



Union calls to assess firearms

By Nicholas Ibarra

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SANTA CRUZ >> The union representing Santa Cruz County probation officers is speaking out in support of a grand jury investigation that found its members were not adequately equipped to handle high-risk field visits.

Released in June, the Santa Cruz County civil grand jury investigation found that probation officers are not safely equipped to handle high-risk cases, particularly in the wake of California's inmate realignment that left more probationers under the oversight of county agencies.

The lack of equipment, and lack of speedy support from local law enforcement, has led to risk of injury, inability to effectively carry out certain duties, and created a "culture of fear" in the department, the investigation found.

Those findings — along with a recommendation to look into arming at least some probation officers — were broadly rejected by county officials in a series of formal responses released Oct. 17.

Santa Cruz County is among only a few California counties in which no probation officers carry firearms. As of 2014, probation officers were armed in at least 54 of California's 58 counties, according to the Chief Probation Officers Association — up from 44 in 2011.

Now, the Santa Cruz County Probations Officers' Association is wading into the fray to back the grand jury investigation, and to call on county leaders to heed its advice.

Santa Cruz County Probation Officers' Association President Julio Juarez said the union fully supports the findings of the investigation, which "only reaffirm some of our insecurities when we are conducting any type of fieldwork."

"We were disappointed to hear any county leader discredit the hard work of honorable civilians without further investigation or presenting further factual information," Juarez said.

He added that the union takes issue with public comments made by Chief Probation Officer Fernando Giraldo.





In a June interview with the Sentinel, Giraldo said the department doesn't need guns, pointing out that it works with nine local law-enforcement agencies and that none of its officers have been "seriously" injured on the job.

"Our members that have been injured on the job find that offensive," Juarez said. " ... It's cruel to suggest that, and to think that anything dangerous will have to happen for somebody to enact change."

Reached via phone Thursday, Giraldo declined to directly respond to the union's comments.

"All I have to say is that safety has always been of the utmost importance, and we've continued to go to great lengths to reasonably assure that staff are safe," Giraldo said, highlighting recent changes underway at the department to improve officer safety.

In the wake of the grand jury investigation, the Probation Department is in the process of equipping officers with fitted protective vests and tasers. Starting in September, a fulltime Sheriff's deputy was made available to support probation officers in the field.

Officers are already equipped with protective vests, pepper spray, handcuffs and radios, and can call on local law enforcement for support during high-risk visits.

"The county has made a significant investment," Giraldo said.

Questions around whether probation officers should be allowed to carry firearms were underscored by California's recent sweeping criminal justice reforms. Starting in 2011, county probation departments were tasked with supervising an array of nonviolent felons that had previously fallen to the state.

Since then, almost all county probation departments have opted to arm at least some of their officers. But the decision rests with each department, and multiple legislative efforts to force departments to develop a firearm policy have failed.

Critics of arming probation officers argue introducing firearms fundamentally changes the nature of interactions with probationers, effectively turning probation officers into police. Supporters claim guns are sometimes necessary to ensure officers are safe while searching the homes of convicted felons, making arrests and carrying out other duties.