

Assembling the Jail Reentry Puzzle



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The national discussion on offender reentry has focused primarily on individuals returning to the community from prisons, with relatively little attention given to the unique challenges and opportunities surrounding those reentering the community from jails. Yet there is a need for an innovative, collaborative, data-driven approach to jail transition.

The National Institute of Corrections (NIC) entered into a cooperative agreement with the Urban Institute to meet this need, launching the Transition from Jail to Community (TJC) initiative in 2007. The TJC initiative advances collaborative relationships between jails and local communities to enhance public safety, reduce recidivism, and improve individual reintegration outcomes. The underlying principle of TJC is that jails and communities must jointly own the issue of local reentry. The challenges are too great and the issues too complex for either a jail or the community to do it alone.

“Traditionally the mission of Denver [Colorado] jails has been care and custody. I think we need to add community to that.” This is how Undersheriff and Director of Corrections Bill Lovingier summarizes Denver’s reason for joining Douglas County, Kansas, as an initial site for the TJC initiative in September 2008.

TJC participation is an opportunity for the two sites to place reentry alongside custody and care at the core of their jail business. In doing so, the counties of Douglas and Denver are encountering obstacles common to most jail systems, but with the TJC model as a guide, they are building the partnerships and leveraging the resources necessary to meet them. It is early in their TJC implementation process, but the two counties have already made good strides down the path toward a jail reentry system that delivers a safer community.

Reentry and Recidivism in the Jail Context

There are an estimated 12 million releases from American jails each year, representing 9 million unique individuals (Beck, 2006). Broad jail recidivism studies are few and far between, but the ones that exist suggest high rates of recidivism for released jail inmates. A recidivism analysis conducted by Hampden County, Massachusetts, found that the proportion of sentenced inmates released and re-arrested within one year varied between 48 percent and 57 percent in the years 2000 to 2004 (Lyman & LoBuglio, 2006). New York City jail releases return to jail within a year at a rate of roughly 40 percent (New York City Independent Budget Office, 2009).

Recidivism rates like these are a problem for a number of reasons. Returning offenders take up scarce jail beds, causing jail management problems and imposing serious costs on cash-strapped communities. Most importantly, recidivism means the commission of new offenses. Even law violations that could be classified as “nuisances” have costs. They create disorder and impact perceptions of safety, reducing quality of life for residents and commercial prospects for businesses. Factors that contribute to recidivism, including mental illness, substance abuse, and minimal job skills, can also cause jail “frequent flyers” to consume community resources in other ways, such as emergency room visits and occupying homeless shelter beds.

The issues facing jails and communities seeking to facilitate successful jail-to-community transition are formidable. More than two-thirds of jail inmates meet the criteria for substance abuse or dependence (Karberg & James, 2005). Seventeen percent have a documented serious mental illness (Council of State Governments, 2009). Fourteen percent were homeless the year prior to incarceration (James, 2004). In the face of these serious needs, the capacity for treatment and services in most jails is limited at best. The window for intervention in the jail is also brief; most individuals who cycle through local jails return to the surrounding community within just a few weeks. Despite, or perhaps because of, these

challenges, many jails have embarked upon reentry efforts, using a wide variety of approaches, engaging many different partners, and targeting different components of the jail population. (For a summary of many such efforts, see Solomon et al. 2008, *Life After Lockup: Improving Reentry from Jail to the Community*, available at www.urban.org/projects/tjc/resources.cfm.) Many of the pieces of a workable approach to jail reentry are in place in jurisdictions across the country. What the field needed was for someone to assemble the puzzle.

Transition from Jail to Community Model

The TJC model incorporates lessons learned from prior criminal justice system reform efforts, particularly NIC’s Transition from Prison to Community (TPC) initiative, as well as findings from the considerable body of prisoner reentry research and the growing literature on evidence-based correctional practices. The model’s development was informed by the knowledge and expertise of a diverse group of advisors convened by the NIC/Urban Institute TJC project team, which included jail administrators, sheriffs, local law enforcement, social service providers, community and victims advocates, formerly incarcerated individuals, corrections policy experts, and researchers.

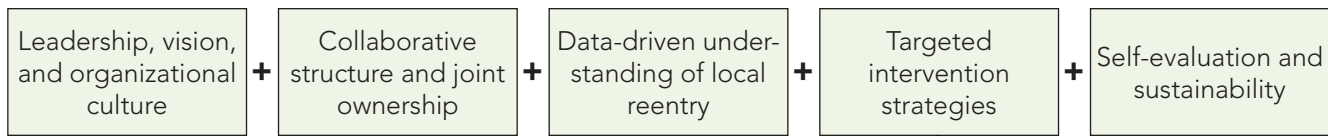
The TJC model (Figure 1, page 12) represents a systems change approach to jail-to-community transition. Systems change is necessary because reentry is too difficult and too central to the mission of corrections to be delegated to a stand-alone program or programs. It needs to be embedded in the business of the jail and its community partners. The first two elements of the TJC model (leadership, vision, and organizational culture and collaborative structure and joint ownership) ensure the high-level support, sense of common purpose, and action-oriented partnerships necessary for a comprehensive systems approach are in place. The other three elements have many components, but at their core they work together to achieve three goals:

- Identify the issues within the population that need to be addressed in order to prevent recidivism.
- Intervene to change the factors that make recidivism likely.
- Monitor the outcomes to determine whether interventions were successful.

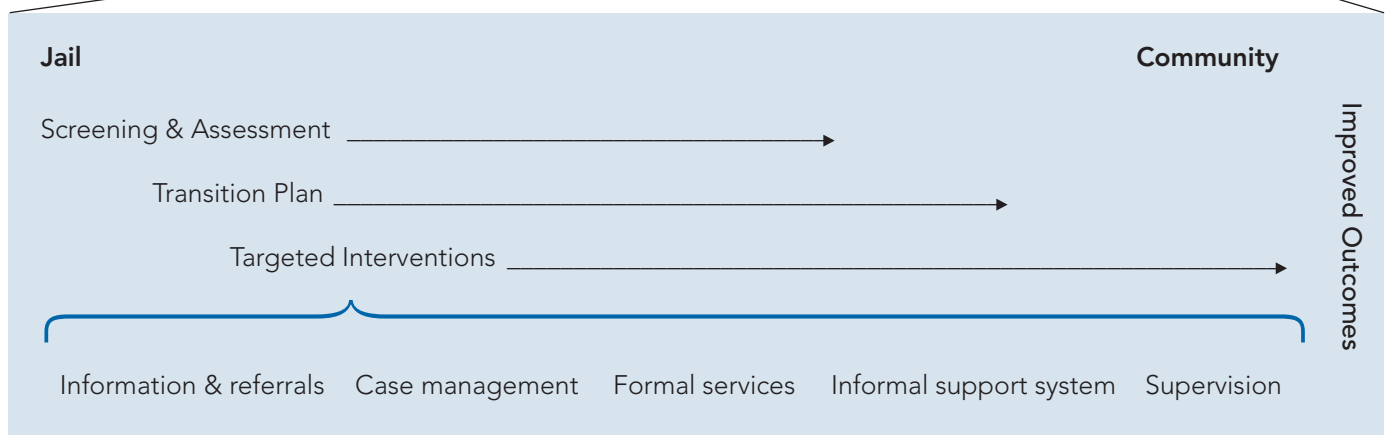
Jails and their communities have limited resources, and for this reason, the TJC model incorporates a triage approach to determine levels and extent of intervention, in other words, “who gets what.” Triage is the prioritization of activities on the basis of where resources are best used, most needed, or most likely to achieve success. Triage planning helps classify individuals and identify the appropriate mix, timing, and dosage of targeted interventions for each individual based on information about risks, needs, and strengths obtained during initial screening and assessment.

Figure 1.
The Transition from Jail to Community Model.

System Elements



Intervention Elements



TJC sites receive tailored technical assistance from the national TJC team to implement the TJC model, in addition to evaluation support to determine the degree to which they are achieving success, both in realizing systems change and in reducing recidivism and improving reintegration outcomes. The TJC team also operates a website, (www.jailtransition.com) that presents evolving and up-to-date information on jail-to-community transition, including the lessons learned from implementation in the TJC sites. The TJC team will soon launch a web-based TJC Implementation Toolkit, accessible through the TJC website and providing a step-by-step guide to implementing the TJC model.

Initial TJC Sites

The Douglas and Denver County jail systems operate at very different scales. Opened in 1999, the Douglas County Jail is a 186-bed direct supervision facility. The facility was built in part to alleviate crowding at the old jail facility, but by 2007 the average daily population (ADP) had reached 185. Both a city and a county, Denver operates two jail facilities. The Pre-Arrestment Detention Facility (which functions as the city jail) has a rated capacity of 158. The county jail is a 1,634-bed facility that opened in 1954. In 2007, Denver had an ADP of 2,118 (30% over capacity) at the county jail and 277 (75% over capacity) at the city jail. A new justice center facility is under construction that will replace the city jail and take on many of the current functions of the county jail.

“We are no different from most facilities,” says Shannon Murphy of the Douglas County Jail, “in that our ‘frequent flyer’ population tends to be booked on lesser offenses, for example, nuisance ordinances such as illegal camping, public intoxication, and criminal trespass), but with high levels of needs, most commonly mental illness and homelessness, which are challenging to meet in a correctional environment. This population tends to be stabilized physically and mentally when in custody, only to return to the same environment and challenges, spinning that revolving door.”

Indeed, recidivists play a substantial role in the growing jail population in Douglas County. A quarter of the 950 individuals booked into the jail in 2008 had two or more stays that year, and eight percent had three or more stays. Over the year, recidivists accounted for 44 percent of total bookings.

Denver County Jail Programs Coordinator Dwayne Burris describes a similar recidivism dynamic: “There are many factors as to why individuals keep coming back to jail. Of course, there are substance abuse concerns and mental health issues. Anger and relationship problems usually lead to assaults and domestic violence cases. The lack of employment is also a contributing factor, but even when some have jobs, minimum wages can be discouraging, as well as not understanding how to keep the job. Some fall into the categories of being homeless and/or sex offenders. This makes it difficult to find housing and employment.”

The scope of the frequent flier population in Denver is similar to that in Douglas County: 7.2 percent of individuals booked into the Denver jail system in 2008 had three or more jail stays in that year.

With no further funds for jail construction forthcoming from the county commission, Douglas County turned to a jail reentry effort to alleviate population pressures in the jail facility. Douglas County established a reentry committee in 2007. That committee persuaded the county commission to create a reentry coordinator position, which Shannon Murphy assumed. Her addition to the jail jump-started efforts at assessment, case planning, and community coordination around reentry, positioning Douglas County to become a TJC site.

The Denver Crime Prevention and Control Commission (CPCC), established in 2005, launched several new initiatives to improve Denver's criminal justice system, including a jail-to-community reentry process. Denver saw TJC participation as a chance to build upon its existing partnerships and processes to accelerate and enhance its jail-to-community transition efforts.

Leadership, Vision, and Organizational Culture

The TJC model reflects the belief that developing an effective jail transition strategy requires the active involvement of key decision makers to set expectations, identify important issues, articulate a clear vision of success, and engage diverse stakeholders in the effort. Champions or "change agents" from all levels at key agencies are critical to change the culture of partnering organizations as necessary to achieve the common jail-to-community transition vision.

Denver had an extensive history of criminal justice collaboration and a pre-existing structure on which to draw in providing leadership and vision to its TJC initiative. In the CPCC, Denver has a collaborative structure established by the mayor to work on criminal justice issues (including jail/community transition) that incorporates high level leadership from all of Denver's criminal justice agencies, as well as a wide variety of community stakeholders. In particular, the Denver TJC initiative relies on and benefits from the commitment and leadership of Director of Corrections Bill Lovingier and CPCC Executive Director Regina Huerter.

Douglas County, by contrast, did not have an entity like the Denver CPCC in place. It did, however, have committed and credible leadership from Sheriff Ken McGovern and Undersheriff for Corrections Kenny Massey. The Douglas County Commission has also been a strong source of support for reentry activity in general and the TJC Initiative in particular. As part of its TJC effort, Douglas County convened an executive council

to provide high-level oversight and strategic guidance for its TJC work. The executive council included Sheriff McGovern, County Commissioner Jim Flory, and State Representative Paul Davis, among others.

One of the first tasks of the leadership of the TJC effort at both sites was to articulate a vision and mission to serve as a consensus point for the diverse group of stakeholders collaborating on the jail-to-community transition work. Denver's mission and vision statements for its TJC work effectively capture the public safety and community reintegration goals underlying the TJC initiative as a whole:

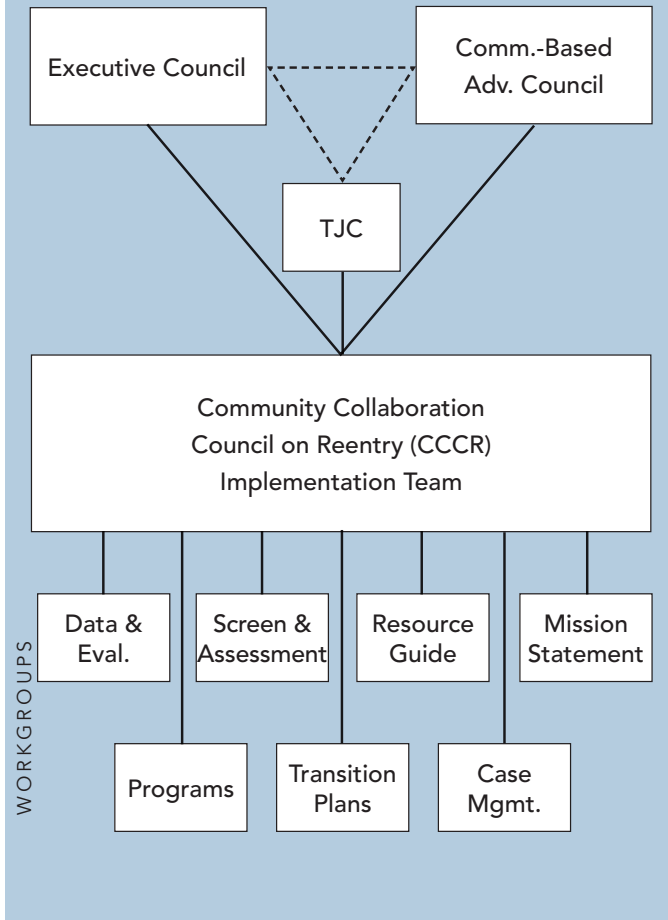
- Vision—To reduce recidivism and improve the quality of life and safety in the Denver community.
- Mission—To connect participants transitioning from jail with supportive skills, resources, and relationships to promote positive community involvement and a safer Denver.

Collaborative Structure and Joint Ownership

Effective transition strategies require activities that occur both in the jail and the community. As individuals transitioning from jail to the community move across systems, coordination is essential. This demands a collaborative approach, which will only happen in a meaningful way if all stakeholders jointly "own" the jail transition issue. Multiple partnerships between the jail and community organizations existed in both Douglas County and Denver prior to the initiation of TJC, laying the groundwork for that sense of joint ownership. Many community partners in both jurisdictions have expressed the hope that TJC work will expand coordination, communication, and information-sharing around jail reentry beyond the level that existed prior to TJC participation.

Both Denver and Douglas Counties devoted significant time and energy to building structures to facilitate this collaboration by designating clear roles and responsibilities for all of the partners. Such structures are necessary to ensure the limited time that partners devote to planning and implementing the site-specific TJC strategy is used productively. Denver built on the existing CPCC structure to do this, creating a TJC steering committee that oversees TJC model implementation, and reports regularly to the CPCC. Douglas County convened the Community Collaboration Council on Reentry just prior to TJC selection and this body responsible for TJC implementation. The council was supplemented by the executive council (to provide strategic leadership and community approval for the direction of the effort) and a community advisory board composed of leaders from local community organizations (Figure 2).

Figure 2.
Douglas County Transition from Jail to Community Model.



Data-Driven Understanding

Using local data to assess the characteristics of the correctional facility population, including inmate risks, needs, and service profiles, is a critical first step toward identifying who reoffends, what factors are driving their recidivism, what resources are available for intervention, and how those resources are being used. There are challenges associated with answering each of these questions. Even answering what is meant by “who reoffends” is not simple. “The key part is defining [that],” says Shannon Murphy. “We’re describing it as being back two or more times in a year.”

Douglas and Denver Counties made significant investments in their jail data systems that will assist them in this work. Douglas County implemented a new data system in 2008, and Denver is in the process of bringing a new jail management system on-line. While these new data systems will enhance data analysis and management capabilities at both sites, their implementation raises some problems in the short term. Douglas

County’s new system is not integrated to allow for access data recorded prior to 2008, making any analysis of trends difficult. Douglas County is also building its capacity to fully utilize the new system, and as is often the case in small jail organizations, the task of jail data analysis and reporting falls on just a few individuals. Denver is undertaking new TJC-driven analyses of its jail population while converting the data systems. Despite these obstacles, the TJC sites are making strides in their data collection and reporting. The figures on frequent jail users cited earlier in this article were produced for the first time as part of the TJC process.

Perhaps a greater challenge than understanding the jail population through data is determining who is accessing program services. Different programs and different providers in the community and the jail may not collect information on program participation, collect it in completely different ways, or collect it on paper, making it difficult to share. Data systems for program and treatment provision are often designed to make immediate decisions about individuals, and not to inform resource allocation across the entire population.

The TJC collaborative teams at both sites are working to address these program data issues. The partners are aware that they need to know who is referred to programming, who enrolls, and who completes it in order to track how limited program resources are being allocated and whether they are producing the desired results. Denver instituted a reentry database to collect data on common clients from its partners. Douglas County has undertaken a survey of all its community partners to learn what data they are collecting on services for the population released from jail, how they collect these data, and whether they would be able to start collecting data that are missing.

Targeted Intervention Strategies

Targeted intervention strategies form the core of the TJC model at the individual level and comprise the basic building blocks for effective jail transition. The other elements of the TJC model are intended to ensure that the process of triage planning for matching individuals with the correct interventions is well-informed, aligns with the primary goals and concerns of the jurisdiction, is coordinated across organizational boundaries, and draws upon all available resources. Critical to the triage planning approach are the principles that:

- Interventions begin in jail with the booking process and continue, as needed, throughout the incarceration period and in the community upon release.
- Interventions are tailored to the specific needs, risks, and strengths of each individual.

TJC intervention strategies consist of, at a minimum, screening and assessment, transition planning, and specific-targeted interventions. Implemented together, these core elements ensure that each individual has an

opportunity to receive the appropriate mix of interventions for his or her unique needs both within jail and in the community after release.

Screening and Assessment

The screening and assessment process is the cornerstone of a triage approach to targeted intervention. It is screening and assessment that provide the information to determine where resources are most needed or are most likely to achieve success. Universal risk screening of the jail population provides a quick division of the population into low-, medium-, and high-risk categories. The low-risk category will receive the most minimal intervention (such as the resource guides Douglas and Denver Counties are making available to their entire jail populations, both in the facilities and in selected places in the community). Medium-to-high-risk inmates are targeted for more intensive intervention, beginning with full criminogenic risk/need assessments. These assessments identify the criminogenic needs that must be addressed in order to avert recidivism. Ongoing assessment informs the construction of an individual's initial jail-to-community transition plan and subsequent revisions to that plan.

Prior to TJC involvement, neither site utilized general criminogenic risk/needs screening or assessment to determine who received programming in the jail or in the community, and at what level. (Mental health programming and treatment were the exceptions in both jurisdictions.) Program enrollment is voluntary, meaning that inmates determine whether or not they accessed

important criminogenic treatment needs. At the same time, there is the potential to reorient those resources toward a common assessment. In Douglas County, the capacity to apply assessment is more limited. They have applied for funding through the Second Chance Act (http://reentrypolicy.org/government_affairs/second_chance_act) to support positions that will take on some assessment responsibilities.

Transition Plans

Assessment results should be used to develop transition plans for release and enhancing long term reintegration, particularly for individuals assessed as moderate- or high-risk/need. The plan specifies the types of interventions an individual needs, when and where interventions need to occur, and who will deliver them. In the jail setting, a transition plan may be as simple as receiving resource packets before release or as comprehensive as working with a case manager and community-based providers weeks or months before release and upon return to the community.

Both Denver and Douglas Counties had transition plans for some portion of their returning jail population. The backbone of the Denver reentry process is enrollment of inmates in the jail-based Life Skills program, and facilitating their enrollment in the Community Reentry Program (CRP) upon release. Denver has case management plans for some inmates who work with the Life Skills program and are referred to CRP upon release. Douglas County has a case plan called the Local Correctional Inmate Release Plan (LoCIRP), which is

Interventions begin in jail with the booking process...

services. Both Douglas and Denver Counties realize the importance of making strategic decisions to ensure that resources are targeted at those whom intervention will be most effective. Given the current fiscal crisis, both have limited resources and are seeking the most efficient way to implement screening and assessment. Jail classification processes in both jurisdictions collect inmate information for the purpose of determining institutional behavioral risks; some of that information may predict post-release risk of re-offense and identify basic needs. Therefore, the TJC team is assisting them to determine what risk screening can be done with data already being collected for other purposes.

Risk/need assessment is a more resource-intensive activity than risk/need screening, but the triage approach reserves assessment for a smaller proportion of the jail population. In Denver, Life Skills program staff and community providers conduct independent assessments and intakes using a mix of protocols; however, these efforts are largely uncoordinated. The potential for duplication of effort is high, as is the potential to assess and address non-criminogenic issues at the expense of

developed during incarceration and delineates what inmates should be doing both pre- and post-release. LoCIRP does not follow released inmates to community providers, however. Expanding case planning and making sure the plans are informed by screening and assessment and shared with and updated by community partners is a key planning step for both TJC sites.

Targeted Interventions

The scope of a jurisdiction's targeted interventions will range from formal treatment at the most intensive end of the continuum, through access to community-based providers and volunteers who conduct "in-reach" into the jail, to simple provision of information on community resources and the minimum end of the continuum. Some interventions will occur in jail while others will take place in the community after release. Many interventions need to begin in jail and continue with a community-based provider after the individual's release from jail, ensuring continuity of service delivery, which leads to improved outcomes. For individuals with short lengths of stay, the primary form of in-jail interven-

tion may be efforts to engage them with a community provider upon release. Triage planning allows for the determination of “who gets what, when, where, and from whom” across all these types of intervention.

Prior to TJC participation, Denver targeted sentenced misdemeanants for the Life Skills/CRP track, while maintaining a separate reentry track for mentally ill inmates. The Life Skills/CRP track serves just 10 percent of sentenced misdemeanants. They also have a number of jail-based programs, including GED preparation, drug/alcohol counseling, and anger management, which are not associated with either track and may serve felons as well as misdemeanants. Denver is exploring the expansion of interventions to other populations, with the TJC team suggesting that they make determinations regarding who should receive programming based on assessed risk rather than sentence and charge status. (A substantial portion of the sentenced felon population receives services from other sources, such as community corrections.) Denver’s TJC Programming Subcommittee is reviewing all of their programs to determine which are core and which are subsidiary, and whether there should be more coordination across the existing program tracks and with programs that are not associated with the tracks. The subcommittee is also looking at the content and curricula of programs to make sure they are consistent across both community and institution, reflect evidence-based practice, and convey a unified message to clients.

The Douglas County Jail has developed a fairly wide range of programming that serves as a base for interventions that reach a larger share of the population. Resource cards with the name and contact information of many community-based services are presented to exiting inmates to facilitate access to post-release services. Like Denver, Douglas County targets sentenced offenders for program services. Douglas County also faces intervention challenges due to much of the programming in the correctional facility being done by volunteers or contract individuals, sometimes resulting in interruption based on the life circumstances of those individuals.

Douglas County efforts are underway to establish several new services and programs that would directly affect inmates returning to the community. There is a unique opportunity for the initiative to consider which clients may be best suited for such services and to work with partners to develop guidelines for such services. The Salvation Army is interested in putting together a mentoring program for people coming out of the jail. The Lawrence-Douglas County Housing Authority began offering five units of transitional housing for the reentry program starting this past June. The agency also is willing to consider relaxing the eligibility criteria for some of its programs for people identified as appropriate clients coming from the reentry program. One of the greatest challenges in Douglas County’s reentry inter-

vention efforts is that they do not have an equivalent to Denver’s CRP, which acts as a coordination point for community post-release services. This emphasizes the need for communication and coordination across the community providers in Douglas County.

In essence, both Denver and Douglas Counties are creating a mechanism to determine what programming and intervention resources are provided to which inmates and released individuals, rather than having inmate initiative determine this. The promise of this approach is that by targeting, they can apply their intervention resources where they will have the most impact. The challenge is providing the right people with the right intervention. Both sites are working on incentive structures and other approaches to address these challenges.

Self-Evaluation and Sustainability

The final TJC model element is ongoing self-evaluation and sustainability planning. Self-evaluation refers to the ability and commitment of local stakeholders to monitor progress and make needed modifications to ensure that both intermediate and long-term goals are met. Measures need to be identified for each TJC initiative goal, baseline data collected to determine the starting point against which to measure progress, and regular reports made to track progress. The TJC team is working with the sites to establish mechanisms—such as forums, routine reports from partner agencies, or client satisfaction surveys—to obtain early and frequent feedback regarding key aspects of the initiative. TJC sites also receive regular feedback on implementation as part of the TJC team’s evaluation effort.

Denver has made a significant investment in evaluation at the local level. Last year, the CPCC contracted with two organizations, Omni Research Institute and Human Resources Consortium, to document the jail reentry processes and evaluate key aspects of that process including officer attitudes toward in-jail programming and the effect of current reentry efforts on both clients and the system. Douglas County has taken advantage of the presence of the University of Kansas to engage its School of Social Welfare as a key partner and evaluation advisor. Both counties are working on the main outcome measures to track and determine success, which reflect the main goals of each jurisdiction for the jail-to-community transition effort. Douglas County’s main outcome measures are:

- Number/percent of referrals from facility to the agency.
- Number/percent of clients who attended first appointment.
- Number/percent of clients engaged in service (for services that involve multiple sessions like drug treatment, for example).
- Length of sentence.


- Number/percent of clients still engaged in service at 3 months, 6 months.
- Homeless at 3 months, 6 months.
- Employed at 3 months, 6 months.
- Number/percent returning to jail at 3 months, 6 months.

The ultimate goal of the TJC initiative is to build jail-to-community transition efforts that last. Sustainability depends on both formal and informal mechanisms employed by the local initiative to ensure the longevity and legacy of their efforts. Formal information-sharing and resource-sharing agreements that delineate how agencies and organizations work together over time are examples of mechanisms that promote sustainability. The continued involvement of local reentry or criminal justice councils in jail transition can also facilitate the sustainability of efforts over time. While Douglas and Denver Counties are still in the early stages of TJC implementation, they are thinking about how to ensure that the structures they have built around jail-to-community transition are robust and endure for many years to come.

Conclusion

Both counties have accepted the daunting task of changing their jail-to-community transition processes into a comprehensive jail-to-community transition system that considers the entire jail population and allocates intervention resources in order to have a maximum possible impact on recidivism. This is a complex and challenging endeavor under the best of circumstances, and 2009 has not represented the best of circumstances for either jurisdiction. However, it is when resources are most scarce that it becomes clear what is most important and that strategic planning is most necessary. Both counties also have determined that protecting public safety through reducing recidivism is the most important service for their jails to provide, and they are using TJC participation as a way to move on multiple fronts to reach their goals.

Editor's Note: When the National Institute of Corrections partnered with the Urban Institute in 2007 to initiate the Transition from Jail to Community program, they established a diverse advisory group, of which the

American Jail Association (AJA) was a member. The advisory group was composed of representatives ranging from nonprofit organizations, such as AJA, to corrections professionals, sheriffs, and judges. This approach ensured a broad range of input in the development of the program. 

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