

REQUEST TO CONVENE JUSTICE AND SAFETY WORKING GROUP

We, a growing coalition of concerned residents and service-providers, request that the Commissioners of Lancaster County convene a Justice and Safety Working Group to make policy recommendations that would reduce the jail population and necessitate a smaller, less expensive new jail.

Lancaster County leadership is to be commended: This request is not made critically, but rather out of a sincere desire to use the building of a jail as an opportunity to ensure that Lancaster County continues to make sound financial investments and stays on the cutting edge. Thanks to the efforts of current leadership, we are on the map for being one of the first to adopt treatment courts, and for having an extremely robust reentry community.

Why establish a working group? While Lancaster County is transparent with its jail population data, there are inherent limitations with its current software that have historically prevented residents from answering basic questions about who is in our jail, why, and for how long.¹ Despite these limitations, Lancaster County Prison (LCP) provided CGL with one day snapshot and release data reflected in the Needs Assessment report. This information provides us with our first, dynamic view into what we are using our jail for.

The Needs Assessment report indicates that a jail population is simply a product of admissions and length of stay, and notes how sensitive jail populations are to law enforcement, court processing and sentencing practices. Yet the Needs Assessment assumes that our policies and practices will remain static. Now that we have more insight into our jail population, it's time to reassess our policies and practices.

In a society where detention prior to or “without trial is the carefully limited exception”², only one in ten people committed to LCP are entering after having been convicted of and sentenced for a crime.³ The vast majority of people being committed to LCP are entering on allegations, and are disproportionately Black, poor, suffering from mental health disorders, substance use issues, and are charged with minor offenses or technical violations of their supervision, and we are holding them for an inordinately long time. Not only is this reality inconsistent with our ideals, it is also inconsistent with best practices, costly, and inefficient.

¹ These limitations became apparent when CGL requested data for its Needs Assessment report and Lancaster County Commissioners are again commended for already addressing these limitations with a new data-systems purchase, which is expected to be operational in the fall.

² U.S. v. Salemo, 481 U.S. 739 (1987).

³ Needs Assessment, Table 10.

While it is heartening that Judge Spahn is convening a group to reduce our average length of stay to be more in line with the national average by exploring potential changes to court operations that might go into effect in 2026, more can be done and now is the time to do it.

What would be the working group's focus? Because jail populations are dynamic and sensitive to policies and procedures, and because conversations about our criminal system necessarily implicate broader community concerns, the Justice and Safety Working Group would have a dual focus with a singular goal: safely reduce the jail population through community-centered interventions.

The group would:

- a) review criminal court systems and case-processing practices, including pre-arrest procedures and probation practices, and offer recommendations.
- b) focus on expansion of our community-based social services and programs that can prevent the types of problems we might think we are addressing through incarceration.

Over the course of 6 months, the working group would use data-driven approaches and evidence-based best practices, to pinpoint systemic problems and suggest interventions, investments and other modes of improvement. The working group would aim to ensure a more efficient coordination of community-based services, and a more humane and just criminal system, which produces less recidivism, improves public safety, and minimizes our use of pretrial incarceration.

Who would participate? The Justice and Safety Working Group would convene people with lived experience, service providers, and other stakeholders across disciplines that represent the spectrum of the criminal justice system – from prevention to re-entry..

In conclusion, Lancaster County has successfully demonstrated its ability to safely achieve significant reductions in population at the current facility. There is no reason to pass up the opportunity to explore how more could be done.