

2024-2025 KERN COUNTY GRAND JURY



CAMP ERWIN OWEN

Release Date

March 31, 2025

CAMP ERWIN OWEN

“Is the Best of the Free Life Behind Us Now?”

Merle Haggard

SUMMARY:

The 2024-2025 Kern County Grand Jury (Grand Jury) conducted a continuity investigation, a follow-up to the 2023-2024 Kern County Grand Jury report titled *Kern County Probation Department Youth Services Bureau* (PYSB). The 2023-2024 Grand Jury investigated all three detention facilities the PYSB manages.

Since June 30, 2023, PYSB has been responsible for housing and treatment of the most serious and violent juvenile offenders until they reach the age of 25. The PYSB is a branch of the Kern County Probation Division. It consists of three in-custody facilities: James G. Bowles Juvenile Hall (JGBJH), Camp Erwin Owen (CEO), and Crossroads.

The Grand Jury reviewed the 2023-2024 Grand Jury’s recommendations (See Appendix A) and Kern County Board of Supervisors (KCBOS) responses (See Appendix B) to determine which ones had been addressed, funded, and/or implemented. This report addresses recommendations and responses for specific improvements to Camp Erwin Owen.

PURPOSE OF INQUIRY:

Pursuant to California Penal Code §919(b), the Grand Jury shall inquire into the conditions of confinement and management of the public correctional institutions within the county, including authority over facilities housing youth offenders. This report addresses specific recommendations and responses from the 2023-2024 Grand Jury Report. This report also addresses current conditions at CEO.

METHODOLOGY:

The Grand Jury carefully reviewed the report of CEO from the 2023-2024 Grand Jury to evaluate the responses to the Findings and Recommendations.

The Grand Jury visited CEO on November 5, 2024; toured the facilities, took photographs and interviewed members of CEO staff. The Grand Jury also reviewed the 2023-2024 Grand Jury Report regarding findings and recommendations proposed for CEO; performed internet searches relative to CEO repairs and subsequent funding.

DISCUSSION OF FACTS:

Camp Erwin Owen is a 65-bed forestry camp for male youth aged 14-18, located in Kernville, CA. CEO opened in 1938 as an honor and work camp, and it holds true to that tradition today. Juveniles in the camp do not have a history of violent offenses (such as attempted murder, robbery, and gun offenses) and are carefully screened before the Juvenile Justice court system commits them to this facility. The facility is in a remote location in the county and is not fenced. Staff and allied agencies provide services which promote discipline, a strong work ethic and individual responsibility. Youth take advantage of essential elements of evidence-based treatment and counseling, participate in vocational assignments, and work to improve academically. The Division of Juvenile Justice completed realigning the juvenile offender population, with the closure of its statewide facilities, leaving the County responsible for housing juvenile offenders.



Vocational programs include raising pigs, chickens and planting vegetable gardens.
Photos courtesy of the Grand Jury.





Brick maker was built by 14-year-old Merle Haggard while at CEO.
Photo courtesy of CEO

CEO partners with the Kern County Superintendent of Schools (KCSOS), Kern Medical Correctional Medicine, College Community Services, as well as community resources to meet the individual needs of every youth in the program. CEO had a staff of 55 and a population of 34 at the time of the Grand Jury's visit. During the November 5, 2024 tour, the Grand Jury observed that some recommendations stated in the 2023-2024 Grand Jury's Report have been completed.

A. The 2023-2024 Grand Jury report stated the following common to the three facilities:

- *The PYSB is experiencing chronic understaffing, low entry-level wages, job burnout from mandatory overtime and the inability to attract applicants with the required educational background.*
- *The Probation Department recommended wage increases based on the higher requirements for staff and staff shortages. The recommendation failed to meet the Measure K Committee's threshold for funding.*
- *PYSB has a [staff] vacancy rate of nearly 20% (72 staff [vacancies] for 389 positions). Youth Services Officers (YSO) work mandatory overtime which negatively impacts job performance due to fatigue and burnout.*
- *The 2023-2024 Grand Jury recommended that the Board of Supervisors create a higher entry-level salary for newly hired YSOs, because current wages are too low to be competitive and hinder retention of staff (See Appendix B).*

- B. CEO provides mental health services in two trailers that are over 40 years old. These facilities are inadequate and show evidence of water damage to ceilings and floors caused by leaky roofs. Additionally, the trailers do not provide privacy required for mental health treatment by Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) privacy rules.¹



CEO mental healthcare trailers
Photos courtesy of CEO staff

- The 2023-2024 Grand Jury recommended replacing the CEO mental healthcare trailers with new modules or a fixed building. The project was given an initial date to begin the replacement by July 1, 2024 (See Appendix A).

¹ The HIPAA Privacy Rule establishes national standards to protect individuals' medical records and other individually identifiable health information (collectively defined as "protected health information") and applies to health plans, health care clearinghouses, and those health care providers that conduct certain health care transactions electronically. The Rule requires appropriate safeguards to protect the privacy of protected health information and sets limits and conditions on the uses and disclosures that may be made of such information without an individual's authorization. [HIPAA Basics for Providers: Privacy, Security, & Breach Notification Rules](#)

The Privacy Rule protects all "individually identifiable health information" held or transmitted by a covered entity or its business associate, in any form or media, whether electronic, paper, or oral. The Privacy Rule calls this information "protected health information (PHI)." "Individually identifiable health information" is information, including demographic data, that relates to:

- the individual's past, present or future physical or mental health or condition
 - the provision of health care to the individual, or
 - the past, present, or future payment for the provision of health care to the individual
- [Summary of the HIPAA Privacy Rule | HHS.gov](#)

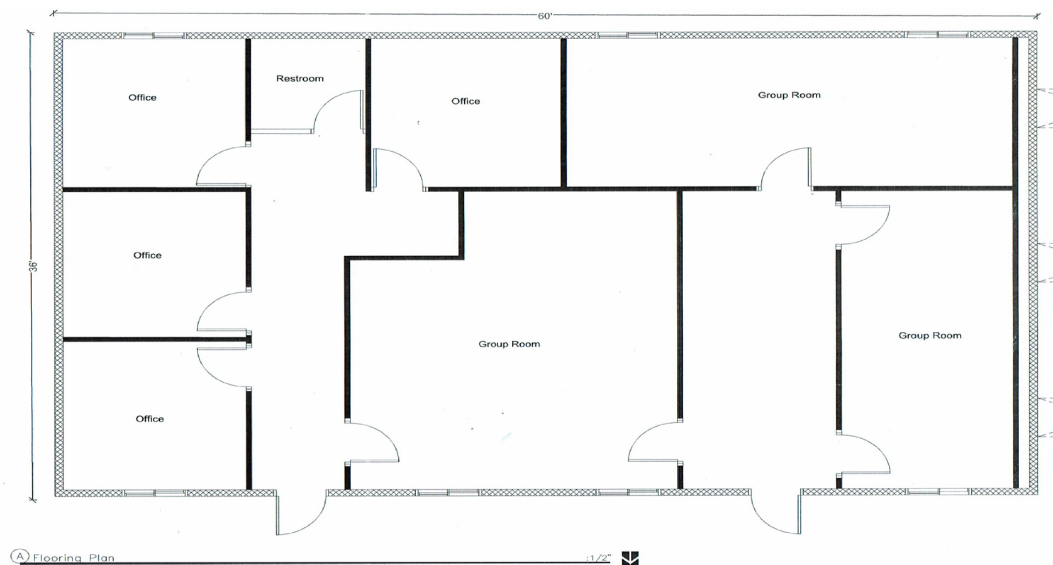


Water damaged ceiling

Missing floor tiles

Photos courtesy of CEO Staff

- CEO has procured California Advancing and Innovating Medi-Cal (CalAIM) funding to replace the Mental Health trailers. The CalAIM plan/budget has been reviewed and approved by the Kern County Chief Accounting Officer for the purpose of replacing the trailers with a permanent structure that will offer the necessary privacy for counseling and group therapy. The structure to be built must be able to accommodate the staff and detainees with the necessary tools to accomplish their mental health goals.



Proposed Mental Health Care Building floorplan
Submitted by CEO staff

- C. The 2023-2024 Grand Jury also observed a damaged roof and hot water tank on one of the two CEO dormitories. The damage prevents staff from using this building to house youth as intended. There is a possible danger of leakage and contamination making the building hazardous (See Appendix A).

- The 2023-2024 Grand Jury recommended that the damaged roof be repaired as well as the water heater on the roof of the dormitory at CEO with preapproved funding by October 1, 2024. The funding was received, and CEO completed replacing the boiler and tank as well as the damaged roof.



New boiler on the repaired roof.
Photo courtesy of the Grand Jury.

FINDINGS OF THE 2024-2025 GRAND JURY:

- F1. PYSB has been unable to recruit or retain sufficient staffing levels because of its inability to offer competitive compensation. The YSO salary levels are eliminated due to the realignment of the YSO series. The recent change in the YSO classification may improve the recruitment and retention process because the entry level salary is higher than previous entry level salary. Recommendation R1 from the 2023-2024 Grand Jury report has been met.
- F2. PYSB is in the process of negotiating with the union to restructure the hiring process to offer higher entry level pay; mandatory overtime should be greatly diminished. Recommendation R1 from the 2023-2024 Grand Jury report has been met.
- F3. The Probation Department currently conducts exit interviews when employees depart. Exit interviews provide needed documentation to support changes in recruitment and employment hiring practices. Recommendation R3 from the 2023-2024 Grand Jury report has been met.

F4. CEO's mental healthcare trailers still do not provide the environment required to properly perform counseling duties, possibly violating HIPAA rules. CEO is in the planning stages to replace Mental Healthcare trailers, but no timeline for construction is currently in place. Presently, the County is in the process of selecting an engineer for the project. CEO hopes to have the project started by summer 2025 and completed before 2026.

F5. The Grand Jury found that satisfactory repairs to the dormitory roof and boiler were completed in September 2024. Recommendation R6 from the 2023-2024 Grand Jury report has been met.

RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE 2024-2025 GRAND JURY:

R1. KCBOS should expedite approval to create a higher entry salary for newly hired YSOs by June 1, 2025. (Finding #1)

R2. PYSB should reduce mandatory overtime by July 1, 2025. (Finding #2)

R3. The Grand Jury recommends CEO implement a timeline for replacing the Mental Health trailers using funds appropriated by CalAIM by May 1, 2025. (Finding #4)

NOTES:

- The Kern County Probation Department should post a copy of this report where it will be available for public review.
- Persons wishing to receive an email notification of newly released reports may sign up at: <https://www.kerncounty.com/government/other-agencies/grand-jury>
- Present and past Kern County Grand Jury Final Reports and Responses can be accessed on the Kern County Grand Jury website <https://www.kerncounty.com/government/other-agencies/grand-jury>

RESPONSE DEADLINE:

- **REQUIRED WITHIN 90 DAYS FROM:**

Kern County Board of Supervisors

Finding #1

Recommendation #1

- **REQUIRED WITHIN 60 DAYS FROM:**

Kern County Probation Department

Findings #1 through #5

Recommendations #2 and #3

RESPONSES ARE REQUIRED PURSUANT TO CAL. PENAL CODE §§933 (c) AND 933.05:

- **PRESIDING JUDGE
SUPERIOR COURT OF CALIFORNIA
COUNTY OF KERN
1415 TRUXTUN AVENUE, SUITE 212
BAKERSFIELD, CA 93301**
- **FOREPERSON
KERN COUNTY GRAND JURY
1415 TRUXTUN AVENUE, SUITE 600
BAKERSFIELD, CA 93301**

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| Reports issued by the Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Cal. Penal Code §929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Grand Jury. |
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APPENDICES:

APPENDIX A

Findings and Recommendations from the 2023-2024 Grand Jury as it pertains to Camp Erwin Owen (CEO):

FINDINGS:

F3. The mental healthcare trailers at CEO do not provide the confidential or therapeutic workspaces required to perform counseling duties, possibly violating HIPAA laws.

F5. The Grand Jury also observed a damaged roof and hot water tank on one of the two CEO dormitories. This does not allow staff to use this building to house youth as intended.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

R4. Replace the CEO mental healthcare trailers with new modules. This project should be initiated by July 1, 2024. (Finding 3)

R6. Repair the damaged roof and water heater on the dormitory at CEO with confirmed preapproved funding by October 1, 2024. (Finding 5 and 7)

APPENDIX B

Kern County Board of Supervisors response to the 2023-2024 Kern County Grand Jury report:

R4: The Grand Jury recommends that the Board of Supervisors and the Probation Department replace the Camp Erwin Owen (CEO) mental healthcare trailers with new modules. This project should be initiated by July 1, 2024.

This recommendation requires further analysis. With a large number of projects competing for funding, the County continues to look for funding sources for essential services and projects. The County agrees the trailers need to be replaced, once funding sources are identified and secured. Cal-AIM funding from the State is being considered for replacement of a trailer at Camp Erwin Owen and the Probation Department has submitted a proposal for use of Measure "K" funding for a trailer at the James G. Bowles Youth Detention Center.

R6: The Grand Jury recommends that the department and the Board of Supervisors repair the damaged roof and water heater on the dormitory at CEO with confirmed pre-approved funding by October 1, 2024.

The recommendation will be implemented. Funding was approved by the Board on November 28, 2023, and the project is anticipated to be completed in the fiscal year 2024-25. The Probation Department and the General Services Division have initiated the project and contractors have already removed the old, damaged equipment in preparation for installation of the new boiler/HY AC units.

BOARD OF SUPERVISORS
COUNTY OF KERN

TRACKING PAGE

APRIL 29, 2025

TUESDAY - 2:00 P.M.

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COUNTY ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE

CA-42) Proposed response to Grand Jury report titled Camp Erwin Owen (Fiscal Impact: None) - APPROVED; AUTHORIZED CHAIRMAN TO SIGN CORRESPONDENCE

Couch-Flores: All Ayes

BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

SUPERVISORS

Phillip Peters..... District 1
Chris Parlier..... District 2
Jeff Flores..... District 3
David R. Couch..... District 4
Leticia Perez District 5



KATHLEEN KRAUSE
CLERK OF BOARD OF SUPERVISORS
Kern County Administrative Center
1115 Truxtun Avenue, 5th Floor
Bakersfield, California 93301
Telephone (661) 868-3585
TTY Relay 800-735-2929

April 29, 2025

The Honorable John W. Lua, Presiding Judge
Kern County Superior Court
1415 Truxtun Avenue
Bakersfield, CA 93301

Dear Judge Lua:

Transmitted herewith is the Board of Supervisors' response to the 2024-2025 Grand Jury's Final Report titled Camp Erwin Owen, follow up to the 2023-24 Grand Jury report titled Kern County Probation Department Youth Services Bureau.

The Board of Supervisors appreciates the Grand Jury's review and input.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be "Leticia Perez", written over a horizontal line.

Leticia Perez, Chair
Kern County Board of Supervisors

NA/SH/COMPL_GJ Probation-CEO A

Attachment

cc: Grand Jury

Kern County Board of Supervisors
Response to Grand Jury Final Report
Kern County Probation Department – Camp Erwin Owen

Response to Findings F1-F5:

Kern County agrees with the Grand Jury's Findings F2, F3, F5 and partially agrees with Findings F1 and F4.

Regarding Finding F1, employee wages are often a central issue in recruitment and retention; however, wages are subject to legal requirements for meet and confer with employee representatives and will need to be reviewed in a larger context, including internal and external comparability, compaction issues, available funding, and many other factors. Regarding Finding 4, while the County agrees the current trailers designated for the mental health team at Camp Erwin are aging and in need of replacement, those trailers have been vacated in anticipation of their replacement. The Probation Department has made temporary alternative spaces available to conduct group and individual sessions with youth to ensure confidentiality pursuant to HIPPA laws.

Response to Recommendation:

R1: The Grand Jury recommends that The Kern County Board of Supervisors expedite approval to create a higher entry salary for newly hired Youth Service Officers by June 1, 2025.

This recommendation will not be implemented. Finding F1 in the 2024-2025 Grand Jury report acknowledges that the 2023-2024 Grand Jury's Recommendation # 1, to change the Youth Services Officer series and increase the entry salary, had been met and that "it is too soon to see results" of the changes made. On January 13, 2025, the Civil Service Commission approved the proposed collapse of the Youth Services Officer I/II flex classification with the pay scale set at the previous Youth Service Officer II salary range, which increases the entry level pay offered to new Youth Service Officer employees. The Board of Supervisors gave final approval for this classification change at the Board of Supervisors' meeting held on January 14, 2025.

Since the 2023-2024 Grand Jury report, the Board of Supervisors has also approved pay increases for this classification, some of which have not yet gone into effect. On July 16, 2024, the Board of Supervisors approved a three-year Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Kern County Probation Officers' Association, which represents the Youth Services Officers classification. The MOU included salary increases of 5% beginning July 13, 2024 and 4% beginning July 12, 2025, for the Youth Services Officer classification.

The current MOU already includes approved pay increases for this classification and it would be premature to approve a higher entry salary before the previously approved increases have gone into effect. Salaries will be evaluated in the regular negotiations process. The County Administrative Office, Human Resources Division, and the Probation Department will continue conversations to determine the most effective strategies for recruitment and retention for these positions.

R2: The Grand Jury recommends that Probation Youth Service Bureau (PYSB) should reduce mandatory overtime by July 1, 2025.

The recommendation will be implemented but also requires further analysis and explanation. Based on recent changes to the entry level pay and ongoing recruitment efforts by the Probation Department for Youth Services Officer classification, it is anticipated that vacancy rates will be reduced. However, while that is the primary factor in the need for mandatory overtime, there are other factors related to ongoing leaves of absence and modified duty by existing permanent staff which will continue to impact mandatory staffing levels required by the State for youth facilities. When existing staff are on any type of leave of absence or modified duty, their position cannot be backfilled through hiring of additional permanent staff beyond the number of positions allocated to the Probation Department and the required staffing levels must continue to be adhered to. To help further mitigate this impact on use of mandatory overtime, the Probation Department is attempting to increase the number of Extra-Help Youth Services Officers employed. These temporary employees can be used as needed to cover shifts in each of the Probation Department's youth facilities, which will reduce the need for mandated overtime for permanent Youth Services Officers.

R3: The Grand Jury recommends Camp Erwin Owen implement a timeline for replacing the Mental Health trailers using funds provided by CalAIM by May 1, 2025.

This recommendation will be implemented. On March 11, 2025, the Board of Supervisors approved the appropriation of CalAIM revenue for the establishment of a mid-year major maintenance project to replace the mental health modular trailers at Camp Erwin Owen. This project will be managed by General Services. The demolition process for the existing structures should begin in April 2025. The project is in the design phase and General Services anticipates a draft project timeline being completed by or near May 1, 2025. There will continue to be ongoing communication on this project with all parties involved throughout the process.