flexible use and food services, as well as approximately 9,280 square feet of space for conferences and community meetings. The project will also potentially serve transitional-age former foster youth.

"Expanding access to affordable housing for transitional-age youth is an important step in supporting their stability, independence and long-term success," said Board of Supervisors Chairman and Third District Supervisor Dawn Rowe. "We are grateful to the college district for their partnership and commitment to advancing this important project."

"Every young person deserves the opportunity to build a stable and successful future," said Vice Chair and Fifth District Supervisor Joe Baca, Jr. "Legacy Village will do more than provide housing, it will connect young people with education, workforce opportunities and the support they need to become self-sufficient. This is an investment in our youth, our workforce and the future of San Bernardino."

The housing development is intended to connect residents with educational opportunities, workforce development, childcare, transportation, health and behavioral health services, and other resources that support long-term housing stability, education attainment and economic mobility.

“Having a stable place to live can make the difference between putting college on hold and earning a degree that changes a family’s future,” said Dr. Diana Z. Rodriguez, chancellor of the San Bernardino Community College District. “Our vision for Legacy Village brings housing, education and support services together so local students and families can build that future. We are grateful for the county’s partnership and support in moving this vision forward.”

The adoption of the resolution aligns with the county’s goals to address housing insecurity, strengthen workforce readiness and promote neighborhood revitalization through public-private partnerships.

“This project demonstrates the power of partnerships in addressing critical community needs,” said County Chief Executive Officer Luther Snoke. “Legacy Village will make a positive difference in the lives of residents across our region.”

The board’s support and conditional commitment are designed to facilitate project planning, the pursuit of funding opportunities and coordination of the housing, community amenities and supportive services that are planned for Legacy Village. Adoption of the resolution does not guarantee funding, which would require further action. Any financial agreement or approval related to Legacy Village will be presented to the board for consideration and approval at a future meeting.

For more information about Legacy Village, please visit the project website.

About San Bernardino County

San Bernardino County is a diverse public service organization serving America’s largest county that for three consecutive years has led the nation in awards for innovation, efficiency and outstanding public service. We are governed by an elected Board of Supervisors and dedicated to creating a community where nearly 2.2 million residents can prosper and achieve well-being in fulfillment of the Countywide Vision. It is comprised of 42 departments and agencies, which are staffed by more than 23,000 public service professionals who provide a wide range of vital services in the areas of public safety, health care, social services, economic and community development and revitalization, fiscal services, infrastructure, recreation and culture, and internal support. For more information, visit sbcounty.gov.

About the San Bernardino Community College District

The San Bernardino Community College District serves nearly 30,000 students through San Bernardino Valley College and Crafton Hills College. Together, the colleges offer more than 140 academic and career training programs, including nursing, firefighting and skilled

trades, along with pathways to university transfer. Financial aid helps keep college and career training affordable and within reach. SBCCD also operates the Economic Development & Corporate Training Center and KVCR Public Media, the Inland Empire's NPR and PBS affiliate station. Learn more at www.sbccd.edu.

Upgraded Rialto library branch opens featuring AniMaker Space



Children and families explored the newly renovated Rialto Branch Library following its reopening after a two-month closure in Rialto on Monday, Oct. 19, 2026. The upgraded library features the county's second AniMaker Space, an interactive storytime area with a mini animatronic character, immersive globe projection and 3D projection mapping. Visitors also had the opportunity to meet former astronaut José Hernández during the celebration hosted by San Bernardino County and the city of Rialto.(Photo by John Valenzuela/Contributing Photographer)

By **STAFF REPORT | San Bernardino Sun**

PUBLISHED: October 20, 2026 at 5:22 PM PDT | UPDATED: October 20, 2026 at 6:08 PM PDT

San Bernardino County and the city of Rialto on Monday, Oct. 19, hosted a ribbon cutting ceremony to celebrate the reopening of the newly renovated Rialto Branch Library following a two-month closure.

The branch now includes the county's second AniMaker Space — the AniMaker Space at Fontana Lewis Library and Technology Center opened in 2023 as the first of its kind for a public library. "This space paved the way for children, teens and adults to learn cutting edge technology, from operating 3D printers to programming animatronics," the county website says.

The system was developed by Garner Holt Education Through Imagination.

Additionally, a new storytime area at the Rialto Branch features a mini animatronic character, immersive globe projection and the capability to incorporate 3D projection mapping onto the walls, a county news release said.

Speakers at the event included former astronaut José Hernández.

The branch was renovated at a cost of $1.7 million.

California DOJ Declines Charges in 2024 Fatal Shooting by Sheriff's Deputies

by **Contributing Editor** October 20, 2026

The state's Department of Justice announced Tuesday that it has declined to file charges against sheriff's deputies who shot and killed a man who pointed a replica firearm at them.

Deputies responded around 9:20 p.m. on March 16, 2024, to Gage and Eastman avenues in East Los Angeles, where 28-year-old Martin Sebastian was harassing customers at El Tio Tono Market with a metal stick, according to the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department.

Sheriff's officials said Sebastian was armed with a replica firearm when deputies made contact with him, pointed it toward them, with deputies shooting and killing him.

He died at the scene, and a replica firearm was recovered. Investigators from the California Department of Justice responded to the scene to conduct an independent investigation regarding the shooting and to provide any further updates regarding the incident.

"Loss of life is always tragic, and we hope that this report provides Mr. Sebastian's family and the community closure. Our priority is to protect the rights of individuals while also fostering a system that promotes trust and accountability between law enforcement and Californians," Attorney General Rob Bonta said in a statement.

Bonta said his office works to protect the state and ensure shootings by officers comply with the law, adding that Assembly Bill 1506 is crucial to achieving that goal.

According to the DOJ, AB 1506 requires the department investigate all circumstances involving officer-involved shootings resulting in the death of an unarmed civilian in the state.

"After conducting a comprehensive investigation into this incident, DOJ concluded that the evidence does not show, beyond a reasonable doubt, that the deputies involved acted without the intent to defend themselves and others from what they reasonably believe to be imminent death or serious bodily injuries," the department said in a statement.

The department said there was insufficient evidence to support criminal prosecution of the deputies and that no additional action is expected in the case, adding that three recommendations related to the shooting were identified as part of the investigation.

The first recommendation called for the sheriff's department to amend its body-worn camera policy and provide additional training on camera activation and discussions permitted and prohibited during debriefs after deputy-involved shootings.

The second recommendation calls for compliance with sequestration policies to preserve the integrity of investigations, while the third calls for the department to amend its policy and provide additional training on preserving evidence related to deputy-involved shootings.

San Bernardino police chief and council members face new legal claims from Councilmember Treasure Ortiz



San Bernardino City Councilmember Treasure Ortiz on Tuesday, Sept. 1, 2026 during her misdemeanor eavesdropping trial. (File photo by Anjali Sharif-Paul, The Sun/SCNG)



By **ISRAEL J. CARREÓN JR.** | icarreon@scng.com | San Bernardino Sun

PUBLISHED: October 20, 2026 at 7:44 PM PDT | UPDATED: October 21, 2026 at 10:39 AM PDT

San Bernardino City Councilmember Treasure Ortiz's fight against the city continues with the filing of a new claim for damages against the city's police chief, other police personnel and fellow City Council members.

The claim was filed Oct. 1, but first came to light last week when an agenda for Wednesday's San Bernardino City Council meeting was posted, noting council members would be reviewing the claim in closed session.



San Bernardino Police Chief Darren Goodman is called to the stand as a witness in the San Bernardino City Councilmember Treasure Ortiz's case of two misdemeanor eavesdropping charges on Monday, Aug. 24, 2026, at the San Bernardino Justice Center. (Photo by Anjali Sharif-Paul, The Sun/SCNG)

The Oct. 1 filing date was two weeks before Ortiz was sentenced to 30 days in jail, fined $500 and placed on probation for illegally recording a conversation with Police Chief Darren Goodman.

Ortiz's attorney, Peter Schlueter, provided the claim to the Southern California News Group. Such claims are typically precursors to lawsuits.

The claim stems from “damages arising from alleged unauthorized access to my personal information through the California Law Enforcement Telecommunications System (CLETS), the city’s response to my report of that access, and an alleged coordinated course of conduct intended to discredit me and harm my personal and professional reputation,” Ortiz said in her submitted liability claim form.

A city spokesperson did not immediately comment on the claim’s status as of Tuesday evening.

Ortiz said by phone Tuesday evening that she filed the claim within the six-month statute of limitations as a private resident and maintains that at one point, Goodman told her a crime was committed against her. Ortiz also says that her April censure hearing organized by fellow council members was a “mechanism to weaponize her position as a council member,” where colleagues on the dais “preemptively went after me with false information and unsubstantiated claims.”

As previously reported, the Ward 7 councilmember alleges that police Detective Steve Desrochers improperly accessed the CLETS to check Ortiz’s criminal history. However, the city and Goodman have disputed Ortiz’s claims, saying the department did not illegally or improperly search her in the database. Goodman said the then-mayor, John Valdivia, filed a police complaint against Ortiz for her allegedly threatening him, which led to her name being run through CLETS as part of that official investigation.

Ortiz disagrees.

“The chief of police unequivocally told me that Steve Desrochers illegally ran me through CLETS and unequivocally told me that he was already speaking with the District Attorney to prosecute, and unequivocally texted me that he was working on the criminal prosecution of Desrochers,” Ortiz said, adding, “I was asked to press charges against Steve Desrochers by the chief of police.”

Goodman’s take on this, per a lawsuit he filed against Ortiz and the city, is that after Ortiz told him her name had been illegally ran through CLETS, he looked into it and found “Ortiz’s central claims were false.” The investigation’s focus then turned against Ortiz as she had telephoned the Department of Justice and fraudulently identified herself as a member of the San Bernardino Police Department in an attempt to obtain restricted information, and had illegally recorded a conversation with Goodman, according to Goodman.

“The fact that (Goodman) was in the position, as chief, to investigate Ortiz and to find her claims demonstrably false made it necessary (for Ortiz) to undermine and discredit the chief as much as possible,” Goodman’s suit says.

Ortiz includes San Bernardino Police Sgt. Jose Loera and Detective Myra Doner in her claim for allegedly filing police reports that “contained false factual statements, materially misleading descriptions, or omissions that distorted the events,” Schlueter alleged in the claim to the city.

Also listed in Ortiz’s claim are councilmembers Theodore Sanchez, Fred Shorett and Kimberly Knaus, for allegedly failing to “uphold their fiduciary responsibility, not create more of a burden for the taxpayers and to service the best interest of the residents, not their own selfish personal vendettas,” according to a document attached to the city’s liability claim form written by Schlueter.

Loera, Doner and Sanchez had not responded to requests for comment as of Wednesday morning. Shorett declined to comment.

“Councilmember Ortiz was censured unanimously, by all seven council members, and a statement was read on behalf of our city by the mayor refuting Ortiz’s allegations,” Knaus said in an email statement sent Wednesday. “I think the community, our staff, and council members are over the continued false allegations. This is more of the same rhetoric coming from someone who has been convicted and sentenced to 30 days in jail for a crime involving deceit. As someone who is from San Bernardino, I believe we can be better. Our city deserves more than empty noise and falsehoods. It’s time for us to move our city forward, and that’s what I will continue working to do.”

Goodman’s attorney, Joe Richardson of McCune Law Group, said in an email statement: “This claim appears to be another attempt by Ms. Ortiz to distract from the fact that she was convicted for illegally recording our client, and that the claims in her federal lawsuit against our client have been dismissed.”

The filing comes a month after Ortiz’s guilty conviction for illegally recording a conversation with Goodman without his consent, which resulted in the 30-day jail sentence. Initial charges also included illegally recording a conversation with Loera; jurors acquitted Ortiz of any wrongdoing involving the police sergeant. Ortiz said plans to appeal are still “moving forward.”

Goodman and Loera have filed their own claims against Ortiz and the city — in Goodman’s case, the claim evolved into the previously mentioned lawsuit. Goodman alleges that Ortiz created a hostile work environment and subjected him to harassment and that the city allegedly failed to address her conduct.

According to a letter attached to Loera’s claim, attorney Kasey Castillo said that Ortiz publicly attacked the sergeant’s character and asked the city to “conduct a comprehensive human resources investigation” into Ortiz’s comments and actions. Castillo also states that Ortiz may have violated city policies and breached professional conduct standards for elected officials.

Both are seeking more than $10,000 in damages.

Ortiz says she is not seeking a dollar amount in damages.

“My purpose is a transparent, accountable government, and legitimacy that we know that we are protected,” Ortiz said.

Ortiz, in the meantime, is pursuing her federal lawsuit against Desrochers, Loera, former Interim San Bernardino Police Chief Eric McBride, former San Bernardino City Attorney James Penman and the San Bernardino Police Officers Association. Goodman and the city were earlier dismissed as defendants in that lawsuit.

hoodline
INLAND EMPIRE

IEHP Turns 30, Opens Massive 33,000-Square-Foot Wellness Hub in San Bernardino

By Riley Bennett

Published on October 20, 2026

Source: Omnitrans Joint Powers Authority / **Wikimedia Commons**

Inland Empire Health Plan is marking 30 years of operation with a major expansion: a new two-story, 33,000-square-foot Community Wellness Center opening in San Bernardino this November. The health plan, which now covers 1.4 million people across Riverside and San Bernardino counties, says the facility at 2050 N. Massachusetts Ave. will be its largest community site yet, packed with fitness, cooking, technology and youth programming.

IEHP opened its doors on Sept. 1, 1996, serving 62,000 Medi-Cal members through a network of 650 providers, according to a news release from the health plan. Three decades later, the organization says it provides affordable health coverage to 1.4 million people, or about one in three Inland Empire residents. IEHP CEO Jarrod McNaughton said the organization has become “a community of more than a million people who trust it with their health,” as reported by the San Bernardino Sun.

To mark the milestone, IEHP launched an anniversary campaign called “30 Years, Caring Together,” which the news release says honors the members, providers and communities that have been part of the organization's journey since 1996. The health plan also points to its broader role in the community, noting it brings resources directly to residents through vaccination clinics, well-child screenings and telehealth options, per the same release.

What's Inside the New San Bernardino Center

The new facility is designed to be more than a clinic. IEHP's own site describes the two-story space as having “something for everyone,” including a fitness studio, a food demonstration kitchen, multipurpose rooms, a computer lab, in-house partner suites, a kids' playroom and a teen center, according to IEHP's website. The San Bernardino Sun

reports the grand opening is set for 10 a.m. Saturday, Nov. 21, 2026, with tours, opportunities to meet staff members and other activities planned for the occasion.

Additional detail from a groundbreaking report describes six multipurpose rooms that will double as accessible meeting and gathering spaces, a teaching kitchen with seating for up to 50 people, five partner suites and a multimedia room, per ConnectCRE. That outlet also reports the San Bernardino center is the first of three Community Wellness Centers planned for the region, with Riverside and Victorville to follow — though the San Bernardino Sun's reporting lists Riverside and Victorville as locations where IEHP already has centers. IEHP says anyone in the Inland Empire is welcome to visit and explore the new space.

A Push Toward Everyday Wellness

The opening lines up with IEHP's 30 for 30 Challenge, which runs through October and November and invites members and community residents to complete 30 minutes of wellness-based activity five days a week for 30 days. Per the news release, qualifying activities can include walking, fitness classes, cycling, meditation and chair exercises. IEHP plans to bring the 30 for 30 programming to its Community Wellness Centers in Riverside and Victorville, and to San Bernardino starting in November.

At the San Bernardino site specifically, the health plan says visitors can expect a wide range of classes, from strength training and crochet to healthy cooking demonstrations and Zumba. IEHP's website notes the center offers free parking and security during operating hours for anyone who stops by.

Provider Numbers and a Bigger Footprint

IEHP's growth claims come with some inconsistency in the numbers it has published about its provider network. The organization's own history page states it has more than 8,000 providers in the Inland Empire, while its 30th-anniversary news release says the network now includes more than 10,000 quality providers supported by nearly 3,600 team members. IEHP separately describes itself as one of the top five largest Medicaid health plans in the nation.

The new San Bernardino center also represents a dramatic jump in size from what came before it. A local report describes the current San Bernardino Community Wellness Center location as just 6,500 square feet, according to the HSJ Chronicle — meaning the new facility will offer roughly five times the space once it opens next month.

Desert Sun.

WEATHER

California temperatures cool as rainstorm forecast to shower the state



Ernesto Centeno Araujo
USA TODAY NETWORK

Oct. 20, 2026, 1:59 p.m. PT

As temperatures cool across California, a rainstorm is expected to shower areas of the state starting late Oct. 20.

The National Weather Service has forecast rain across Southern and Central California, as well as the Sierra Nevada, as the storm is expected to bring snow, rain, and dangerous surf.

The early weeks of the fall season have seen high temperatures as heatwaves have blanketed the state.

A tropical storm brought light showers and slightly cooler temperatures last week, but the coming rainstorm would be the first of the season to bring substantial rain to large parts of the state.

Which parts of California will the storm affect?

How much rain is California expected to get?

Snow, rain, and thunderstorms are in the forecast for parts of California, with the strongest impacts south of the Central Valley.

Sierra Nevadas

While much of Northern California is expected to stay dry from the incoming rainstorm, areas around the Sierra Nevadas could see light showers and a chance of thunderstorms as early as Oct. 20., the weather agency says.

Elevations above 8,000 feet could see 3 to 6 inches of snow, with heavier amounts at higher elevations.

Central Valley

Areas south and east of the San Francisco Bay Area, including Fresno, Visalia and Merced, may receive light rain under an inch on Wednesday, with Shaver Lake seeing over an inch.

Central Coast

Parts of the central and Southern California coast into Los Angeles are expected to receive between a half-inch and an inch and a half of rainfall starting Oct. 21, with peak times during the day to the afternoon of Oct. 22. The mountains could receive up to 3 inches, the agency says.

Hazardous conditions include flooding and debris flow in areas with recent burn scars, high surf and dangerous rip currents in the Ventura and Los Angeles County coasts, and a 30 to 40% chance of thunderstorms.

Southern California

Orange County, along with western parts of Riverside and San Bernardino counties, has a 30-50% chance of rain early Oct. 21, with chances increasing at night and farther east and south into San Diego County. As temperatures cool across California, a rainstorm is expected to shower areas of the state starting late Oct. 20.

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Southern California

Orange County, along with western parts of Riverside and San Bernardino counties, has a 30-50% chance of rain early Oct. 21, with chances increasing at night and farther east and south into San Diego County. The Coachella Valley could see scattered showers, though rainfall amounts are expected to be light. The biggest impact may be cooler temperatures.

Ernesto Centeno Araujo covers breaking news for the Ventura County Star. He can be reached at ecentenoaraujo@vcstar.com, 805-437-0224 or@ecentenoaraujo on Instagram and X.

CALIFORNIA COURIER

Hit With a 29% Rate Hike, FAIR Plan Customers Get New Answers Under Assemblyman Phil Chen's New Law

October 20, 2026

New law requires California's insurer of last resort to post policy counts by ZIP code and total risk exposure every quarter

More than 675,000 Californians insured through the FAIR Plan are now paying more, after the insurer of last resort's 29.1% average rate increase took effect Oct. 15. A new law by Assemblymember Phillip Chen will make the plan show the public, ZIP code by ZIP code, how many properties it covers and how much risk it carries.

The increase is the largest in the plan's recent history, and some homeowners in high wildfire risk areas will see their wildfire premiums double, KQED reported. Los Angeles County also opened an investigation on Oct. 7 into how the FAIR Plan handled claims from the January 2025 Eaton and Palisades fires, citing resident complaints of delays, underpayments and denials.

Assembly Bill 2061 was signed Sept. 30 and filed as Chapter 918, Statutes of 2026. It requires the California FAIR Plan Association to post on its website each quarter the number of policies it has issued in each ZIP code and its total risk exposure. The bill drew no opposition in either house, passing the Senate 40-0 and clearing its final Assembly vote 78-0 on Aug. 31.

The plan, a safety net for property owners who cannot find coverage in the regular market, keeps growing. As of June 2026, the plan had 696,562 policies in force, up 157% since September 2022, and total exposure of $768 billion, up 250% over the same period, according to the FAIR Plan.

Chen, an assemblyman who represents the 59th Assembly District in Orange and San Bernardino counties, made his case in a statement quoted in the Assembly Insurance Committee's April 22 analysis of the bill.

"The FAIR Plan should be transparent with their data and make every effort to allow every Californian to be easily informed about the insurance market in the state," Chen said in the statement.

That statement described an earlier version that also called for reporting claims activity and policyholders moved out of the plan through its clearinghouse program. The final law keeps the two core requirements, ZIP code policy counts and risk exposure. It also deletes a requirement that the association publish its toll-free number in all general distribution telephone directories.

The committee analysis notes that the California Department of Insurance, by executive action on July 1, 2025, required the FAIR Plan to post total exposures, policy counts and financial data online. The analysis says the bill "builds off of this executive action and places more structure and requirements of the FAIR Plan." The Little Hoover Commission registered support, and no opposition was on file. Republican state Sen. Roger Niello coauthored the bill and carried it on the Senate floor.

Pressure on the plan has built for years. State Farm General Insurance Co. stopped accepting new homeowners applications in California effective May 27, 2023, citing "historic increases in construction costs outpacing inflation, rapidly growing catastrophe exposure, and a challenging reinsurance market."

Then came the January 2025 Palisades and Eaton fires. On Feb. 11, 2025, Insurance Commissioner Ricardo Lara approved the FAIR Plan's request to assess its member insurers $1 billion so it could keep paying claims. The plan had exhausted $510 million in retained earnings and estimated its total loss from the two fires at about $4 billion, according to the commissioner's order. Under the deal, insurers may recover half of the assessment from policyholders through a temporary supplemental fee, subject to the commissioner's approval.

Lara's answer has been his Sustainable Insurance Strategy, completed in December 2024. On Aug. 3, the department reported that FAIR Plan growth slowed to 1.9% in the second quarter of 2026, a net gain of 12,305 policies. The department estimated that about 24,000 policies left the plan in April and May, and said 11 homeowners insurance groups and two major commercial insurers have committed to grow in the state under the strategy.

"We are turning the corner. FAIR Plan growth has slowed for three consecutive quarters, thousands of policies are leaving the Plan, and insurance companies are writing more coverage under our new rules," Lara said in the release.

AB 2061 writes quarterly ZIP code reporting into state law. The department's 2025 disclosure requirement was an executive action.

Chen serves as vice chair of the Assembly Banking and Finance Committee and sits on the Insurance Committee.

When is a child's death a crime, and when is it a tragic accident?

Column: Well-intentioned efforts at prevention and family preservation haven't reduced child abuse and neglect deaths, experts say



Josiah and Jestine James died of fentanyl poisoning. (Courtesy of James family)



By **TERI SFORZA** | tsforza@scng.com | San Bernardino Sun

PUBLISHED: October 21, 2026 at 8:48 AM PDT | UPDATED: October 21, 2026 at 12:10 PM PDT

Part 2 of a series on child deaths in Southern California. Read Part 1 here.

Justice can't bring back the dead. But it can provide a neat, narrative closure that allows us to overlook the arguably deeper tragedies lurking just below the surface.

The demise of 3-year-old twins Josiah and Jestine James made headlines in July 2024. The toddlers got into their mother's purse, found drugs in a colorful container and died of fentanyl poisoning. Mom Jestice James was charged with murder and child abuse/abandonment; pleaded no contest to child abuse; and was sentenced to 18 years in state prison.

"These innocent boys reportedly came into contact with fentanyl, an opioid that has wreaked havoc across our communities," then-Los Angeles District Attorney George Gascón said in a statement then. "This tragedy is part of a disturbing trend where babies and toddlers are increasingly becoming victims of the opioid crisis. The deadly capabilities of fentanyl cannot be overstated, and it is our collective responsibility to protect those who cannot protect themselves. My office is committed to holding accountable anyone who exposes vulnerable children to such dangerous substances."

What the headlines didn't mention was that the twins' family had a troubled history with child protective services and law enforcement. There were reports of domestic violence, emotional abuse, caretaker absence/incapacity, severe and general neglect, and more, according to files detailing the boys' death investigation. Their mother was an alleged victim when she was a minor, and the same was true for their maternal aunt.

Now, however, their mother was "estranged." The twins remained in the family unit, living with their maternal grandmother in the San Fernando Valley. Mom attended the party celebrating the twins' third birthday on July 10, 2024, and stayed the night.

The next day, “police responded to a call regarding domestic violence,” a screener report says. “When officers entered the apartment, they observed several people gathered around a table. Officers heard individuals saying, ‘Give ’em more Narcan, give ’em more Narcan!’… there were two unconscious children lying on the table surrounded by adults…. (Redacted) had been deceased for extended time because jaw/mouth would not open.”

The complexities of addiction, neglect and troubled family histories wreak more havoc than safety systems seem willing to fully acknowledge.

Baby Adam Bumanglag’s start in life may have been as difficult as his exit from it. He was a “prenatally substance-exposed infant” born in July 2023, irritable, “floppy,” with a high-pitched cry. “(M)other is trying to leave against medical advice (without the baby),” a child welfare screener wrote at the time. Adam stayed in the hospital’s neonatal intensive care unit for a month and was taken into protective custody in Los Angeles County.

His parents were offered family maintenance and reunification services about three months later. Things apparently went well, and in April 2024 — about six months after those services were offered — the state’s jurisdiction terminated and joint legal custody went to his parents, with physical custody to his mother. At about 9 months old, Adam was reunited with his family.

DESCRIPTION OF SERVICES AND ACTIONS

Date of Death: 8/14/2025

DESCRIPTION OF SERVICES AND ACTIONS:[1]

I. Description of child protective or other services provided and actions taken by the child welfare agency, relating to the deceased child. Check all boxes that apply.

Description of Service or Action	Date(s)
☐ Alternative Response Services	
☐ Voluntary Family Maintenance	
☐ Voluntary Family Reunification	
☒ Protective Custody	7/25/2023 from mother and father
☐ Initial Visitation Order	
☐ Other:	

II. Description of actions taken by the juvenile court, if applicable, relating to the deceased child. Check all boxes that apply.

☒ Detention	7/28/2023 from mother and father
☒ Ordered Family Reunification Services	10/5/2023 to father
☒ Ordered Family Maintenance Services	10/5/2023 to mother
☐ Termination of Family Reunification Services	
☐ Termination of Parental Rights	
☐ Adoption	
☐ Legal Guardianship	
☐ Placement with relative or NREFM[2]	
☐ Permanent Placement Services	
☒ Other:	10/5/2023 – home of mother 4/4/2024 – jurisdiction terminated; custody order of joint legal custody to parents and physical custody to mother

[1] This document is prepared in conformity with Welfare and Institutions Code 10850.4(c)(2)(F) and AB 1625 of 2016.

[2] "Non-relative extended family member."

HOA.101356710.1

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Screenshot from file on death of Baby Adam

But on Aug. 14, 2025, Adam's mom called 911 and told the dispatcher that Adam wasn't breathing. An ambulance rushed him to the emergency room in cardiac arrest. The medical examiner concluded that he died from the effects of fentanyl and cocaine.

Adam was 2 years old. His parents, Jacob Bumanglag and Paloma Ramirezlopez, have been charged with murder and child abuse. They have pleaded not guilty.

The question haunting such tragedies is: Did these children really have to die? Is there more that the child welfare, law enforcement and court systems could have, should have, done to protect them from the complexities of addiction and a drug as murderously ruinous as fentanyl?

It's well known that substance use usually takes more than a few months to beat. The U.S. Surgeon General's landmark report on Addiction in America noted it can take as long as eight or nine years after a person first seeks formal help to achieve sustained recovery.

"If you are asking me personally, not in my capacity as a DDA (deputy district attorney), yes, DCFS (the Department of Children and Family Services) needs to do a better job," said Jonathan Hatami, a veteran of the Los Angeles District Attorney's office who heads up complex child abuse cases. "LA City and County need to do a better job. California should take a more realistic approach to substance use and addiction. Even one child dying from a fentanyl overdose is too much."

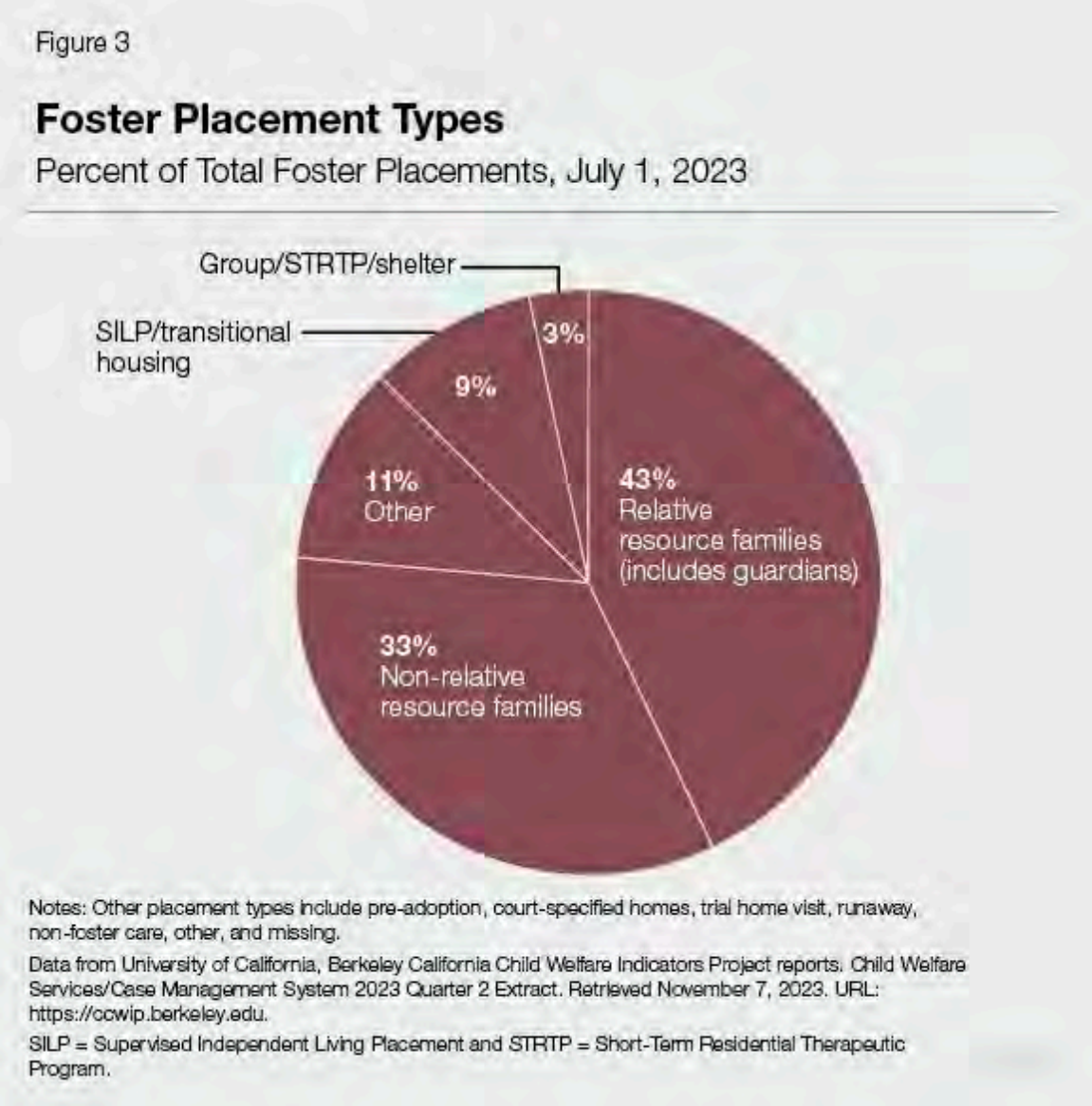
Policymakers at the state and county levels have the power to change this. "We prosecute crimes and try to get justice for children usually after something bad already happens," Hatami said. "They make laws."

Heavy weight

The Southern California News Group reviewed thousands of pages of child abuse and neglect fatality case files for Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside and San Bernardino counties from 2024 and 2025. We found that drug and alcohol use factored into nearly half of them, and that the overwhelming majority of families were no strangers to the child welfare system. With few exceptions, the dead children's families were repeatedly scrutinized by child welfare, police and/or criminal justice systems, but children remained with troubled families nonetheless.

That's at least in part by design. The federal Family First Prevention Services Act changed decades of policy that swiftly swept kids into the child welfare system when their parents struggled with addiction. Instead, states were empowered to use federal funding to wrap those families in the support needed to succeed. Those services could include mental health care, substance abuse treatment, in-home parenting programs, home nurse visits and the like, designed to keep families intact "whenever safe to do so."

It's hard to know exactly when it's safe to do so and when it's not. Social workers agonize: Will it end badly? Will it improve? Making recommendations to "remove" or "remain" haunt them.



Screenshots from Legislative Analyst's Office report

"These are just super hard things," said Michael Cull, who leads the technical assistance team at the National Partnership for Child Safety. "By and large, the work we see in a case that leads to a fatality is no different than in a case that doesn't lead to a fatality. You can have good casework with a bad outcome, and bad casework with a good outcome."

Families may agree to accept voluntary services; services might be ordered by the court. But it's not clear if these interventions work or are just performative. Entries into the child welfare system have plunged by nearly half over the past two decades, but confirmed child abuse and neglect deaths have ticked up, both nationally and in California.

"The unfortunate truth is that we don't have highly effective, scalable programs that address the most intractable social problems with the hardest-to-engage populations," wrote researchers Emily Putnam-Hornstein and Sarah Font in "Family First's Big Bet on Prevention Hasn't Paid Off."

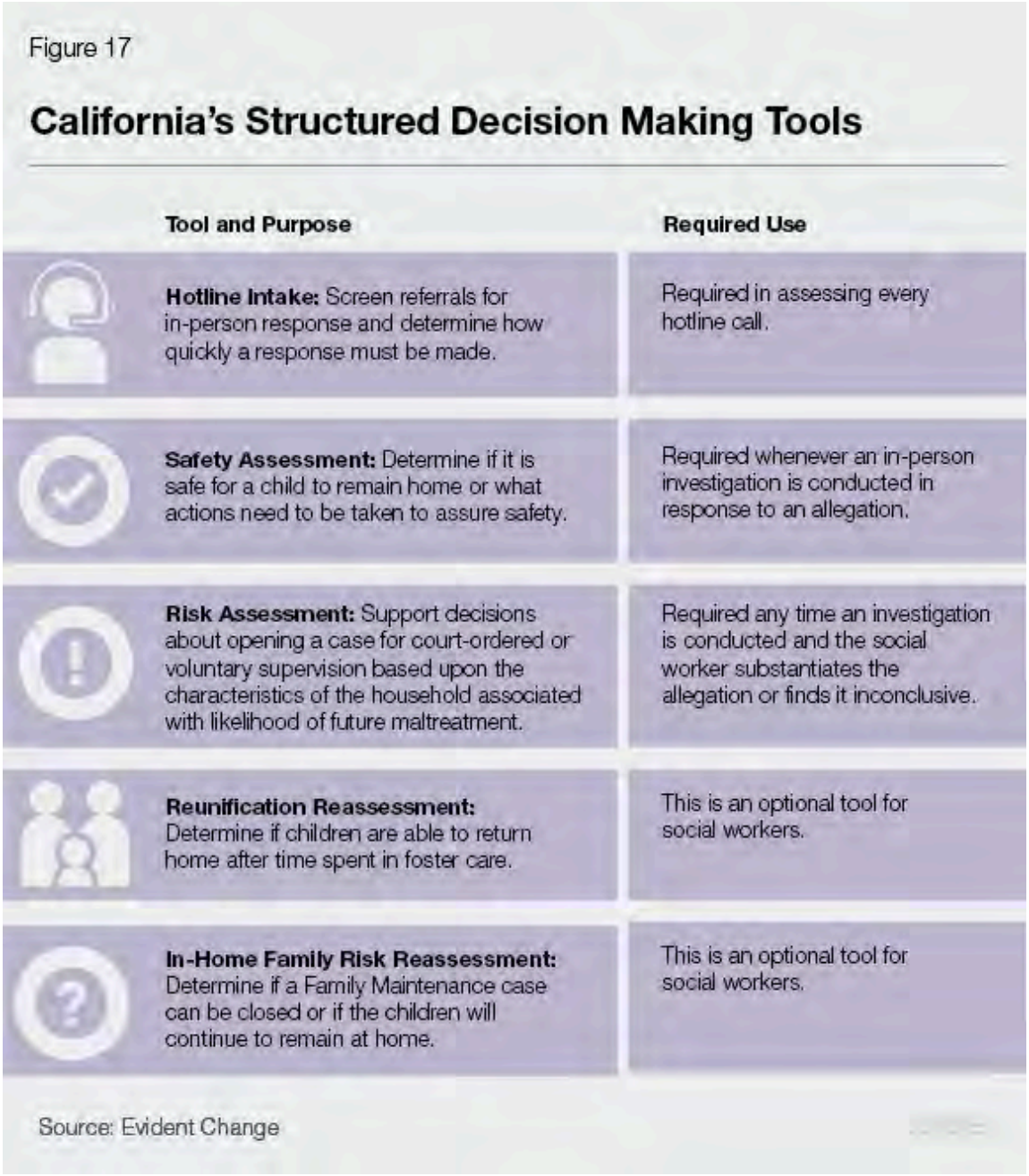
“The highest-risk families currently receive short-term, often inadequate services, involving limited contact with caseworkers and service providers. Most maltreated children receive few or no services.”

The quality of those services concerns Jessica Heldman, executive director of the Children’s Advocacy Institute at the University of San Diego, as well.

“There hasn’t been any requirement or measure or standard for what is an effective service,” she said. “Parents may be recommended, told, required to do this or that, but if that service isn’t effective and tailored to the needs of the family — substance use, domestic violence — what are we doing?”

When a parent is engaged in treatment, systems typically interpret that as evidence that we’re addressing risk, writes Cull. But the evidence does not support that.

“Access to treatment matters, though in many communities it remains uneven or inadequate,” he wrote. “Even when treatment is available and engagement is high, the evidence on its effectiveness is limited. Outcomes are modest and highly variable even under optimal conditions — stable housing, financial resources, social support, and consistent access to care. Substance use disorders are widely understood to be chronic, recurring, and remitting. Relapse is not an exception but part of the clinical reality. In practice, treatment offers population-level probabilities, not assurances, and those probabilities were generated under conditions that differ substantially from the lives of families involved with child welfare.”



Screenshots from Legislative Analyst's Office report

In a statement, the California Department of Health Care Services said that Families First will provide more funding for quality prevention. "There is a plan to measure outcomes and improve services to meet goals," the statement said. The California Family First Prevention Services Continuous Quality Improvement Plan and Implementation Plan were developed through extensive collaboration, and together outline a framework to drive performance improvement.

Cull is also president and CEO of the Center for the Helping Professions, focusing on safety science, shared data and system reform to reduce child maltreatment and fatalities. It works with several California counties, including Los Angeles, Riverside, Alameda and Santa Clara, extracting lessons from critical incidents.

"We focus on trying to surface the systems issues," he said. "In the data we have now, the most stable finding is that it takes coordination with those outside of the child welfare system — teaming with law enforcement, education and health care.

McMansion v. trailer park

Complicating matters further: Officials have differing ideas on exactly what constitutes an abuse/neglect death from place to place.

“The death of a toddler who drowns in a bathtub, for example, may be classified as an accident in one jurisdiction and as a child neglect death in another,” said a federal commission report in 2016.

“(D)eciding if a child’s death is caused by abuse or neglect is more subjective than it might appear at first glance,” said Richard Wexler, executive director of the National Coalition for Child Protection Reform. “For starters, there may be differences in the competence of medical examiners and coroners. But also, the same potential for bias that exists everywhere else in child welfare exists here.

“Consider a hypothetical example: Early one Sunday morning, while his parents are asleep, a 3-year-old wakes up, manages to unlatch the back door of the family home and wanders away. He falls into a body of water and drowns. Accident or neglect? The history of American family policing suggests that if the body of water is the pool behind a McMansion, it will be labeled an accident. If it’s a pond behind a trailer park, it will be labeled neglect.”

Differing yardsticks in differing locations may leave children at risk and deaths uncounted, child welfare advocates say. Consider:

• Orange County is bigger than both Riverside and San Bernardino counties. Orange County also has more children under age 18, and a higher child poverty rate. Yet Riverside and San Bernardino each reported more than 30 abuse/neglect deaths over 2024 and 2025, while Orange County reported eight.

• How often the system moves to intervene in a family varies widely as well. Juvenile dependency petitions are the legal documents alleging that a child is at risk and asking the court for permission to intervene. Statewide, there were 30,415 petitions filed in 2025, including 11,096 in Los Angeles County. In Riverside County, there were 3,689; in San Bernardino County, 2,675; and in Orange County, 1,974.

• The number of criminal charges related to abuse and neglect differed as well. Over the two years examined, Riverside County prosecutors filed 862 such charges; Orange County prosecutors filed 1,698; and San Bernardino filed 2,033, county officials said.

“If everyone has a different definition of child abuse and injury, how do you collect the data and look at it retrospectively?” asked Kim Day, vice president of programs for the National Children’s Alliance.

“There’s no national system. It’s all state- or county-based. And each jurisdiction has its own way that child fatalities are investigated. Some have coroners, others have volunteer coroners who may or may not have any education in child abuse and neglect. … Creating definitions that are the same across the country, and requiring states to report on the definition so there could be an analysis of the risk factors, would be very helpful.”

Chi Pham, spokesperson for the Orange County Social Services Agency, said that variations in stats don’t necessarily indicate differences in underlying conditions, and that the county’s priority is ensuring that each case is reviewed thoroughly and consistently in accordance with state standards.

A statement from Rob Oftring, spokesperson for Los Angeles County Superior Court, said that the central goal of its Juvenile Division is child safety “by delivering intentional, timely and fair justice through trauma responsive approaches in the courtroom.” Initiatives designed to preserve and encourage healthy parental bonds include a specialized dependency courtroom called Helping Our Parents Excel, or HOPE, which focuses on the families of children up to age 3.

Abdication of responsibility?

The National Commission to Eliminate Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities urged states to take a public health approach to child safety. “We must effectively marshal the knowledge, skills, and resources of all government and community agencies that come into contact with families and children. We need public will, shared accountability, local and state and federal leadership, and partnerships with the private sector to bring solutions to life,” it said.

California’s list of mandated reporters of suspected child abuse or neglect has expanded to include myriad professionals. The number of child abuse and neglect deaths has remained stubbornly stable nonetheless.

Child welfare reports often begin at hospitals. Social workers follow up on allegations — drug exposure, intentional injury, etc. — but allegations are often deemed “inconclusive” or “unfounded” as parents deny problems (and very young children, the majority of kids at risk, are unable to speak for themselves).

A drug-exposed birth is not enough grounds to remove a newborn from a parent's care in California. A parent may accept services voluntarily to keep the family together through "Plans of Safe Care." These are positioned as a compassionate approach to addressing the needs of substance-exposed infants and their families without the stigma and coerciveness of child protective services, explain Sarah Font, Naomi Schaefer Riley and Brett Drake in "The US Is Failing Substance-Exposed Infants." A drug test is not a parenting test, proponents argue, and stigma and fear of CPS can deter people from seeking help.

"These arguments warrant serious consideration in policy evaluation and reform, but (Plans of Safe Care) do not directly address these concerns," the researchers said. "Moreover, it is not clear what other entity can respond when parental substance use is likely to inhibit minimally adequate caregiving and that parent rejects or does not benefit from a voluntary offer of services."

These plans may be nothing more than documentation of services mother or baby already received or were referred to. State and federal laws inhibit child welfare or other agencies from monitoring substance abuse treatment. And the voluntary nature of these plans may mean that the vast majority of eligible parents receive no substance use treatment at all, as studies in New Mexico and Delaware have found, they said.

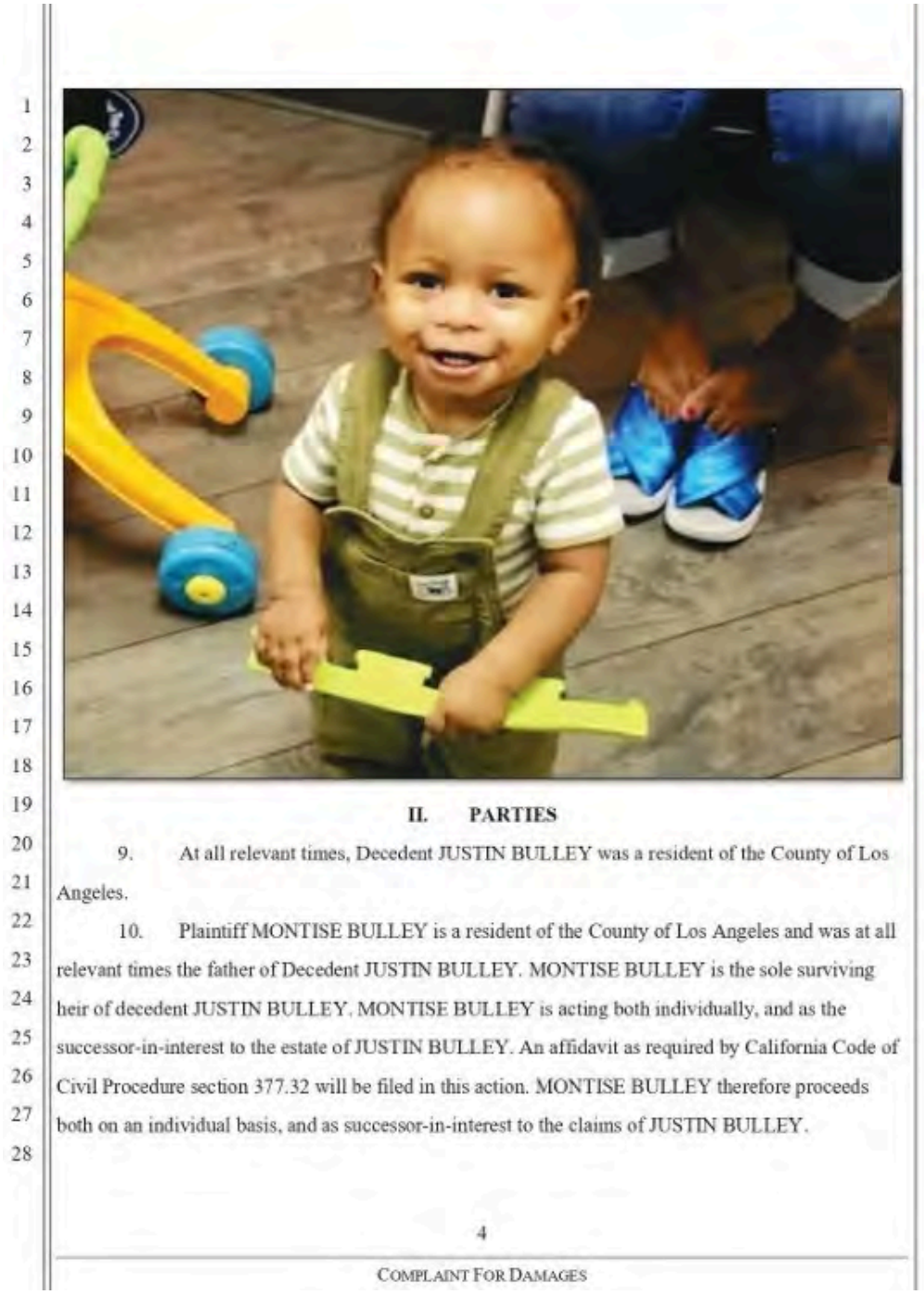
"Individuals with substance use disorders may take many years to be 'ready' for treatment, but there is no pause button on infants' development," they wrote. "Beyond the effects of prenatal substance exposure itself, the effects of untreated substance use disorders on parenting are undeniable: Young children face increased risks of fatality, poisonings, injuries, physical and sexual abuse, and severe neglect, in addition to poor physical, cognitive, and emotional development.

"As states and the federal government myopically prioritize the avoidance of CPS as an end unto itself, (Plans of Safe Care) have been applauded without any evidence — or even requirements to collect evidence — as to their actual efficacy in keeping children safe and ensuring that their basic developmental needs are met. This is not compassion but instead an abdication of responsibility."

'Intellectually honest course'

The file on Justin Bulley is more than 200 pages long. His family was involved in a dozen referrals between 2011 and 2023, including allegations of emotional abuse, general neglect and physical abuse. He was home when his mother's boyfriend died of a fentanyl overdose and was soon removed from her care.

But Justin's mother was allowed visits with him, and he was in the back seat of her car a few months later when she rear-ended a truck in an inebriated state, according to police reports.



II. PARTIES

9. At all relevant times, Decedent JUSTIN BULLEY was a resident of the County of Los Angeles.

10. Plaintiff MONTISE BULLEY is a resident of the County of Los Angeles and was at all relevant times the father of Decedent JUSTIN BULLEY. MONTISE BULLEY is the sole surviving heir of decedent JUSTIN BULLEY. MONTISE BULLEY is acting both individually, and as the successor-in-interest to the estate of JUSTIN BULLEY. An affidavit as required by California Code of Civil Procedure section 377.32 will be filed in this action. MONTISE BULLEY therefore proceeds both on an individual basis, and as successor-in-interest to the claims of JUSTIN BULLEY.

Screenshot from Bulley lawsuit

"It was known to DCFS that Ms. (Jessica) Darthard had an extensive criminal history including multiple alcohol and drug related arrests, as well as charges for cruelty to a child," said the lawsuit against the Los Angeles Department of Children and Family Services, filed by Justin's father. "Further, it was known that all of Ms. Darthard's children had been born with illegal drugs in their system. Additionally, Ms. Darthard had a prior strike against her in 2006 under Penal Code 246 for shooting a firearm into the dwelling."

The county's duty included ensuring that someone kept a watchful eye on mother and child during visits, but the designated monitor was actually a friend who also abused drugs, the lawsuit said.

On Feb. 18, 2024, Justin and his siblings were visiting at their mother's house. Their grandfather was there, too, smoking fentanyl from a glass pipe with Justin beside him, according to prosecutors. The grandfather fell asleep. When he awoke, he found Justin unresponsive.

Justin died from the effects of fentanyl, the medical examiner concluded. He was 17 months old. "Justin Bulley's death was caused by the failures of DCFS," his father's lawsuit asserts.

Mother Jessica Darthard and grandfather Jessie Darthard were charged with murder. The monitor was charged with willful cruelty to a child causing possible injury or death. They've pleaded not guilty.

"We see a number of cases of children in foster care where the parent still has access to them, and there's drug exposure," said Putnam-Hornstein. "Because children are going into relative placements as opposed to traditional foster homes, we're relying on the relative to supervise visits with the parent very quickly. If I'm a nonrelative, I'll probably be in a better position to report to the agency that, 'I suspect Mom is high,' than if I'm Mom's mother."

By any honest accounting, "Family First" has failed to deliver on the vision of its architects, wrote Putnam-Hornstein and Font. "The only question now is whether we double down on their flawed assumptions, or chart a new, more intellectually honest course."

This project was produced in partnership with the USC Center for Health Journalism through its Data Fellowship.

Editor's note: Children's full names, rather than their initials, are used in this story because they've been publicly identified and their parents have been charged with crimes.

Next: There are no simple solutions, but there are things that can be done to prevent some tragedies.

LA County to hire in-house chaplain as part of homeless strategy

Department of Mental Health was given approval by the Board of Supervisors to hire a chaplain to work with the unhoused and coordinate faith-based partners



The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, as seen on Dec. 10, 2025. On Tuesday, Oct. 20, the board approved a motion to hire a chaplain to work with the Department of Mental Health, for helping the spiritual needs of homeless and others involved with county services. (image courtesy of Board of Supervisors)



By **STEVE SCAUZILLO** | sscauzillo@scng.com | Inland Valley Daily Bulletin

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Los Angeles County is moving to hire an in-house chaplain, looking to explore the intersection between spirituality and good mental health, especially as it applies to services for the county's homeless population.

The Board of Supervisors approved a plan by a 5-0 vote on Tuesday, Oct 20 to hire a chief chaplain to work with clients of the Department of Mental Health (DMH), and establish a faith-based subcommittee headed by the chaplain to provide spiritual counseling for improving behavioral health needs for the unhoused.

The chaplain also will coordinate with existing faith-based county partners, including many who informally serve the homeless in their communities.

"For too long our mental health system has treated spiritual well being as something separate and outside the scope of mental health care," said Fifth District Supervisor Kathryn Barger, a co-author of the motion. "A chaplain will be a bridge between our clinical programs and our faith communities."

The motion, authored by Third District Supervisor Lindsey Horvath and co-authored by Barger, directs the hiring of a chaplain to interface with clinics operated by DMH, and provide spiritual support to the county's clients as well as family members.

The chaplain will help the DMH work more closely with faith-based organizations, "while bringing a faith-based perspective to department programing, services, operations … (and) community partners" for the unhoused and those re-entering housing, the motion stated.

The motion did not say at what salary the DMH chaplain would be paid. More details on the costs and the roles and responsibilities of the chaplain will come back to the board in three months.

"This is not a symbolic gesture. This is a clinical investment," said Barger, and will be funded out of the DMH budget.

Third District Supervisor Janice Hahn and Second District Supervisor Holly Mitchell wanted DMH Executive Director Dr. Lisa Wong to make sure the person she hires is non-denominational and will serve clients of all faiths as well as those who do not believe in a higher power.

“In our search for candidates we are looking for somebody approaching spirituality from a very broad sense,” Wong responded.

Hahn, who said she is a Christian, said she’d like the person hired to have worked across many faith disciplines. She also said the county’s mental health treatment should include faith-based approaches, if the person who is involved with substance abuse or living on the street does not object to this kind of holistic approach.

“When people are experiencing homelessness, there are a lot of layers it takes for them to begin their healing, to try to see what God intended each of us to be,” Hahn said.

Barger said chaplains work in the county Fire Department and the county Sheriff’s Department. Those called into Men’s Central Jail are volunteers sent by faith-based institutions. Recently, the Los Angeles Catholic Diocese sent Archbishop Jose H. Gomez to say Mass in the jail. He also met with the inmates.

Last Christmas, Gomez said Mass at the Century Regional Detention Facility and distributed holy communion. The LA Archdiocese through St. Camillus Center sends chaplains to the Los Angeles County Medical Center.

They are often referred to as a “spiritual paramedic,” and can work with a person during a crisis by helping people cope and find peace, according to the International Fellowship of Chaplains website.

“In addition, chaplains conduct assessments and make referrals, ensuring people have access to necessary resources. This might involve connecting someone to mental health services or community support networks,” the group explained.

Although they can be an ordained minister, they provide counseling to those with various belief systems. The chaplain usually serves within an institutional setting, the motion stated. “The chaplain ministers not to a congregation, but to the public at large and communities,” the motion stated, and support provided based on what the person being served is requesting.

They are often the unsung heroes, quietly offering support where it’s needed most, from hospitals, military, schools, and beyond. Their work is crucial, impacting lives every day, according to the motion.

“For many our our residents, faith is an essential source of strength, healing and community,” said Supervisor Mitchell.