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Independent Review of Escape from the Youth Services Center

REDWOOD CITY, Calif. – The escape of Josue Raul Orozco from San Mateo County’s Youth Services Center appears to be an example of a youth taking advantage of a combination of factors and security system failures, according to a report by an independent team of experts.

The report was requested by County Manager John Maltbie and Assistant County Manager David Boesch to discover what led to the Feb. 14, 2008 escape and to recommend steps to prevent future escapes.

Orozco had been in custody since the age of 14 for allegedly shooting to death a rival gang member in Redwood City.

Orozco was awaiting trial as an adult on suspicion of homicide when he escaped from a Youth Services Center recreation yard. Two other youth apparently boosted him high enough to grab a light fixture, push through a cloth mesh material that closed in the recreation area and climb over a wall. He then appears to have escaped through a fence that had been cut and pulled back.

The 19-page report was prepared by the National Council on Crime and Delinquency president Dr. Barry Krisberg, former San Mateo County Sheriff Don Horsley and Jeanne Woodford, former director of the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. The authors attempt to identify the conditions that may have allowed or contributed to the County’s first juvenile escape in 16 years and to recommend ways to strengthen systems.

The report will be provided to the Probation Department for review. Maltbie and Boesch have also pledged to provide the report to the general public and residents of the San Mateo Highlands community near the Youth Services Center and to host a public meeting on the issue.

Among the report’s findings:

- The assignment of inexperienced staff to supervise Orozco and 19 other youth in his housing unit may have contributed to the escape.
- Permitting a high-risk inmate such as Orozco to utilize an exercise yard with a single chain-link fence along the facility’s perimeter may have contributed to the escape.

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- Cameras are inadequate to monitor the perimeter for possible security breaches.
- The lack of policy, procedures or post orders (job-specific requirements on the unit) may have led to staff not following specific policies and procedures and may have contributed to the escape.
- The unmonitored access of vehicles and pedestrians to the area behind the facility may have contributed to the planning and execution of the escape.

The authors recommend numerous steps to improve security and communication. Among the recommendations:

- Review the appropriate housing for youth facing serious criminal charges by the Court, District Attorney and Probation Department.
- Probation Department to review the mission of each housing unit at the Youth Services Center to determine if there is sufficient staff to perform all of the duties.
- Stop the practice of allowing inexperienced staff or temporary help employees to work without a supervisor and ensure policies, procedures and post orders are readily available.
- Require all management staff to receive training in conjunction with the Sheriff's Office in a new Incident Command System that would be used to manage critical incidents.
- Establish a practice and protocol for notifying key executive and court personnel.
- Restrict private vehicles from driving or parking on the perimeter road behind the facility.
- The County consider increasing staffing to eliminate the need for temporary help employees.

The report also noted the County has already taken numerous corrective actions since the escape and prior to the release of the independent report. Among those actions:

- The Sheriff's Office and Probation Department have established an automated telephone message system for all residents within about 1.5 miles of the Youth Services Center.
- The light fixture used in the escape has been raised and exercise mats that may have been stacked to aid in the escape are now stored in locked rooms.
- All staff at the Youth Services Center have been retrained on post orders, policies and procedures. At every shift briefing, key policies and procedures are reviewed.
- Probation is conducting perimeter fence checks once per shift and camera checks of the fence line are being performed hourly.
- Photos of inmates will be taken annually to ensure law enforcement has the latest information. (When Orozco escaped, his photo was more than 2 years old.)
- Steps are being taken to further improve communication between the Probation Department, Sheriff's Office and the Court.

The report also determined that about half of the youth in the San Mateo County juvenile detention system have alleged gang affiliations. The nature of gang crimes will likely mean there will be inmates in custody for an extended period of time, the report said.

“These facts suggest that it is timely for San Mateo County to conduct a thorough review of all of its policies and procedures relating to the safety and security operations of the YSC,” the report concludes. “It is important to determine that the needed steps to increase public safety are taken, and that these reforms are sustained over time.”

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