

July 14, 2009

Letter to the Albuquerque Journal Editor

Dear Mr. Herrera:

Over the past several weeks, the *Albuquerque Journal* has highlighted the need for Bernalillo County to offer safer choices to individuals who are released from the Metropolitan Detention Center (MDC). It is clear that the policy of transporting people from the jail to downtown Albuquerque, regardless of the hour, needed review and the County Commission has taken that issue very seriously.

I am pleased to say that we have made significant progress over the past four weeks. At the Commission's June 23rd meeting, we established a task force to make recommendations for short and long term strategies to make the drop-off process safer. The task force included community organizations such as Crossroads for Women, Joy Junction, UNMH, The City of Albuquerque's Family and Community Services, Southwest Women's Law Center, and Healthcare for the Homeless, as well as County and MDC staff.

The staff at MDC immediately made these changes:

- Free phones are now available in the MDC release area for inmates to notify their families of impending release and schedule rides if they choose.
- At the time of release, all inmates are informed that Joy Junction will provide transportation and shelter if they have no safe place to spend the night.
- Individuals being released between 10:00 pm and 6:00 am have the option of staying at the MCD until daylight and taking a morning shuttle.
- MDC staff, in the releasing area, now provides brochures with contact information for social service agencies so that those who need help can get it.
- The MDC will continue to release inmates with acute mental illness **only** during normal business hours and only when those individuals can be released to a family member or community resource program.
- In addition, last week Bernalillo County and the City of Albuquerque entered into a partnership to provide lighting, phones, bathrooms, and shelter at the Public Safety Center (PSC) at 5th and Roma where newly-released inmates leave the MDC vehicles. The 24-hour Prisoner Transport Unit will be relocated to the PSC to provide a greater police and sheriff presence during the night. Now that the agreement is in place, the new facilities will be completed in as little as four months.

Those steps could never have been taken without the contributions and cooperation of all the individuals and organizations who are working with us on this issue. While the new policies will go a long way to make the drop off process safer, we realize that there is far more to do. The issues of crime and inmate reintegration are intimately connected to the problems of

homelessness, substance abuse, family dysfunction, and mental illness that affect our community. The working group will continue to look for ways that MDC can help connect jail inmates to available social services so individuals get the help they need to break the cycle of crime and incarceration.

Sincerely,

Maggie Hart Stebbins

County Commissioner, District 3