

Green Street

County Asks \$136,000 Question

Santa Cruz County is trying to decide how far it can afford to go in allowing women convicted of crimes to have the same alternatives as men.

Women serving sentences in this county are already far more likely than men to do hard time at the County Jail. The Legal Aid Society has recently expressed concern about that inequity and other alleged discrepancies in the treatment of women prisoners in the county.

And the problem could be even more severe if the Santa Cruz Board of Supervisors decides to replace the women's work furlough program with an alternative that would be \$136,000-a-year cheaper, but might leave more women in the County Jail.

Last December the Legal Aid Society wrote Sheriff Al Noren complaining that incarcerated women are given second class treatment in Santa Cruz County. There are

fewer facilities and programs available to women prisoners. "The net result," Legal Aid attorney Sheryl Studley wrote, "appears to be that more women, proportionately, are doing harder sentenced time than men."

The overwhelming majority of men sentenced in this county do time at the minimum security farm in Watsonville. But the only minimum security facility for women requires that they meet the higher eligibility standards of the work furlough program. Those higher standards, and a possible underutilization of the program by those in charge, leave half the women prisoners doing their time at the County Jail.

Women in the local jail are given even fewer options than their fellow men prisoners, the letter claimed. There are, for example, no women trustees. The work release and county parole programs are not working for women, Studley claimed. And health care problems that affect all prisoners at the jail have been even worse for women.

That letter — dated December 6, 1983 — has gone through the normal channels and the Board of Supervisors was scheduled to discuss this week a proposed answer written by the County Administrative Office.

They postponed the discussion. The proposed answer looks like the two agencies will talk right past each other. While Legal Aid claims that women are given worse treatment after sentencing, the county is going to answer that none of the practices are illegal.

The only change in practice offered is an agreement by Noren to carry the ball in rewording the rules of the county parole program to eliminate the requirement that people released to run a household be married.

A women's trustee program will be established when completion of the next wing of the jail makes it possible to

provide the housing for it. And the lack of a minimum security facility for women, which appears to be the most significant of the complaints, could become more severe if the women's work furlough facility is eliminated.

About 90 sentenced women a year do time at that facility, which allows them to be at their jobs or homes during the daytime. But there are, at any given time, an average of only 6.2 inmates using the 10-bed facility.

That means it costs the county more than \$25,000-per-inmate year to keep the program going. It costs a little more than \$15,000-per-inmate year to keep someone in jail.

The high cost of this underutilized facility has made it a likely item for scrutiny by the financially beleaguered county.

One alternative being seriously considered by the Board of Supervisors would be to close the women's work furlough facility and replace it with a program that would allow the women to live at home under heavy probation supervision. That alternative would serve most of the women now using the work furlough program, and it would save the county \$136,000 each fiscal year.

But it appears that at least some women now using the work furlough program would be sent back to County Jail because they would not meet the higher requirements for home supervision. And some of the women on the new home supervision program would likely be recruited from the ranks of those who now would be on the more lenient general probation.

The issue has left the Supes in a quandary between the need to save money and a reluctance to further reduce the limited alternatives available for women sentenced in the county. Every other week this year, the Supes have postponed making a decision on the question. They did it again on Tuesday. □