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Alameda County should learn from San Francisco's pretrial services mistake

By **Andrea Crider**

Sep 30, 2026

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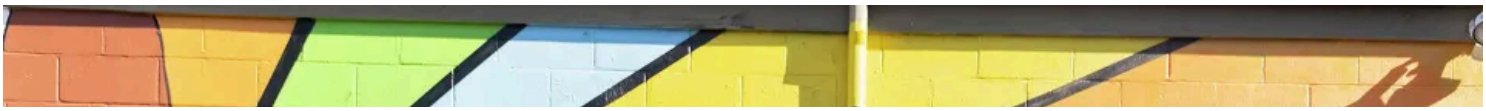

e-Edition Account

Building Opportunities for Self-Sufficiency staff member John Jones III arrives at the Oakland nonprofit's office in 2022. The group provides pretrial services for the Alameda County Superior Court.

Jessica Christian/S.F. Chronicle

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On any given day, roughly 3,000 people in Alameda County who have been charged but not convicted of a crime are free while awaiting trial. What happens to them in that in-between period — whether they find housing, keep a job and get to court — can determine whether they end up in a jail cell.

Two Bay Area counties are running parallel experiments regarding who should manage that pretrial period, and the results should settle the question.

Since February 2026, the Alameda County Superior Court has partnered with the Oakland nonprofit Building Opportunities for Self-Sufficiency on an expanded pretrial services program, moving away from an earlier, probation department-run pilot that was "rooted in monitoring and supervision," Cory Jacobs, program manager for pretrial services with the court, told the Oaklandside in February.

In practice, that meant regular in-person check-ins with a probation officer, compliance verification and, in some cases, electronic monitoring — not help finding housing or treatment.

"You don't need to follow someone around while they're out of custody to make sure they stay out of trouble," Jacobs said in the Oaklandside.

Building Opportunities for Self-Sufficiency's case managers, by contrast, connect defendants to housing, treatment and benefits. The result of switching oversight has been profound: Moderate-risk rearrests dropped from 43% to 18% after the program launched — roughly double the old model's effectiveness.

Yet that success story is now on the chopping block. County funding for the program expires Dec. 31, and the Alameda County Probation Department wants to take it over on a rushed timeline — even though Building Opportunities for Self-Sufficiency has already served 789 people in six months, connecting hundreds of them to housing and treatment, on top of the rearrest-rate drop county officials have already documented. The fight has spilled into public view, with one judge going so far as to call the takeover plan "bureaucratic insanity."

Presiding Judge Michael Markman put it even more plainly to the Oaklandside: "Pulling the plug after less than a year would be a real tragedy."

It is also something that Alameda County officials should have foreseen given that an example of this mistake was playing out just across the bay. For 50 years, the nonprofit San Francisco Pretrial Diversion Project was paid by the city to do exactly what Building Opportunities for Self-Sufficiency does. This year, San Francisco dismantled the program. The Adult Probation Department requested roughly $13 million to duplicate services the project was already providing for less — even though state law specifically carved out an exception letting San Francisco keep contracting with the nonprofit. San Francisco Public Defender Mano Raju urged Mayor Daniel Lurie to reject the takeover, Sheriff Paul Miyamoto accused the court of using flawed metrics to justify it, and the groups like the Vera Institute and the ACLU joined the fight to save the program.

A last-ditch compromise — including the resignation of the nonprofit's longtime CEO and new oversight powers for probation — fell apart. In July, Mayor Lurie sided with the court anyway, funding the nonprofit only through a shortened, one-year contract that effectively sealed its fate. By August, pretrial's own board voted to dissolve the organization entirely, effective Nov. 13. At an arraignment shortly after, Judge Lianne Dumas noted the gap now opening for defendants who have to find their own way to a probation-run center instead of being offered services where they live: "It's just gonna be on your client to go," she said.

The case for community organizations isn't sentimental — it's structural. A probation department's default posture is monitoring and consequence while a nonprofit's is to provide help. For a population presumed innocent, that difference shapes whether someone shows up to court or disappears out of fear. As San Francisco Pretrial CEO David Mauroff told the Davis Vanguard, staff with lived experience "understand the community" in a way a law-enforcement agency cannot, and the trust networks they build over decades don't transfer with a budget line.

To be fair, probation departments raise legitimate points: Centralizing supervision can improve accountability and data sharing, and a government agency answers to elected officials in ways a contractor doesn't. The San Francisco Superior Court also cited transparency concerns about the pretrial project's reporting. But those are governance problems fixable with better contracts — they don't require dismantling a working program and rebuilding its entire service network from scratch.

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The Alameda County Board of Supervisors has this decision in front of it now. Given what just happened in San Francisco — a costlier takeover, a dissolved nonprofit and a judge telling defendants they're now on their own — Alameda County has the rare advantage of seeing the ending before it chooses the plot. The Alameda County Superior Court has already said funding is "urgently needed" to keep Building Opportunities for Self-Sufficiency's program running at scale. Supervisors should fund that request and let a full year of data — not a rushed hand off — decide what comes next.

Alameda County trusted a community organization and cut its rearrest rate in half and is now deciding whether to abandon that anyway. San Francisco made the opposite choice and is living with the consequences. Alameda still has the chance San Francisco didn't take. It shouldn't waste it.

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Sep 30, 2026

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