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KINGS COUNTY MAJOR CRIMES TASK FORCE FACES CROSSROADS AS HANFORD WITHDRAWS



HANFORD, CA – February 25, 2025 In the heart of Kings County, where wheat fields once sparked the need for fire carts in the 1910s, a modern battle against crime has unfolded for decades. The Kings County Major Crimes Task Force, a coalition born from the Narcotics Task Force of the 1970s and the Gang Task Force of the 1980s, stood under scrutiny at Tuesday's Board of Supervisors meeting. Praised for its victories against gangs and killers, the task force now confronts a pivotal shift as Hanford Police Department pulls out, igniting debate over its future amid a rising tide of violence.

Sheriff Dave Robinson, nearing 15 years in office, painted a vivid picture of the task force's legacy. "It's been around for years, and it works very well," he told the board, his voice steady with conviction. Over the past five years, the task force has tackled every homicide case across the county—from rural Kettleman City to bustling Hanford—leaving no jurisdiction unsupported. Its recent wiretap operations, including "Operation Takedown," cracked seven or eight cold case homicides, cases that had gone dark until investigators pieced together the clues. In [Avenal](#) alone, that effort sent 10 homicide suspects to jail, a \$500,000 overtime investment Robinson deemed "worth the money" for the justice it delivered.

The task force's prowess shines in its details. Jonathan Brewster, president of the Deputy Sheriff's Association and a former gang investigator, recalled a 2019 case in Hanford: a four-person attempted homicide on Scott and Reddington streets that left two young girls



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wounded by stray bullets. "We worked that case six days straight," he said. "Felony convictions—over 100 years each." The key? A wiretap investigation, a grueling process requiring 100 hours of overtime per case to track gang members' calls. "It costs money, but it puts [people](#) in prison for years," Brewster added.

Yet, a rift emerged as Hanford Police Chief Stephanie Huddleston defended her department's exit, a decision six years in the making under her predecessor. She's redirecting resources to a five-officer Street Crimes Unit, arguing it better serves Hanford's 58,000 residents. "Instead of one full-time person in the task force, I'm committing five investigators to the streets," she said, citing a \$140,000 overtime bill for a single task force officer over 15 months as evidence of inefficiency. Her unit's 2023 record dazzles: 95 cases investigated, 65 search warrants served, 99 arrests, and 21 firearms seized. In 2024, despite staffing shortages, they logged 85 arrests and solved a double homicide in a Walmart parking lot in under 14 hours. "We'll keep the city safe," she vowed, promising continued aid to county partners when called.

The withdrawal sparked sharp pushback. Robinson warned of a communication gap without Hanford's daily task force presence. "You lose that piece when you [don't](#) have a body there day in and day out," he said, noting sensitive cases suffer when information isn't shared seamlessly. Supervisor Richard Valle pressed the point: "Gangs don't respect city limits. Hanford gangs shoot in Corcoran; Corcoran retaliates." He cited a chilling example—stray bullets piercing children's bedroom walls in his district—as proof of the need for a countywide approach. Robinson, invoking a 1997 Attorney General opinion, underscored his legal duty to oversee the entire county, cities included. "I don't take that lightly," he said. Huddleston countered with pragmatism. Her unit, with officers boasting five to 15 years' experience, offers flexibility the task force lacks. During the Walmart homicide, her team arrived second on scene, freeing patrol officers for 911 calls—a nimbleness she credits for the swift resolution. The Hanford Police Officers Association unanimously backs her, with a letter praising the shift as "sound fiscal and operational judgment." Still, Brewster flagged a downside: "Our people end up doing the gang packets and expertise for their cases. It's frustrating for line staff."



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[Community voices added depth to the debate](#). Justin Vallon, a 24-year Hanford PD veteran and former task force supervisor, called the withdrawal a practical choice. “We’re increasing our staff fourfold,” he said, arguing five officers can aid Corcoran, Avenal, and beyond more effectively than one. He dismissed wiretap complexity—“not that difficult”—and questioned why Corcoran’s 2021 exit didn’t spark similar uproar. Meanwhile, former Sheriff Chris Jordan, speaking as a retired captain, likened the rift to a “divorce” affecting street-level deputies and officers. “When hell breaks loose at 3 a.m., it’s nice when a deputy shows up,” he said, urging resolution for safety’s sake.

Funding emerged as a crux. Robinson, managing a \$65 million budget, shrugged off overtime critiques—“You see it every year”—and urged cities to leverage new tax measures passed in Hanford and elsewhere. “Put the money where it matters,” he said, envisioning a bolstered [public safety](#) network. “We need more boots on the ground—more detectives, more street crimes units, more task force members. These tax measures in Hanford, Corcoran, and [Lemoore](#) are a chance to build that, not just patch holes. Let’s invest in what keeps us safe.” He also eyed federal grants, like a \$600,000-\$700,000 award secured decades ago under Sheriff Jordan. Supervisor Joe Neves recalled a rare Department of Justice meeting in D.C., hinting at untapped aid. “It’s all about funding,” he said, a sentiment echoed countywide as inflation squeezes budgets.

Crime’s uptick fueled urgency. Homicides, once countable on one hand annually, now near 20, including prison cases—a stark rise from decades past. The supervisors debated a letter urging Hanford’s [city council](#) to reconsider, with Valle insisting it respect Huddleston’s leadership. No vote was finalized, but the stakes were clear: a task force with a proven record—solving cold cases, jailing killers—versus Hanford’s bid for local control.

Robinson remains steadfast. “We’ll keep putting people in prison,” he said. “That’s what we do.” As [Kings County](#) navigates this crossroads, the task force’s legacy hangs in the balance—its victories a testament to collaboration, its future a question of unity or division.



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Questions for Readers:

- Do you think Hanford's withdrawal strengthens or weakens [Kings County's](#) fight against crime? Why?
- Should the county prioritize funding for the Major Crimes Task Force, or should cities like Hanford focus on their own units? What's the best balance?
- How can [Kings County](#) ensure cooperation across jurisdictions when resources and priorities differ? Share your thoughts!

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