

County Corrections

I always say that some of the challenges facing Cook County face every county and others are unique to Cook County. The first challenge is common to many counties. While Cook County is a very diverse county, our correctional population is not diverse. It is usually not economically diverse because wealthier people can avoid pretrial detention far more often than poor people. The over representation of African Americans and Hispanics in the jail and on probation and supervision is partially a reflection of drug policies that are federally mandated.

Many people move from the county corrections system to the state correctional system. In regard to this group, Cook County faces a unique challenge. We are interested in reducing pretrial detention but not in releasing people pretrial who are accused of violent crimes and appear to pose a danger to public safety. But cases move more slowly in Cook County than in other counties. So even keeping people in detention who need to be in detention becomes problematic when it lasts too long.

On the other hand many people in county corrections are not going to move into the state correctional system, not because of time considered served but because the charges against them are dropped or they are ordered onto probation or supervision. In common with other counties we have to ask how can we reduce pretrial detention for this population?

My office has advocated for increased use of Electronic Monitoring as one way to reduce pretrial detention. We faced unanticipated challenges. First, are we sure that if the number of people released on Electronic Monitoring increases it is not increasing because people who would have been released on their own recognizance are now released on Electronic Monitoring? Careful data tracking has established that that is not happening.

Second, what happens to people ordered released on Electronic Monitoring who have no place to go? If you have no home where will the monitor be placed? Here the Cook County Sheriff's Office stepped up to the plate and contracted with housing providers so homeless people can be released on Electronic Monitoring, and our office helped pay for services.

The next challenge faces every county in Illinois, namely what can we do to reduce recidivism? One answer is that we can help people receive services that will reduce recidivism. There are different strategies to reduce recidivism through services including setting up treatment programs for detained people including pretrial detainees and setting up specialty courts.

These solutions, which are being implemented in different ways in every county in Illinois, contain the seeds of further challenges. If the services are located in the criminal justice system does this increase our willingness to provide services through prosecution? A lot depends on where in the system the services are located. Judges, prosecutors and probation officers are often most comfortable with services located in detention. Cook County provides some excellent services in detention. However what happens when detention ends? Services also need to be available for those on probation without detention. As we expand behavioral health services through County Care, we are particularly focused on where and at what point services should be provided. We are working on this issue and are very interested in how the rest of the State tackles this question.

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