

REMARKS OF COMMISSIONER ALEX BUSANKSY
Hearing of Citizens' Commission on Jail Violence
September 28, 2012

I want to take a moment to first thank my fellow Commissioners and the staff of the Commission. I give my heartfelt thanks to the many attorneys and other volunteers who have given us their assistance in completing the critical work of the Commission.

And finally, my deep appreciation to the many people who took time from their schedules to speak before the Commission, both at our meetings and in our community listening session. All of you helped to give us a more complete picture of the jail.

The Board of Supervisors formed our Commission last October with a mandate (quote) "to conduct a review of the nature,[the] depth and cause of the problem of inappropriate deputy use of force in the jails, and to recommend corrective action as necessary." (End quote)

I believe that we have fulfilled our mission with the release of our final report. Our work has been challenging, and not always easy. We have heard from many people with differing opinions as to the nature of the problem and the solution. I hope that our report will be taken as it is intended: a document driven by the hope and expectation that Los Angeles can one day be the shining example of how to run a large jail system.

As we sit here today, there are currently over 18,000 men and women who are being held in the LA jail system, under the supervision of the Sheriff's Department. Countless more have gone through the facility or will be held in the months and years ahead. All are individuals, and also members of a larger community. They have mothers and fathers. Brothers and sisters. Sons and daughters. Some will be charged with serious crimes and may serve lengthy prison sentences. *Most* will be quickly released from the jail, having been charged with misdemeanors, or because their cases are dismissed or they're ultimately acquitted. Some have jobs. Some are in school. All of them have lives beyond their stay in the LA County Jail.

All of them are entitled to be housed in a jail that protects them. A jail run by a department that keeps them safe: not only from potentially dangerous inmates but also from the very people who had sworn to protect them – the Sheriff's deputies.

There are many, many good and honest men and women who work in the Sheriff's Department—people who do not deserve to be tarnished in this process. We have made many recommendations that will help these individuals to serve in a safe and well run department. But like our hospitals and schools, our jail is a public institution. Those who work in the jails, sadly, live by the reputation and actions that others bring upon the institution.

Several years ago, I served as the Executive Director of the Commission on Safety and Abuse in America's Prisons. I have worked as both a federal and a state prosecutor. I have visited numerous jails around the country, met with the men and women who work in them, and spoken with those who are incarcerated.

Sheriff Baca said recently, "We are best in the nation." What I, and this Commission have seen is not the best in the nation. It is a jail system in desperate need of real leadership, meaningful accountability, and simple honesty. Leadership that has the tools and the know-how to change the dangerous culture that has been allowed to grow in much of the jail system.

This Commission's report does not represent the end of the process but another step along the path of change.

In our report, we say:

"If a chief executive officer in private business had remained in the dark or ignored problems plaguing one of the company's primary services for years, that company's board of directors likely would not have hesitated to replace the CEO. Dismissal is not an option, of course, when talking about an elected public official. But the Commission was disturbed by the Sheriff's "don't elect me" response to a question about how he should be held accountable for the troubling history of the jails under his watch. His statement seemingly reflects a lack of genuine concern about and acknowledgement of the severity of the problem."

Perhaps some would agree with Sheriff Baca that the ballot box is the only place for a measurement of his performance. I would argue otherwise. Real leaders do not need an election to teach them the difference between right and wrong. Real leaders are accountable to all people in their community. Real leaders demand accountability from those who work for them. Seeking Sheriff Baca's dismissal is beyond the scope of this Commission's work. However, it is well within the scope of work of the Board of Supervisors, the press, and our civic and religious leaders.

I hope that in the months and years ahead the work of this Commission and others working toward real reform of the Sheriff's Department will not drift into the shadows, but that the spotlight will remain "on" and bright. I hope that the community will care, and understand that the state of this jail impacts their lives. I hope the good men and women in the Sheriff's Department will demand leadership that meets their needs. And finally, I hope the people whose lives are touched by conditions in the jail can have the jail they deserve.

As we once wrote in the report of the Commission on Safety and Abuse in America's Prisons called "Confronting Confinement":

"What happens inside jails and prisons does not stay inside jails and prisons. It comes home with prisoners after they are released and with corrections officers at the end of

each day's shift. We must create safe and productive conditions of confinement not only because it is the right thing to do, but because it influences the safety, health, and prosperity of us all."

It was true then. It is true today.

Thank you.