

# ORANGE COUNTY SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT INTERNAL MEMO



**TO:** Undersheriff Barnes  
**FROM:** Lieutenant Puckett  
**DATE:** October 26, 2017  
**RE:** Santa Ana Riverbed

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On August 25, 2017, the Orange County Homeless Outreach Team (OCHOT) was transferred from the Security Bureau to North Patrol. This shift was based on a change in strategy to begin a holistic approach with outreach and criminal enforcement in the Santa Ana Riverbed.

To date, the Homeless Outreach Team has been effective primarily in an outreach role. However, due to ongoing jurisdictional issues, reports by the media of crimes within the homeless encampments, and public concern, the Orange County Sheriff's Department has taken the lead in providing a police presence in areas of the Santa Ana Riverbed.

In addition, there has been documented victimization of people who are using the Santa Ana Riverbed in a recreational manner. This includes crimes against people and property.

On September 6, 2017, the OCHOT began an enhanced mission of outreach and enforcement in the Santa Ana Riverbed. This was a combined effort with the Anaheim and Orange Police Departments. Since beginning this operation, the OCHOT has made approximately 1118 contacts in the Santa Ana Riverbed.

The purpose of these contacts was to provide and document our outreach effort. It was also used to help identify the criminal element in the various encampments. Based on previous experience, we believed the possibility existed that a criminal element was victimizing the homeless population that was in need of outreach.

The data provided by our encounters points towards a disturbing trend that would necessitate the need to close the Santa Ana Riverbed. It is my belief the reasons documented below will support this goal.

The closing of the Santa Ana Riverbed would be necessitated by the following public safety issues:

- Potential for a Hepatitis A Outbreak
- Fire outbreak concern
- Illegal dumping in the waterway
- Criminal Activity

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### Hepatitis A

Recent articles in the media have well documented an ongoing Hepatitis A outbreak in various encampments in the City of San Diego. According to a recent OC Health Care Agency advisory, "San Diego, Santa Cruz, and Los Angeles Counties are experiencing Hepatitis A outbreaks primarily in their homeless and illicit drug user populations. San Diego County has had 444 cases of Hepatitis A, Santa Cruz County has reported 69, and Los Angeles County has reported 10 cases."

Transmission of this disease occurs under the following conditions: Hepatitis A spreads when someone comes in contact with an infected person's feces, sometimes when hands are not properly washed after going to the bathroom or changing diapers and the virus is then spread through food or objects. It can also be spread through sex or by sharing drug paraphernalia.

While the Orange County Health Care Agency has stated we do not have an outbreak yet, they have begun to administer vaccinations to the homeless in the Santa Ana Riverbed. There has also been discussion regarding the posting of restrooms and wash stations.

This however does not mitigate two issues; 1. The population of the Santa Ana Riverbed is in constant flux with new people, 2. Intravenous drug use is rampant.

Both of these issues have been noticed by OCHOT while in patrol of the area. The deputies assigned to this area are encountering up to 100 syringes daily while on patrol. Many times, simply driving in the area will lead to syringes being found in tires of patrol cars.



While the County has been diligent in installing sharps containers, the evidence would dictate that not everyone is using them.





Restrooms and wash stations will not combat infectious disease spread by intravenous drug use.

In addition, due to a constant influx of people it would be difficult to vaccinate the entire population to stop the spread of this disease.

It is even more concerning that many of these encampments are in contact with residential areas. This makes the potential for a public health epidemic even more prevalent.

#### **Fire Outbreak Concern**

Patrol of the encampments in the Santa Ana Riverbed have revealed living conditions which are at risk for fire and loss of life. The encampments consist of tents and other make shift structures that are rife with flammable material and accelerants.

This issue is further complicated since this area was never designed to accommodate camping or other communities. Allowing any of these encampments to remain endangers both the homeless population and the surrounding communities.

I would recommend this information be forwarded to the Orange County Fire Marshall to render an opinion.

Deputies have noted the following hazardous conditions:

- Encampments are densely populated, with several tents "next door" to each other, with tarps and blankets in a makeshift style fence which surround several tents.
- The groups of tents which are surrounded by cloth and plastic fencing have no obvious entry/exit points which limit access into and out from encampment groups, which also limits access for first response and egress for possible victims.
- Some camps are barricaded with wooden pallets, iron fencing, chains, and other materials to prevent entry.
- Some of the more densely populated camps have electric generators, from which multiple extension cords run into various tents. These extension cords, and power outlets are weather worn and not in great shape to begin with. These cords are daisy chained and grouped in a way that would facilitate an electrical fire.



- Camps have several gas stoves inside the tents. Tents are not rated for internal flame.
- Tents are generally packed full with refuse, debris, and other items which have been collected and hoarded. These items include clothing (flammable), bike oil, gas for generators, butane.
- Camps have fire pits with wood that is burned openly
- Almost every camp and person has butane style torches (possibly for methamphetamine and heroin use).
- Mental health issues have caused calls for service reference subjects lighting things on fire and open flames in general.
- Camps are in close proximity to open areas (freeway overpass, onramp/offramp) which often contain dry brush and trees.

It should be noted that since January 1, 2016, the Orange County Sheriff's Department has responded to the following Arson related calls in the Santa Ana Riverbed:

16-150475 – Transient related brush fire

16-169014 – Transient related fire underneath a bridge

17-017948 – Grass fire

170508-0914 – Grass fire

170630-1073 – Subjects attempting to start a fire

Deputies have taken the following photographic documentation:





Battery with power inverter

Propane Tank



Battery with multiple connectors / power inverter

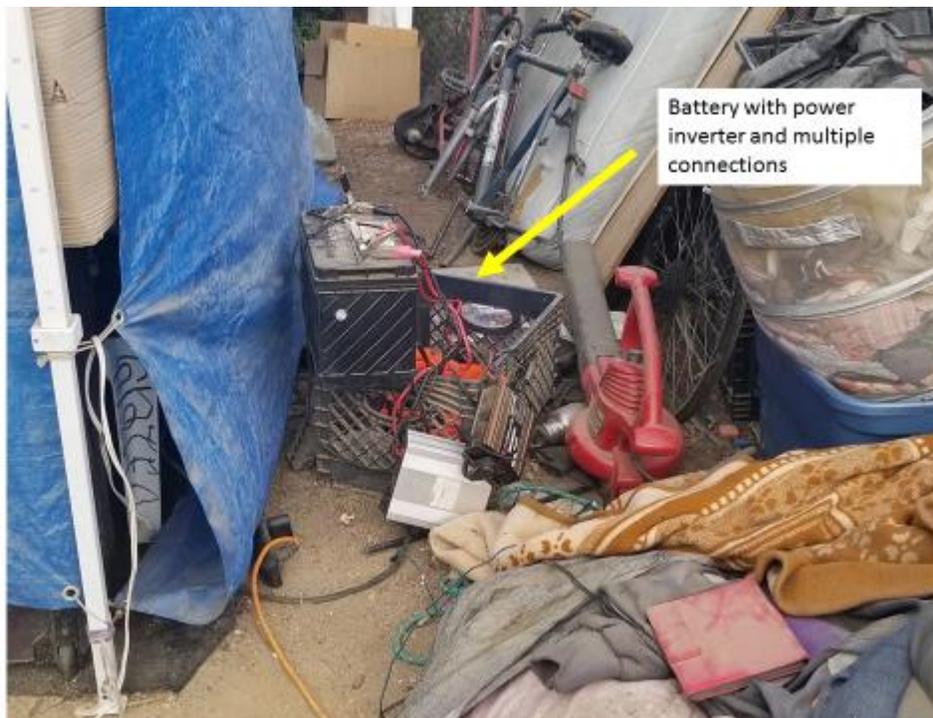








Propane



Battery with power inverter and multiple connections









### **Illegal Waterway Dumping**

The community that has been established in the Santa Ana Riverbed has unquestionably been committing various forms of illegal dumping in the spillway leading to the Pacific Ocean. This dumping has included tobacco, syringes, garbage, human feces, and chemicals.

To substantiate this, over the past 3 weeks OCHOT has issued numerous citations for this offense.

As previously stated, this issue is problematic since the area of the Santa Ana Riverbed was never intended for habitation.



### Criminal Activity

On September 6, 2017 OCHOT began using a specialized field interview card to document outreach activities and enforcement actions. Since that time we have conducted 1118 consensual contacts in the Santa Ana Riverbed. An analysis of those contacts has revealed approximately 85% of all those contacted have a prior criminal history.

The data from these cards has shown that 1026 of the contacts have no desire for outreach services. It should be further noted that HCA reports that only 10% of those who accept service actually follow through. This would translate into less than 1% of the population in the Santa Ana Riverbed pursuing services.

In addition, we have encountered criminal offenses including Robbery, Assault, Narcotics Sales, Weapons Possession, Burglary, Trespassing, and other numerous crimes. Since September 6, 2017, we have made 180 arrests for those offenses. We have also begun preliminary investigations into possible Human Trafficking, Weapons Sales, and Narcotics Sales.

We are also actively looking for another 28 suspects in the Santa Ana Riverbed with active warrants that range from Violent Assaults to Trespassing.

This presents a unique public safety issue for the surrounding communities. Many communities in Santa Ana, Fountain Valley, Anaheim, and Orange have reported that crime is elevated when next to an encampment. Both crimes against persons and property are alleged to have increased when in proximity to homeless encampments.

### Closure

Closure of the Santa Ana Riverbed would follow existing protocols used for previous incremental closures in the area. This would include a 72-hour notice, stating the area will be closed to the public. Anyone trespassing would be subject to a misdemeanor trespassing violation under California law.

