

EL DORADO COUNTY 2021–2022 GRAND JURY

HOTEL EMERGENCY HOUSING FOR HOMELESS WESTERN SLOPE

Case #21-06 -- June 23, 2022

SUMMARY

El Dorado County (County) houses homeless individuals and families in hotels located within the County. Programs receive funding from State and Federal governments to cover the costs of housing individuals experiencing homelessness. The County departments that use these funds to provide emergency housing services to the homeless include the Health and Human Services Agency (HHS) and the Probation Department (Probation). Currently, the County primarily pays hotels by check instead of by the more expedient credit card payment. This has resulted in few local hotels willing to participate in supplying emergency housing due to the long wait times to receive payment from the County. The lack of hotels has led to homeless people primarily being housed at a single hotel in Cameron Park.

BACKGROUND

Probation emergency housing is used by any Probation Officer who has a Justice Involved Individual (JII) experiencing housing instability. Emergency housing is commonly used for offenders who are under a formal grant of probation, who were released from custody, or who are under Post Release Community Supervision (offenders returning to the community from prison and trying to re-establish themselves back into County society). Emergency housing may be for a single night or for more than a month, depending on the client's needs.

Under HHS, emergency housing can be used by:

1. The California Work Opportunities and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs) - Housing Support Program (HSP) to provide a hotel stay to families at the discretion of HHS. HSP is a state-funded program which assists homeless CalWORKs families to quickly obtain permanent housing.
2. The Family Stabilization Program, a part of CalWORKs, provides temporary services to families who are homeless, or at risk of becoming homeless, or

experiencing transportation or other emergencies impairing participation in Welfare-to-Work activities and employment.

3. Child Welfare or Child Protection Services can also provide emergency housing. Child Protection Services helps to identify, treat, and reduce child abuse and neglect. Emergency housing may be for a day, but not to exceed 16 days. However, stays can be extended in certain circumstances.
4. Full-Service Partnership and Homeless Mentally Ill Outreach Treatment Behavior Health programs can use emergency housing. These programs work with mental health patients.

METHODOLOGY

The Grand Jury, in conducting this investigation:

- Interviewed County Departmental personnel;
- Interviewed County elected officials;
- Reviewed El Dorado Opportunity Knocks Continuum of Care Documents;
- Reviewed County Board of Supervisor meeting minutes;
- Reviewed complaints on social media from County residents;
- Attended Homeless Outreach meetings; and
- Reviewed County Departmental policies and procedures.

DISCUSSION

The Grand Jury reviewed reports from Probation and HHSA for documenting hotel stays by their clients. From June 2019 through September 2021, HHSA utilized the Cameron Park Quality Inn (Quality Inn) for emergency/temporary housing of 28 families. In Fiscal Year 2020-21, Probation's hotel stays for JII clients at the Quality Inn Hotel had 14 clients totaling 292 nights, and the Courtyard by Marriott in Folsom had 1 client for 10 nights. Probation reported that 67% (10) had a high-risk supervision level, 27% (4) medium risk level, and 6% (1) low risk level. A low-risk offender is one with a relatively low probability of reoffending (few risk factors), while a high-risk offender has a high

probability (many risk factors). In contrast, lower-risk offenders receive lower levels of supervision, while the higher risk clients need more face-to-face contact with Probation. Key components that contribute to the risk of probation violation include a history of chronic crime, low socioeconomic status and/or unemployment, varied stressors associated with legal supervision, and insufficient ability to deal with social pressures. One JII client reoffended during this time period while staying at the Quality Inn.

The Grand Jury learned from both HHSA and Probation that they utilized the Quality Inn for its homeless clients because the Quality Inn would agree to invoice and wait to be paid by check.

As a supervising agency, Probation supports housing in a location proximate to the Probation Office in Shingle Springs. Officers visit the location weekly or more often to monitor and provide support to clients while they are in residence. Further, services within walking distance of the hotel include stores, restaurants, public transportation, and possible employment opportunities.

County officials/employees at HHSA and Probation, based on prior institutional knowledge, were under the impression the Auditor-Controller's Office required them to only use hotel vendors who would accept the terms of payment by check through an invoice, rather than the more expedient and convenient use of a credit card. The Auditor-Controller's Office stated this was never the policy. This perception prevented and/or dissuaded HHSA and Probation from using County credit cards when purchasing hotel stay services for their clients. Interviews revealed that a hotel in El Dorado Hills was initially willing to take part in the emergency housing program for County clients, but due to the extended timeline for payment by check, ultimately declined to do so. This extended timeline for payment by check limited the number of hotels that the County was able to use for emergency housing and resulted in an unequal distribution of clients being housed at the Quality Inn. With greater purchasing flexibility, it would be likely the County could use hotel vendors outside of the Cameron Park area when it was most appropriate for the client's needs.

The Grand Jury was concerned by the lack of written procedures and communication between the Auditor-Controller's Office and both HHSA and Probation management to clear up this misconception, as well as the lack of cooperation to ensure a smooth and efficient payment process for local hotel vendors. Although there is some communication now between them about this issue, it is accusatory and reactionary instead of cooperative to fine tune the process. The County's Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) should request more productive communications between the departments to increase the number of local hotel vendors and to ensure swift payment for services. After all, the hotel vendors are supplying a service to the County.

HHSA has procedural guidelines for processing hotel vendor invoices within 30 days of receipt that include internally approving invoices and sending them to the Auditor-Controller's Office for payment. There were several instances in 2021 in which HHSA did not follow its guidelines, resulting in vendors not getting paid for several months from the receipt of invoice by HHSA.

There are no contracts between the County and the hotel vendors it utilizes. Both HHSA and Probation use an "established relationship" with the hotels. Probation does have an Authorization for Services document it provides to the hotel that indicates a maximum nightly rate and requires clients to sign an agreement that says it is the client's responsibility to pay for damages. HHSA has similar documentation. While there have been a few instances of damage, it has been minimal and has been paid for by the related department. The Auditor-Controller's Office has suggested that a contract be executed between the County and hotel vendors to include provisions for damages and unauthorized expenditures.

FINDINGS

- F1. Probation and HHSA have a limited number of hotels available to them, resulting in both departments using the Quality Inn at a disproportionately higher rate than other hotels.
- F2. HHSA, Probation, and the Auditor-Controller's Office do not have written procedures detailing the credit card payment process for emergency homeless hotel stays, including the process and procedures to be followed if there is hotel damage or unauthorized charges from the stay.
- F3. The Grand Jury found examples that HHSA did not follow its written procedures for invoice approval.
- F4. HHSA and Probation were under the impression they were unable to use credit cards for hotel stays. While no written procedures on this matter were found, the perception was strong enough for these departments not to use credit cards for hotel stays and instead, send approved invoices to the Auditor-Controller's Office for payment by check to the hotel vendor.
- F5. There are no formal contracts in place between the County and hotel vendors.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- R1. The CAO should direct County departments to coordinate housing stays and work to use an expanded list of hotels, as appropriate, for emergency housing of their clients on the Western Slope. This directive should be given by September 30, 2022.
- R2. The Auditor-Controller's Office should establish written procedures for processing credit card payments for emergency homeless hotel stays, including the process and procedures to be followed if there is hotel damage or unauthorized charges from the stay, and distribute throughout County departments. These written procedures should be distributed by September 30, 2022.
- R3. Probation and HHSA management should send a monthly report to the CAO demonstrating they are consistently following their internal written procedures for processing hotel vendor invoices, from receipt through fiscal oversight, until it is sent to the Auditor-Controller's Office. This monthly reporting process should begin by September 30, 2022.
- R4. The Auditor-Controller's Office should provide the CAO, HHSA, and Probation with a quarterly report of approved hotel vendors or whenever the list is changed. This quarterly reporting should begin by September 30, 2022.
- R5. The CAO should direct County Counsel to determine whether contracts should be in place with hotels that are used by the County departments for emergency housing hotel stays. The County Counsel should respond to the CAO by November 30, 2022.

REQUESTS FOR RESPONSE

This Grand Jury report is an account of an investigation or review. It contains findings and recommendations, and names those who should respond to each finding and each recommendation pertaining to matters under the respondent's control.

Please review *"How to Respond to an El Dorado County Grand Jury Report,"* a separate document included with this report.

The following responses are required in accordance with California Penal Code §933 and §933.05.

- Auditor-Controller – F2/R2, F4/R4
- CAO – F1/R1, F3/R3, F5/R5
- Probation – F1/R1, F3/R3
- HHSA – F1/R1, F3/R3
- County Counsel – F5/R5