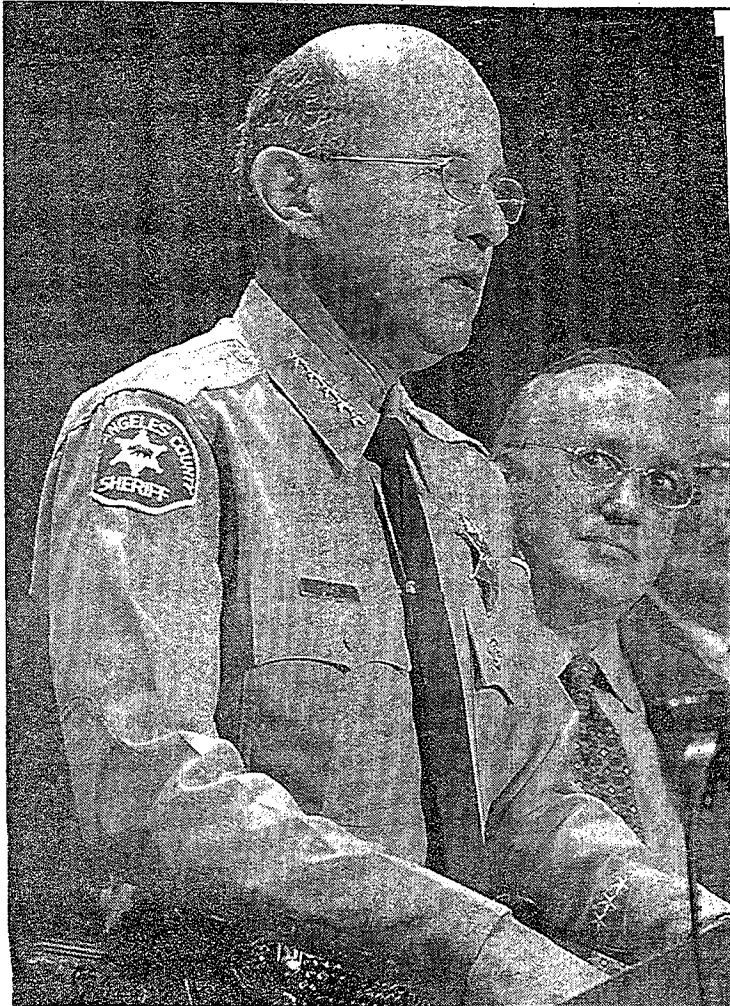


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BRIAN WALSKI / Los Angeles Times

Sheriff Lee Baca and attorney Barry Litt announce settlement of lawsuits filed over the illegal detention of people in county jails.

County to Pay Inmates Millions

Jails: Supervisors approve a \$27-million settlement of lawsuits by prisoners held past their release dates. Sheriff Baca admits errors, says reforms are underway.

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TIMES STAFF WRITERS

Los Angeles County admitted Tuesday to illegally detaining some 400,000 people in county jails over five years as county supervisors agreed to pay \$27 million to settle five class-action lawsuits.

The settlement, among the largest sums ever paid by the county to resolve litigation, shows that the Sheriff's Department's long-standing problem of keeping inmates in jail after courts have ordered them released is far greater than previously known.

The Sheriff's Department for years has acknowledged that it detained hundreds and sometimes thousands of inmates past the date they had been ordered released by a judge, largely due to clerical errors. But its reports did not include the thousands of other inmates routinely held for a few extra days because of the time it took to process their release.

Roughly 200,000 inmates filter through the county's sprawling-jail system every year, and county attorneys estimate that up to 80,000 a year were held past their release date, about 40%. County attorneys say that up to half of those were strip-searched during the time they were held illegally, like plaintiff Valerie Ann Streit, a personal trainer from Santa Monica.

Streit, 49, was arrested on a domestic violence charge that was later dropped. She was held an extra 24 hours and strip-searched in a hallway where men may have watched the procedure.

"It was horrible," she said in an interview Tuesday.

The lawsuits addressed a third systemic problem: The county held inmates who had been brought in on warrants but were not the individuals named on the warrants and did not belong in jail. County attorneys estimate that up to 5,000 people were held improperly since 1997 because of such errors.

A key problem is the inability of the Sheriff's Department computer to communicate with the court computer system. As a result, deputies must rely on handwritten notes telling them when inmates are released. When that paperwork gets lost or misread, inmates who have completed their jail sentence—or been found innocent—can languish for weeks.

Despite repeated alarms about the problem since the mid-1990s, a new computer system to connect the jail to the courts is not scheduled to come on line until 2003.

Until then, Sheriff Lee Baca said
Please see **LAWSUITS, A16**

LAWSUITS: County OKs \$27-Million Jail Accord

8/15/01

Continued from A1

he has ordered immediate reforms to end over-detentions. Prisoners with release orders are now freed at the courthouse, rather than bused back to jail for processing. The department also will stop strip-searching inmates on their return from court if they are scheduled to be released and give greater attention to inmates who claim they are not the person named in arrest warrants.

"It's not pleasing for me to stand up in front of the county of Los Angeles and talk about a \$27-million settlement in these terms," Baca said at a news conference Tuesday night. "My greatest wish is that the Sheriff's Department would have done the right thing when these claims were coming in and fix it."

Hours earlier, Baca had briefed the Board of Supervisors in a closed session on the issue. While lamenting the cost, supervisors said they believed that Baca, who took office in 1999, has finally fixed the problem.

"The [Sheriff's Department] for decades has been treating this issue way too lightly," said Supervisor Gloria Molina, praising Baca for his actions.

Plaintiffs' attorneys, who took the unusual step of joining Baca at his press briefing, also complimented the sheriff for his quick action on the issue. "We are enormously impressed in the job the Sheriff's Department has done in solving this problem," said Barry Litt, the lead plaintiffs' attorney.

It is uncertain whether all the holes in the system have been plugged. Baca did not explain Tuesday how, without a new computer system, the department would fulfill its promise to release inmates from jail by midnight of their release date. Its chronic inability to do this is what sparked the class-action litigation about four years ago.

In one of those lawsuits, the plaintiffs' attorneys estimated that it cost taxpayers \$54.40 per day to house an inmate that had been ordered released. They alleged there had been 66,000 days of over-detentions between 1995 and 1997 alone, costing more than \$3.5 million in public money.

The county fought the lawsuits aggressively for years. The county counsel's office said it did not yet have estimates for how much pub-

lic money was spent defending the county in the case.

But during that time, the county was routinely settling other lawsuits by other inmates who were kept too long, including one filed by a man who was arrested but never charged with a crime, spent 37 extra days in jail and was denied his HIV medication. A woman arrested on petty theft charges paid her bail but was held an extra 10 days, during which she tried to hang herself.

In addition, the Sheriff's Department routinely approached inmates detained too long and offered small sums of money if they signed a form agreeing not to sue. People who signed such waivers are excluded from the massive settlement.

Under the agreement approved by supervisors, the county will pay the plaintiffs' attorneys \$5.5 million in fees and costs. If the federal court approves the settlement, the plaintiffs' attorneys will monitor the county's release policies until 2004. Any violations of the settlement will result in a \$10,000 fine that will go to community-based groups that help keep people out of jail.

The 60 named plaintiffs will get the largest chunk of the settlement—from \$750,000 to \$21.5 million depending on how many other former inmates step forward to claim damages. Those additional inmates can receive from \$50 to \$5,000 depending on how they were treated by the Sheriff's Department.

The \$27-million sum is substantial even in the Goliath county government. With the money supervisors voted to spend settling the litigation, they could have hired about 270 more deputies to patrol the streets or 340 nurses to work in public hospitals and clinics.

The settlement is not the end of the county's legal woes. Attorney Stephen Yagman is pursuing six individual cases and a separate federal class-action lawsuit alleging systemic over-detention of inmates.

In an interview Tuesday, Yagman said he will not settle until the problems are solved—something he doubts has happened yet.

Times staff writers Hector Berra and Eric Malnic contributed to this report.