

CONSEQUENCES *of the* INVISIBLE JAIL:

Embracing a Community-Connected Jail

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Artwork: Jody West

A jail cannot effectively address or solve its challenges in the short or long term without community support. Budgets, salaries, employee recruitment and retention, inmate programming, physical plant upgrades, 21st century information systems, employee training—all of these require an educated and informed community to serve as advocates and allies. Yet, in a 2019 survey, only 3% of responding jails reported that the citizens whom they serve are knowledgeable about their jail; 45% reported citizens as somewhat knowledgeable; and 52% reported citizens are not at all knowledgeable (McCampbell, 2021).

Very few jails have formal (or even informal) mechanisms that involve citizens in the jail’s operation or have the means to gain their support through—for example—advisory boards or councils. In this same survey, 90% of jails reported *no* formally established citizen advisory-only committee or group. With the public focus on accountability, transparency, trust-building, and meaningful community involvement in the criminal justice system, how and why have jails been left so far behind?

This article urges sheriffs, directors, superintendents—the leadership of jails—to embrace a contemporary collaborative model to improve all aspects of their operations through building sustainable partnerships with their community. This model includes:

- Genuine organizational commitment to making the jail a more visible and integral part of community as expressed in the agency’s vision, mission, and value statements;
- Commitment to transparency and accountability in jail operations;
- Improvements in internal agency culture, to align collaborative initiatives with employees’ execution of their duties;
- Identification and engagement of community stakeholders and citizens in meaningful ways;
- Allocation of resources to internally and externally support this vision of a community-connected jail; and
- Perseverance to overcome decades of the “invisible” jails.

Why should jail leaders consider this different model of doing business? If the status quo is acceptable, then proceed. But if the status quo needs an upgrade, deliberate about these suggestions. In considering this different approach, jails must draw on the experiences of the law enforcement’s almost 50 years of work to increase community trust and collaboration. We, in jails, don’t yet have this history nor the specific tools geared toward jails. Hopefully, this will change.

The Invisible Jail

If the jail’s leadership desires to establish and maintain a meaningful relationship with the community, overcoming decades of avoiding such connections will require thought, planning, input, and a strategy to implement. Jails

have an unenviable record of lack of transparency. “Most correctional facilities are surrounded by more than physical walls; they are walled off from external monitoring and public scrutiny to a degree inconsistent with the responsibility of public institution” (The Commission on Safety and Abuse in America’s Prisons, 2006).

“Prisons and jails in this country are among the most opaque public institutions in our society. We have erected massive walls and razor wire fences around these buildings, placed them in remote corners of each state, limited public access to these spaces, and restricted information that can reveal what is happening inside the walls. We lack reliable data pertinent to the health, safety, and well-being of people in custody, and cannot even assess the relative safety or danger of any particular facility” (Deitch, 2021).

The invisible jail may have evolved because of the local political environment, which valued “law enforcement/patrol” functions over incarceration. Or these jails could have come into existence due to benign neglect. Jails are not sexy; jails don’t inspire leaders to shine a light on the work or those doing it, even if critical to community safety. No matter how the invisible jail came about, the jail has not accrued resources, support, staffing, and respect because of this environment. Little time has been devoted by jail leadership to educate the community; clarify mission, vision and values; invite input from those who fund jail functions; or include those whose loved ones are incarcerated.

Today, some communities are demanding formal oversight of jails and prisons, and “de-incarceration”—decreasing the pre-trial population—is the newest word in the reform vocabulary. With emerging public focus and demands, is it time for jails to become their own advocates

and stretch across a divide that might not be of their own making but certainly impacts everyday operations? Is it time to delve into the matter of how transparent and open is your jail, and whether there is a clear view of the concerns of the community and how partnerships can bring change?

Commitment to Involvement and Transparency

If the jail’s leadership has a genuine commitment to change course, how is this accomplished? Defining outcomes may be helpful. What will the future look like? What is “in it” for the jail to throw aside the invisibility cloak? And what’s “in it” for the community to engage with the jail? Internal agency culture and the benefits to employees, inmates, contractors, etc., must be articulated as the process moves forward.

As a ‘test’ of your jail’s transparency, consider your website. What information is readily retrievable? How are requests for public records relegated? How easily can citizens get information about an incarcerated family member? Are completed investigations available? Is data shared routinely? What about use-of-force data? Where to file a complaint?

In the survey referenced in this article, only 10% of responding agencies reported they routinely release the outcome of investigations into allegations of staff misconduct to the public. Jail incident data and jail performance or metrics are not included on the website of responding agencies. This is just one of many opportunities to increase public knowledge and support.

To adopt this new course of action, we must rely on the literature on how law enforcement/police build their community relations, as very little has been written about jail/community

relations and partnerships. Borrowing from this literature, steps may include:

1. Acknowledge and discuss with your communities the challenges in your jail. This may include use of force, deaths in custody, inmate medical and mental health care, the crisis in recruiting and retaining employees, and budget.
2. Be transparent and accountable. How will the jail hold itself accountable through data collection, analysis, problem-solving, and publication of this information to the community?
3. Take steps to reduce bias and improve cultural competency. Jails are closed communities, in which self-talk can skew the reality of how operations are really serving inmates or employees. Training in most jail environments is challenging both in terms of money to pay for improved skills and the ability to free staff from assignments to even attend training.
4. Maintain focus on the importance of collaboration and be visible in the community. To overcome a jail's challenges requires collaboration. Setting aside the reality that correctional staff are the least appreciated of the public safety workers, findings ways to show the connection between inside and outside the bars is crucial. This is a new way of thinking.
5. Promote internal diversity and ensure professional growth opportunities. All the work of corrections staff is community relations because the community is in custody. Working to acquaint the community with the need for basic training, improved in-service training, and credible promotional opportunities means a better jail serving the citizens (U. S. Dept. of Justice, Community Relations Services, n.d.).

Most citizens and stakeholders—those who have a vested interest in the work of the jail—don't even know what to ask when inquiring about how a jail operates. Starting conversations may be challenging, and identifying those in the community who can be allies in this outreach is critical. These may include advocacy groups, families of inmates, service providers, the business community, and faith groups.

If the jail does not have a history of outreach, transparency or accountability, inviting potential partners may be daunting at first. Why should these groups trust the jail or the jail's motives in seeking these relationships? A history of past failures at building this trust can haunt the effort. Communication appears to be the key. When communicating with citizens why the jail seeks the relationships, use plain language, identify key stakeholders, hold small group or individual discussions, and provide evidence of positive outcomes as the first steps. If the jail's own employees aren't on board, the prospects are less hopeful. Teach and mentor employees about the goals and the potential advantages to them as an individual. Refine social media platforms and the agency's own website. Ask questions. Conduct community surveys, be sure the jail "walks the talk" in all aspects of ethical behavior and keeping promises (IACP, 2018a).

The evolving functions and changing role of the jail also needs consideration. As is often discussed, in most communities in this country, jails are the only 24/7 provider of emergency and nonemergency mental health services. Those in the community who are addicted to substances—legal or otherwise—often end up in a crisis that brings them to the 24/7 jail. Some communities wish to focus on diversion, community alternatives

to pre-trial incarceration, bond and bail reform, reentry services to improve outcomes when a pretrial inmate is released from custody, gender-responsive programming for the increasing number of women inmates—the list can be long. Each choice in terms of the jail's mission has an impact on the resources needed, staffing, training, and physical plant.

The jail's own house must first be in order. This includes:

- policies and procedures in place,
- adequate staffing,
- training aligned with policies,
- quality supervision,
- commitment to objective investigations into allegations of such incidents as staff misconduct,
- uses of force,
- in-custody deaths,
- measurable performance objectives, and
- data collection, analysis, and corrective action plans as needed.

Transparency is next; that is, the jail's commitment to share information, investigations, and data. All of this is quite overwhelming for a component of the justice system that has been relatively invisible. And certainly this strategy is not without risks. By opening the door to collaboration and partnerships, jails expose the unseen and often confusing world that is called jail.

What's the 5-year plan or 10-year plan for your jail? Is there a direction, or is it more or less left to the ebb and flow of others in the justice system?

Jail Advisory Board

An option for increasing community education and gaining support of the jail is to create a viable path for citizen involvement. First, the jail needs to learn what their citizens think about options and their level of trust in partnering

with the jail. For the first step, one suggestion is to schedule listening sessions to explore ideas and strategies with political leaders, the business community, the community in general, and the loved ones of inmates. Preparation is necessary to avoid silence at such sessions. What has been the history of past attempts at collaboration? What misunderstandings still exist? What are the successes (IACP, 2018b)?

The jail must engage in some out-of-box thinking about specific projects that can be enhanced by a collaboration with the community. For example, advocacy for community mental health beds, identification of service providers to deliver needed programs to inmates, and recruitment and retention of jail employees. Collaboration isn't a one-way street; the jail also needs to brainstorm about the benefits to the community in whatever initiatives are visualized (McCampbell, 2015).

The process begins by putting together the interests of the community with the needs of the jail. If an advisory board is under consideration, at a minimum it requires:

- a clear statement of mission, vision, and values;
- delineation of roles;
- staffing from the jail to support the group; and
- initiatives that can be explored to enhance the jail's operation and the community's return on investment for participating.

By-laws, membership guidelines, meeting frequency, public notice of minutes, and next steps are all part of this initiative (Cushman, 2001).

The success of any collaboration requires resources and a plan. What are the steps in the process? Who will be responsible and what is the timetable? Staff who are knowledgeable and committed to the community in which they serve are well-versed in the

mission, vision, and values of the partnerships that are needed. Otherwise, the collaboration will struggle.

If opinions from the community are sought and to be blended with the jail's needs, failing to timely act on the information will doom any partnerships. This approach does not rely solely on a citizen academy or the recruitment of more volunteers to work in the jail, or the solicitation of support on the eve of a budget hearing. All of those are important components to a broader view of meaningful community involvement.

As part of this process, jail leaders and the community should keep in mind what constitutes success in this enterprise. Just holding meetings, or doing tours of the jail, while perhaps building blocks of education and trust, does not in and of themselves create a strong enough partnership. Is information more readily and transparently given to the community? Are more new employees recruited from neighborhood sources? Is the budget more clearly defined and advocated in front of the funding authority by community and business groups?

Perseverance

Imagine what some community and business leaders might think if the jail was to approach them about establishing partnerships? Especially if this is the first time the jail has ever ventured to do this work. Having listened to the community could help to frame these early discussions; keeping in mind what might be benefits to partners and not just the jail.

Perseverance might also be needed to convince those within the jail's organization—whether an elected sheriff, a county council, or a regional board—that seeking partnerships is wise. The jail is often not viewed as the

priority public service for some agencies, and gaining an increased community interest might conflict with the organization's leadership image of the world. This may be a daunting obstacle. Articulating and advocating within its own organization may well be the first steps in community outreach. And along the way, don't forget to partner with other criminal justice entities in the community.

Consequences of Jail/Community Disconnect

Jails can be advocates for change within their organizations and in their community; or be forever the invisible part of the justice system. Learning about options, seeking partners, raising the visibility of the impact of pretrial incarceration on the community, urging wages and conditions of work commensurate with professionals, all can be in the jail's purview. Community-based partnerships need the commitment of those leading jails to initiate and maintain them (Washington, 2021).

Next Steps

When asked to identify the barriers to improving community knowledge of and involvement in their jail, the most often cited reason was "lack of community interest" (56%). Whether this is true or not has yet to be measured.

In 2015, the U. S. President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing noted as a recommendation "1.3 Recommendation: Law enforcement agencies should establish a culture of transparency and accountability in order to build public trust and legitimacy. This will help ensure decision-making is understood and in accord with stated policy" (The President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, Final Report, 2020).

This recommendation is 14 years after a similar recommendation by The Commission on Safety and Abuse in America's Prisons, *Confronting Confinement to*

“strive for transparency.” It seems difficult to be interested in an invisible organization or one that lacks transparency and a seemingly genuine interest in the community.

It is time for jails and jail leaderships to step out from the invisibility cloak to gain or to re-gain the public’s trust and support. What will change for jail employees, operations, and the inmate population if this strategy is left undone, poorly constructed, or ignored altogether? ■

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