

Justice Reinvestment Initiative at the Local Level

Getting to Know Travis County, Texas

Travis County, Texas, which includes the city of Austin, home of the state capital and county seat, is located in central Texas, covering 1,022 square miles. Its population is over 1.17 million and has grown by more than 400,000 since 1990. Austin is the largest city in the county, with an estimated population of over 930,000. According to the U.S. Census, the median family income in Travis County is \$59,620 and the City of Austin is \$55,216, higher than the statewide average for Texas of \$52,576.

In addition to its character as the state capital of Texas, Austin is home to a campus of the University of Texas and a number of other colleges and universities. Although not immune to national economic trends, its current unemployment rate was reported at less than 3%, significantly less than the national rate. Its occupations are reported as 27% professional and related and 17% management, jobs which are less vulnerable to changes in the manufacturing and service economy found in many communities.

In fiscal year 2014, the Travis County criminal district courts received 10,053 new felony cases and the criminal county courts at law received 33,069 new misdemeanor cases. The Travis County Sheriff's recorded 48,859 bookings in fiscal year 2015 and had an average daily jail population of 2,457 that same year.

Travis County has a history of addressing the jail population with innovative programming and jail population management efforts, including:

- DWI Court – a specialized court focusing on collaboration between judges, attorneys, probation, treatment providers, and offenders to respond to the large number of DWI cases in the county.
- Adult Drug Diversion Court – a specialized court for non-violent, felony offenders with a substance abuse problem who were arrested on drug related charges.
- Other specialty courts, such as the Phoenix Court (for commercially sexually exploited individuals) and a Veteran's Court.
- Pretrial Services – an agency that makes recommendations to courts regarding eligibility for release on personal recognizance bond and conditions that should be a requirement of release.
- Mental Health Public Defenders Office (MHPDO) – provides misdemeanor representation and intensive social service case management to mentally ill defendants with an Axis I diagnosis.

Travis County was the site of considerable work by the Urban Institute as it explored jail overcrowding and various methods to understand factors contributing to such overcrowding. It was, in fact, one of the three communities that helped shaped the start of the Justice Reinvestment at the Local Level Initiative.

JRI Phase I in Travis County

In the early phases of Phase I, Travis County explored a variety of possible strategies to deal with jail overcrowding, including the location of a sobriety center within the community. However, greater stakeholder support emerged for using the evidence emerging from the research

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regarding permanent supportive housing as a strategy to decrease the repeated jail admission of homeless, mentally ill individuals, many with substance abuse problems. With assistance from the Urban Institute, data on the drivers of jail population were reviewed and revealed that 1/3 of all bookings to the county jail during a three-year period were non-unique (revealing a sub-population of frequent residents). This population, which had two or more bookings per offender, accounted for just 32.7% of the jail population, but consumed 69.3% of jail bed days. Class B and C misdemeanor offenses accounted for 50% of the frequent residents. Those with psychiatric codes (diagnosed mental illness) and reporting chronic homelessness (defined as reporting homelessness at more than 50% of their multiple bookings) were significant. As discussions continued in the Community Justice Council, it became clear that this initiative was consistent with a larger community effort underway to address the needs of this population, which was also creating significant demands on emergency medical transport services in the county, and among county

hospital emergency rooms.

As a result of this analysis, and the growing interest in this population in the community, the Travis County Community Justice Council leading the JRI Phase I initiative, developed a change strategy that would involve community stakeholders in an effort to move into Phase II of the JRI initiative at the local level. The focus was to be on the development of permanent, supportive housing for the chronically homeless, mentally ill population that was cycling through the jail.

JRI Phase II in Travis County

Accepted into the JRI Phase II initiative, and with technical assistance from the Center for Effective Public Policy—funded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance—Travis County developed their Phase II Strategy—the provision of permanent supportive housing for frequent users of the jail who were homeless, mentally ill, and substance abusers. At the invitation of the Community Justice Council, a Community Consortium was formed, composed of key justice stakeholders (sheriff, courts, prosecution, defense, pretrial services, probation, criminal justice planning), other county and city agencies (city and county health, human services and veterans affairs, county and city management, county purchasing office), as well as community stakeholders (business alliance, health care providers, housing advocates, and the Corporation for Supportive Housing). The Community Consortium developed a clear statement of vision and mission and a charter of specific activities and outcomes they pursued collaboratively. As a result, they applied for—and were awarded—JRI Phase II funding to support permanent,

Keys to Success in Travis County

The foundation of Travis County's JRI approach has been and will continue to be:

- Strong partnerships among both justice agencies, county/city government agencies, service providers, and community stakeholders;
- A value placed upon good quantitative information and analysis as a foundation for system change and improvement;
- A commitment to the use of evidence-based practice; and
- Exceptional skills and abilities to measure performance and do cost benefit analysis.

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supportive housing to this population of frequent front end users.

This diverse set of stakeholders had the interest, expertise, and authority to bring the effort to a successful completion. Staffed by Justice Planning, from within the county's Justice and Public Safety division, the Travis County Community Consortium worked with both the providers of housing units, as well as the local service providers who are equipped to provide mental health treatment and medication management services, substance abuse treatment, employment services, and other support.

The Consortium expected that its approach would generate the expected results, because they have explored the research on effective interventions. This research has shown that residents in permanent supportive housing have incarceration rates reduced by 50%; have 50% fewer hospital emergency room visits; are 85% less likely to need emergency detoxification services; and have a 50% increase in earned income.

After conducting a formal Request for Proposal process, Travis County contracted with Foundation Communities, a local housing provider, to provide housing and case management services for the 22 frequent jail users targeted for this effort. The program officially began on May 1, 2013. A smaller housing referral network has been meeting about every three weeks to conduct collaborative case management and share information about outreach efforts. In addition, the John and Laura Arnold Foundation expressed interest in conducting a randomized controlled

evaluation of the project.

A specific target population was identified through an analysis of county jail data. All people booked two or more times during a three year period that were identified as both mentally ill and reporting chronic homelessness were included. A list of 104 of the individuals with the highest jail bed day consumption was compiled. Individuals on the Target Population List were then ranked by a jail impact score, weighting frequency of arrest and number of jail bed days consumed. There were many challenges in identifying and qualifying individuals for the program:

- The random selection of individuals as a result of the evaluation meant that the pool of eligible offenders was expanded considerably and in effect has diluted the potential for cost savings and reinvestment.
- There were unanticipated difficulties in locating this largely homeless population despite heroic efforts by case managements to conduct significant outreach.
- Housing eligibility requirements regarding criminal history limited the number of individuals approved for housing.

The pilot project provided public housing vouchers and case management services to link clients to psychiatric services and medication, psychological counseling and other support services as needed. Over 1,300 potential participants were identified and prioritized (according to jail impact scores) and recruited and screened by an outreach worker network.

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Justice Planning managed and coordinated the pilot, while Foundation Communities, a local non-profit, provided permanent supporting housing using 22 Travis County Housing Authority vouchers in two locations.

An independent evaluation funded by the Arnold Foundation and conducted by the Urban Institute added the component of random assignment of qualified participants into housing and non-housed control groups. 154 participants were located, with 73 randomly assigned to the treatment group. A June 2015 Urban Institute evaluation report documents outputs for the 50 individuals rejected by the housing provider and the 23 accepted into housing. The report concluded that lower rearrest rates among the housed group should be interpreted with caution, since the housing eligibility criteria included a criminal background check (meaning housing placement was directly related to the outcomes of interest, recidivism). “That is, it is reasonable to expect that those in the housed group, regardless of their placement into housing, would have had better rearrest outcomes since they had less extensive criminal histories” (J. Fontaine, Memo, June 2015).

Applied Research Services, Inc. (ARS), a partner of CEPP in the JRI effort, conducted additional descriptive analyses on the rearrest outcomes for participants in the study using county data which includes felony and misdemeanor arrests that resulted in a booking at the Travis County Jail, the JRI site of interest. Charges were aggregated for a single arrest event (having the same arrest date) to describe each arrest event by the most serious charge (misdemeanor or felony statutory level). Arrest episodes were aggregated by person to define the volume, type

and timing of arrest events for each subject in the study cohort. Arrest/jail booking events defined as movements and not new offenses or warrants are excluded (moves to and from court, prosecutorial changes in charges, bookings for psychiatric hospital moves, bookings from court to serve a sentence). These analytical decisions resulted in slight differences between the ARS and Urban Institute findings.

Three-quarters of the 158 study subjects (79%) were arrested after the date they were located by outreach workers or other agencies for participation in the project. The researchers remain cautious in comparing treatment and control groups since only one-third of the randomly selected treatment group were actually placed into housing due to restrictions by the Housing Authority and housing provider (restrictions due to prior criminal histories). However, descriptive comparisons show clear patterns of lower recidivism among the study subjects receiving housing. When new arrest activity is broken down into arrests for new crimes and arrests for warrants or violations (of probation or other programs), one sees nearly half the level of new crime activity among those housed, in comparison to both the control group and the treatment group that was not housed. In addition, the housed group had substantially fewer rearrests than both the non-housed treatment and the control groups and they lasted over twice as long before a new arrest (an average of 306 days).

The Community Consortium has continued to meet to address challenges and barriers. For example, now that Foundation Communities has had some experience with housing individuals with significant criminal histories, they have

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agreed to relax eligibility requirements: certain offenses (such as trespassing) have been removed from consideration, a pattern of offenses has been eliminated, a history of misdemeanor offenses has been eliminated and no offense in the last six months. In addition, the Consortium noted some gaps in their linkages to the jail which continued to improve as the program moved forward. They implemented additional strategies to locate and stabilize eligible offenders.

The Travis County Commissioners' Court is committed to better serving this population through housing, intensive case management and services rather than cycling in and out of the jail. The Consortium was successful in advocating for and securing county funding to continue the program once grant funding ended in the fall of 2015. Funding for the program was extended through fiscal year 2018, allowing Justice Planning to continue assessing and evaluating program outcomes.

OBJECTIVES	1. Develop permanent supportive housing resources	2. Target to the most frequent users of the jail system	3. Work collaboratively with the county the HATC (Housing Authority of Travis County) in partnership with agencies who can provide case management and services
APPROACH	Work with selected organizations to define an evidence-based model of case management and services	Develop process to identify target population and refer into the process at the earliest possible time	Take a pilot approach with a small population, building support from housing providers, documenting impact and cost saving