

# Pima County criminal justice agencies work toward reducing jail population

By Caitlin Schmidt Arizona Daily Star Jan 12, 2019 Updated 2 hrs ago



In 2015, Pima County was selected to participate in an initiative to reduce over-incarceration by changing the way the country thinks about and uses jails. In that time, the jail's misdemeanor population has been cut nearly in half.

Mamta Popat / Arizona Daily Star 2014/

Pima County criminal-justice agencies are working toward significantly reducing the local jail population over the next six months.

The effort is part of the Pima County Safety and Justice Challenge, which for the last two years has been working to safely reduce the Pima County jail's population under a \$1.5 million John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation grant.

To assist in the six-month challenge of reducing the Pima County Jail population by 17 percent, the Safety and Justice Challenge will create a

## Probation Best Practices Committee and a Jail Population Review Committee.

The target population for the effort will focus primarily on nonviolent drug possessors.

The Jail Population Review Committee will assess the custody status of inmates in the Pima County jail, identifying safe and effective release conditions for local courts to consider and reducing the use of jail while mitigating failures to appear in court and protecting public safety.

The Probation Best Practices Committee has developed a set of strategies, including eliminating automatic jail holds, which were previously placed on any probationer arrested for a new crime; expanding efforts to re-engage probationers who have stopped reporting or cooperating; ensuring fewer and shorter coterminous sentences, which is when a person is sent to jail until the end of their probation expiration; and a 10 percent reduction in petitions to revoke probation.

Organizers have until June 30 to show the foundation they've made significant progress toward achieving the 17 percent reduction by 2020 and will find out later this month what the foundation will consider "significant progress" to be eligible for a renewal of the \$1.5 million grant, said Terrance Cheung, Pima County's director of justice reform initiatives.

## WORK IN PROGRESS

Nearly 200 jurisdictions applied for the initial grant funding in 2015, with Pima County being just one of 20 selected for the challenge.

Since then, much progress has been made.

Under the grant funding, the Pima County Safety and Justice Challenge instituted universal risk screenings at the Pima County jail to identify people with substance abuse or mental health issues for a specialized caseload. Organizers also created a warrant resolution court with night and weekend hours, and seated a 33-member community collaborative, made up of representatives from the community and various public agencies, including local courts and law enforcement agencies.

During the first few years of the challenge, outstanding warrants at Tucson City and Pima County Consolidated Justice courts plummeted, thanks to after-hours and weekend events funded by the challenge. To date, more than 5,000 people have been served during extended-hour events, including 2,090 who have had their warrants quashed. Almost 60 percent of the warrants that were in place in 2015 have been eliminated, organizers said earlier this week.

Also during the challenge's first few years, the misdemeanor population in the Pima county jail decreased by nearly half, leading organizers to re-evaluate their strategies to focus on the largest population in the jail — nonviolent drug offenders.

“The first two years focused on the lowest hanging fruit,” Cheung said during a Safety and Justice Challenge update meeting on Monday. “This is the toughest part now.”

## UP FOR THE CHALLENGE

In October, collaborative members submitted their grant application for the next two years, again seeking \$1.5 million. The new grant application contained several changes from the first cycle, including the elimination of funding for extended hours warrant resolution court, which court administrators have committed to continuing at their own expense.

Before reapplying for the second cycle of the grant, Pima County SJC organizers had to re-evaluate their original goal, which included a 26 percent reduction of the jail's population by 2019. When organizers applied for the grant in 2014, the Pima County jail was nearing capacity, with an average daily population of 2,136. That was the figure that organizers used as a baseline to determine the 26 percent reduction, but when their grant funding was approved in 2015, the average daily population had already decreased to 1,894. As a result, the MacArthur Foundation considers that the average daily population for which organizers should base their reduction efforts.

The collaborative realized it wouldn't be able to reach the original goal by 2019 and updated the anticipated reduction of jail population to 11 percent by 2020 for the new grant application. That 11 percent was based upon the foundation's baseline population of 1,894.

But before it would approve Pima County's funding request, the MacArthur Foundation asked the collaborative to take the reduction a step further, requesting an overall jail population decrease of 17 percent. This would put the jail's population at 1,574, a reduction of several hundred from November's average daily population of 1,870.

"This is a challenge, but we are up to that challenge," Assistant County Administrator Wendy Petersen told the Star on Wednesday. "Our stakeholders are sticking with us and working with us.

"These are both efforts that we're getting a lot of cooperation on and we believe that we can already show some significant changes," Petersen said, adding that supervisors and probation officers with Pima County Adult Probation Department are on board. "It takes a little bit of a change in attitude, but they're working towards this and are seeing improvements already."

In addition to addressing the six-month reduction challenge, the second round of the grant will provide funding for several positions, including a program analyst to be embedded within the Tucson Police Department's analysis unit, case managers and a mental health specialist to work within Pretrial Services, a full-time program coordinator to be shared between Superior Court and Pima County Adult Probation, a data coordinator who will be split between the Criminal Justice Reform Unit and Grants Management and Innovation Office and data teams to be seated with all stakeholders.

Challenge organizers have been working with judges at Superior Court, along with Pima County Consolidated Justice Court and Tucson City Court, to share information.

“For so long, criminal justice has been working in silos. The county attorney has historically been the enemy of the defense services,” Petersen said.

“That’s just not happening anymore. When I tell people about our efforts here in Pima County, I say it’s really an alignment of the stars, because we have terrific people.”

The collaborative has also applied for an additional \$300,000 community engagement grant to provide for empowerment and leadership training, readiness pathways for education and workforce training for people getting out of jail, and engagement activities with local tribal nations.

If approved, the funding will cover a community engagement program specialist and training under a program called the Habitation Empower Accountability Program, which takes a holistic approach to treatment of people in the criminal-justice system by addressing spiritual, mental, emotional, physical, environmental and experiential factors that influence a person’s sense of self, behaviors and choices.

The community engagement grant would also provide \$17,000 for education or workforce readiness for recently incarcerated people. The funding would be split, with \$8,500 allotted for scholarships in the amount of \$500 per person, which covers the cost of a four-credit class at Pima Community College and books or required class materials. The remaining \$8,500 will be allotted to people who choose a workforce pathway, providing \$200 per person to help purchase job-related materials, clothing, shoes or travel.

The collaborative will receive word from MacArthur by the end of January about whether the grant funding has been officially approved.

“From there, we have six months to prove ourselves,” Cheung said.