

LEADERSHIP SPOTLIGHT

Patricia Ceballos

SAN DIEGO COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE



For many people leaving incarceration, returning to their communities is both a challenging transition and a time of uncertainty and risk. [Recent reentry policy changes](#) at the federal and state level present opportunities for state, local and community leaders around the country to drive system-wide improvements to health and safety. California was the first state to receive approval from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) for a [Medicaid Section 1115 Reentry demonstration](#). Through California's waiver, called Advancing and Innovating Medi-Cal (CalAIM), the Justice Involved (JI) initiative focuses on providing a targeted set of Medicaid-covered services before someone is released from prison or jail, with continued care management and access to full-scope Medi-Cal services in the community. This

is intended to promote continuity of care throughout the reentry transition.

The success of CalAIM JI requires intensive collaboration between health agencies, including Medicaid, county and community health services and corrections, two systems that have not historically worked closely together. As implementation proceeds, dedicated county health and corrections leaders are working to make CalAIM JI a success in county jails. The [Reentry Services Division](#) within the San Diego Sheriff's Office under Sheriff Kelly Martinez leads the work to implement CalAIM JI in their jails. The San Diego Sheriff's Office oversees seven adult detention reentry facilities in the county with an average daily population of about 4,200 individuals. About 70% of the population is awaiting trial and 30% of the population is sentenced with a known release date.

We spoke with **Patricia Ceballos, Reentry Administrator of the San Diego Sheriff's Office** about her experience and what other counties can learn. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Could you give us some background about how you came to this work?

2026 will mark 20 years that I've worked in the reentry field. I started my career path in San Diego County as a community-based nonprofit provider working in our juvenile facilities. With that work, I got to do a lot of wraparound services, bridging the gap with community providers and connecting people back to their family. Then I found myself working with adults during [public safety realignment](#) in California in 2011. Since that time, I've worked in every adult facility in San Diego County building programs and services and relationships with community partners.

Could you tell us a little bit more about your current role and your work? What are you working on now?

I have the honor and privilege of serving as the Reentry Administrator for the San Diego County Sheriff's Office. This is a new position within our sheriff's office, and I oversee and manage all of the program services and reentry efforts that happen within our county jail system.

Our team has been doing structured reentry work for over 10 years and is responsible for all of the programs and coordination, referrals, and linkages to our community providers, including our faith community. We connect people to all of the community supports they may need in relation to reentry, including treatment, housing, employment, and other support services. Our team is also responsible for direct group facilitation; our counseling teams are the lead group facilitators.

We try to work with people the moment they walk in the door, and ensure that when they're transitioning into the community, they have received some level of service and a connection to community support upon release.

What motivates you to do work in reentry?

Our justice population motivates me to do this work. I often say, when talking about our justice population, "those" people are my people. I have family members who are formerly incarcerated and I experienced being unsheltered as a young person, having unstable transportation and food insecurity. I experienced gang violence in my community as a young person. So, I see myself reflected in this work in more than one way, and I genuinely believe that the representation in our jail is an extension of our community. They are family members. There are things that happen in the lives of the people we love and care about, and as a community and as a system, we need to do a better job at addressing and supporting people.

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CalAIM JI... gave us a chance to look at our population in its entirety in a more structured and robust way, and really start to think about the reentry pathways that needed to exist.

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How did you realize that CalAIM JI was a major opportunity?

About three years ago, I attended one of the DHCS [California's Medicaid Agency] JI advisory group meetings and learned a lot about the future of what our 1115 waiver implementation was going to look like.

For example, we were already doing Medi-Cal enrollment in San Diego. The JI initiative really got us to think about what enrollment looks like the moment someone walks in the door, rather than waiting to prepare them when they are releasing to our community. It was an opportunity to think about our intake process and how we start reentry as someone comes into the jail system, which is especially important for short-term clients who are in and out of our custody very quickly.

Who have been your key partners on this work? Are they new or existing? How did you form partnerships?

The JI initiative broadened our thinking on expanding our partnerships with our criminal justice partners, including the public defender's office and our probation partners. We were a very collaborative county to begin with, so this really solidified some of these partnerships and relationships. The partners that were new for us were managed care plans and health care systems and health insurance. These were all new learning experiences on how managed care plan systems worked, and learning how the contracting system worked with the enhanced care management (ECM) providers. Our ECM providers weren't necessarily new to us because we've had a lot of outreach and care coordination being done already. Many of them were familiar and helped us kind of co-create and design so much of the work that happens in this county.

One of the things that we did to help build relationships very early on, was connect with the managed care plan teams, and asked if they would like to come to jail. We brought them in so that they can see what our operational limitations, challenges, and opportunities were, but also so that we can better understand where they're coming from and learn more about their processes. They went through the jail clearance process so they had an understanding as administrators and managed care plans, what their ECM providers would have to go through also, which provided a shared learning experience for all of us. We also went out into the community to see these various ECM locations, to learn about what the intake process would look like for our clients as they returned home. Through that process we were all learning together and it helped bridge the hard conversations of, for example, how are we going to get this MOU and data use agreement executed in a timely manner?

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This initiative helped us see that this work doesn't belong to any one group of people, it belongs to all of us.

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What's something that you and your team have done that you are really proud of?

I am proud that we have never lost sight of the client perspective. When we developed our health risk assessment, our reentry plan, our reentry checklist, our [engagement video](#) to engage clients, and when we broadened our Reentry Leadership Academy curriculum to include CalAIM type information, it was centered around what the client's experience would be through this process. We are always thinking about how this benefits the client or how the client will be impacted by this decision. I'm really proud that we've made sure we've centered them in all aspects of our work since they are the ones receiving the services.

The second thing I'm so proud of is the type of innovation our team has come up with to engage our clients, to meet them where they are, to support them, to pull in experts with lived experience, to find ways to compensate their expertise for this work, and having command leadership who support staff, who are willing to be brave, and creative.

What's one of your biggest challenges right now and how are you working to address it?

The challenge of thinking about this really complex policy, even just reading the policy guide, is just processing everything and soaking it in. There is a lot of new language and new systems that I didn't necessarily know, and finding the time in the day to learn it, to understand it, and then translate it into action is challenging. I would encourage people to think about this work, not all together, but in really manageable pieces, because it will start to come together.

Finding support systems and allowing ourselves to ask for help was really important. I didn't come into this knowing what medical billing looks like. I didn't know what the codes are or what infrastructure is needed, so I leaned into support systems and experts who can help. It is important to get your IT solutions upfront, thinking about them early on, mapping out existing systems and finding efficient ways to leverage technology before you go live. When we started our procurement process on a new case management system, it took us almost a year to move through that contracting process. Ensuring that people are thinking about IT solutions very early in the process is essential.

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Threading that knowledge at multiple levels within our organization, from both professional and sworn, is really important for jails to think about. Nothing moves in a jail without our sworn staff...So having that buy-in and understanding is critical.”

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How have you and your team worked to help people feel seen and heard in this CalAIM JI work (including both the staff and the individuals who are incarcerated)?

First, I will credit our command staff here at the sheriff's office, who have been instrumental in helping us navigate this work. Our lieutenant, who was our liaison for the CalAIM implementation, was on our internal, interdisciplinary working group and we met on a regular basis to talk through all the different moving parts. He then got promoted to captain and was at our largest booking facility, and then was assigned to our Medical Services Division. At each step of the way, his first question as a commander to me was, where are we? Where are we at with the statement of work for that service in relation to CalAIM?

We focused on messaging to sworn staff on this work, what it means, and how it impacts their day to day. We introduced information very early on and kept it really to the point with information on what's happening, why it's happening, this is who you call to get support, and information on training. The other thing we did is we put all disciplines in a room together—sworn, medical, mental health, reentry, management-level and operation-level—and introduced them to this initiative.

All of us who work in correctional settings are negatively reinforced because we only see people who come back to jail, so we aim to describe what these successes look like, and demonstrate it by bringing people who have been successful in the community back into the jails to share their story of success—not only to the clients, but to the staff who need to hear that it's possible and that there are people who are thriving in the community. I think it's critical. We also created a quarterly reentry newsletter that we share office wide, so it goes to everybody in the sheriff's office. We have over 4,000 employees, and they see what programs and services we offer, what some of the advancements are, and some key milestones in relation to reentry work overall. That helps us with the general awareness of the work that's happening.

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If there was one piece of advice that you could give to your past self when this initiative began, what would it be?

I thought about this question, and have thought about why it was the hardest one for me to answer. When I thought about it, I wrote down one word: grace. The idea being to give us grace in this work, to be graceful with myself, to be graceful with the people around me, to give us grace as we don’t know what we don’t know. We can be really hard on ourselves. We’re pouring everything we have into this work and when something doesn’t work, it’s hard. We’re learning, we’ve never done it before, and having to remind ourselves that it’s okay that it didn’t work that time. But if you can stay steady and grounded, the work will continue, and you can utilize the lesson for future success.

You have to remind yourself that it’s important that you stay level headed and focused, because you set the tone for this work as leaders and administrators, and the people around you who are looking to implement this work are looking to you for guidance, direction, and support. If you can be graceful with yourself, I think that trickles into the work, and what people observe and see, and really what we’re trying to cultivate are future leaders; we want to ensure that we’re also mindful of how we bring them into the space. We want to show that although it’s complicated, it’s possible and opportunity driven, so that the next generation of people who are coming into this work, are not walking into something that’s unmanageable, but feel hopeful about the impact they can make.



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