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Grand Jury Scores Welfare Fraud Prosecution Process

The time limit for prosecution of fraud cases should begin when the fraud is discovered, not when it is committed, the county grand jury recommended today.

In its interim report, the grand jury said laws should be changed so that welfare fraud regulations are the same as criminal fraud cases.

In regular fraud cases, the statute of limitations begins at the time of discovery. In welfare fraud cases, however, the statute of limitations begins when the

theft is actually committed.

Because locating welfare fraud suspects is often times consuming, the statute of limitations should be changed, said the report.

"Welfare fraud is fraud and should be treated as such," the grand jury said in its report.

It called for a change in the state penal code.

The grand jury also recommended that welfare fraud investigators be equipped with two-way radios linked to the Sheriff's Department.

"Because of the nature of their duties, investigators may find themselves in dangerous situations and two-way communication is needed as a safety measure for them."

The report also touched on a number of areas and included recommendations for the Cabrillo College nursing program, the Social Services Department and preliminary hearings for criminal defendants.

Among the report's recommendations:

- Continue to keep lines of communica-

tion open between students and faculty in the Cabrillo nursing program and maintain support of the program director.

The grand jury said it received complaints from participants in the program and set out to investigate by consulting former students, faculty, administrators and program directors.

While the program has produced quality nurses, internal problems in the department have developed, the grand jury said.

However, said the report, the administration and nursing program directors have recognized these problems and made progress toward solving them.

The grand jury also recommended a more integrated program should be developed with career ladder steps.

- Consolidate several of the social service offices currently scattered throughout the Santa Cruz area and expand the Watsonville social services office.

The grand jury said there is some duplication of function in the six offices in Santa Cruz and said the locations should be combined.

It also noted that the two Watsonville offices were overcrowded and a location should be found which would furnish adequate working space.

- Sponsor a proposed constitutional amendment to bring public debate concerning the use of grand juries in criminal indictments.

The report said the grand jury's role has been weakened by a state Supreme Court case which has virtually eliminated the use of grand juries in criminal indictments.

The decision, said the report, has placed an additional burden on the district attorney's office because it results in numerous and long preliminary hearings for those accused of a crime.

The proposed amendment should allow the courts to balance the defendant's rights against the interests of the people, the report said.

The courts should be allowed to review all grand jury indictments and then decide whether the defendant is entitled to a preliminary hearing in addition to the grand jury indictment.