



CASE STUDY

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A Better Way: How Cook County is reducing its jail population through innovation and reform

Each day thousands are detained in Cook County Jail, accused of non-violent offenses but unable to post bond. The cost to the County is significant, but not as high as the damage done to those incarcerated: even a few days of unnecessary incarceration can leave individuals at risk of losing their jobs, homes or education. Understanding the need for reform, Civic Consulting Alliance is supporting the Illinois Supreme Court and criminal justice stakeholders to revise the bond court process and reduce the number of people unnecessarily detained in jail. With support from two pro bono partners, an evidence-based tool was launched, paving the way for a more fair and cost-effective criminal justice system.

Challenge

Nearly three-fourths of the men and women in Cook County Jail are held accused, but not convicted, of non-violent crimes. Many could be safely released before trial, but they remain in detention because they cannot afford to post bond. The human cost is high: while detainees await trial, they may lose their housing or jobs, or be expelled from school. The cost to taxpayers is similarly high: at \$143 per inmate per day, Cook County Jail — the nation's second largest single-site jail — costs Illinois taxpayers more than \$300 million each year.

Recognizing these human and financial costs, in 2013, Cook County President Toni Preckwinkle asked the Illinois Supreme Court to intervene. The Court commissioned an audit, which was released in March 2014, with 40 recommendations on how to release more low-risk detainees without endangering community safety.

While this was a step in the right direction, enacting these recommendations was not straightforward. To be successful, six separately elected and appointed officials — Cook County Board President, Clerk of the Circuit Court, Sheriff, Public Defender, Chief Judge, and State's Attorney — had to be engaged. Each has a unique stake and role.

Fast Facts

75%

Of individuals in Cook County Jail are held accused, but not convicted, of non-violent crime

\$143

Cost to incarcerate per inmate, per day, costing taxpayers more than \$300 million per year

20%

Reduction in the average daily Cook County Jail population since 2010, bringing the average to its lowest since 1991

Action

At the request of the Illinois Supreme Court, in the fall of 2014, Civic Consulting Alliance began working with the Stakeholders to implement the audit recommendations. With pro bono support from A.T. Kearney and Mayer Brown, Civic Consulting developed action plans for six of the highest impact recommendations and developed program management tools to support implementation with the goal of creating a model bond court.

The work didn't stop there. In July 2015, Civic Consulting Alliance helped the Stakeholders launch the Public Safety Assessment-Court (PSA-Court) tool to provide judges with an evidence-based method to assess a detainee's risk of committing another crime or of failing to appear for his or her court date. The PSA-Court tool was a critical component of model bond court and is anticipated to serve as a major step in reducing unnecessary incarceration in Cook County Jail.

Results and Future Direction

After implementing these and other changes to bond court, the average daily jail population decreased by more than 2,000. Today, Cook County Jail's average daily population is below 8,000 for the first time since 1991. Furthermore, 97 percent of eligible defendants are being assessed with the PSA-Court tool — up from only 53 percent when the tool was introduced — showing promise for greater reductions to the jail population in the years ahead.

While virtually all detainees are now assessed with the risk-assessment tool, not all judges are using the output in the same way. In the next phase of work, Civic Consulting will implement a continuous improvement process, which will observe, train and support judges in using the PSA-Court tool.

Moving beyond bond court, Civic Consulting has started working with the newly appointed Public Defender. With pro bono support from law firm DLA Piper, Civic Consulting developed roadmaps, training recommendations and a revised organizational structure to help the Public Defender advance her priorities in specialty courts, staff development and community engagement.

Building on this work, law firms DLA Piper, Jenner & Block, Kirkland & Ellis and Riley Safer Holmes & Cancila are developing and delivering a series of advocacy-based trainings for the Public Defender's office. To address the disproportionate number of individuals in need of mental health treatment who unnecessarily await trial in jail, Civic Consulting is also helping the Public Defender create a working group comprised of criminal justice stakeholders and community behavioral health providers to improve the mental health screening process before bond court.

Taken together, these initiatives promise to reduce unnecessary detention even further in Cook County, making the county's criminal justice system less costly and more just.

Pro Bono Partners

A.T. Kearney

DLA Piper

Jenner & Block

Kirkland & Ellis

Mayer Brown

Riley Safer Homes & Cancila