

Pandemic Behind Bars— Lessons Learned in Handling COVID-19 in Jails

Strategy Brief



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Overview

Jails have been extremely vulnerable environments during the COVID-19 pandemic, as have other congregate care facilities. Many incarcerated individuals are housed close together, making many suggested mitigation efforts difficult. For example, in December 2020, the infection rate of incarcerated individuals in California was around 227 COVID-positive cases per 1,000 individuals, while the public rate was around 32 cases per 1,000 (Engelberg 2020). Jail administrators, alongside government officials, have been navigating the steps for managing a pandemic disease behind bars. These lessons have incorporated important aspects of the community policing model—problem solving, engagement with community partners, and organizational transformation (see figure 1).

Figure 1. Community policing components



Source: COPS Office, "About the COPS Office," accessed December 9, 2021, <https://cops.usdoj.gov/aboutcops>.

Following the guidance of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the following are steps to consider when preparing, preventing, and managing a pandemic in a correctional facility.

Step One. Prepare

Managing infectious diseases inside the facility is not new to the sheriffs. For years, sheriffs have prepared for and responded to other infectious diseases including HIV, hepatitis, MRSA, influenza (including swine flu and bird flu), measles, and Ebola. The COVID-19 pandemic has presented new challenges, and consultations with the CDC and state public health officials have been paramount to addressing this public health crisis inside facilities. As we learned from the onset of the pandemic in 2020, jails should be prepared for a pandemic at all times. The question is not *whether* another pandemic will occur, but *when*—and there are steps that can be taken now to ensure sufficient preparation based upon the recommendations of the CDC and state public health officials as well as lessons learned from facilities across the country.

As will be demonstrated in this strategy brief, relationships are at the core of proper preparation, prevention, and management, and establishing strategic partners is a key element.

In addition, problem solving requires input from the experts and internal innovation as well as analysis of the challenge from various perspectives. Organizational adaptation and transformation are necessary to support jail preparation, prevention, and management of a pandemic such as COVID-19.

Preparation checklist

- **Build or enhance** relationships with public health officials and other community partners who can advise or with whom you could collaborate during a pandemic.
 - Remember to think about who are the strategic partners that would be helpful or necessary.
- It is highly suggested to have a medical expert with corrections experience either on staff or available as needed.
- **Identify areas** in the facility that can be used for quarantining or medical isolation.
 - Take into consideration single cell vs. cohort housing (the CDC refers to cohort housing as isolating infected individuals or quarantining close contacts of infected individuals together when space is limited).
- **Ensure** staffing capabilities are sustainable or have a plan in place to deal with potential staff shortages.
- **Designate** areas around the facility to post information relevant to the pandemic and ensure that the information is available through multiple media forms in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, Title II.

- **Establish** inventory of cleaning and washing supplies, medical supplies, personal protective equipment (PPE), and vaccines and boosters, as well as testing supplies.
 - Determine whether supplies are adequate for staff and incarcerated individuals.
 - Identify multiple sources from which to obtain PPE.
 - Update lists of disinfectants and cleaners suggested by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

Hampden County (Massachusetts) Sheriff Nick Cocchi went in-house for his department's PPE needs. Incarcerated individuals in the vocational program of York Street Industries, the corrections industry of the Hampden County Sheriff's Office, shifted their focus from uniforms and upholstery to face masks, shields, and medical gowns to help bolster the supply of PPE for his agency and others.

Source: Paul Tuthill, "Hampden County Jail Inmates Making Face Masks, Medical Gowns for Local Use," WAMC Northeast Public Radio, last modified July 15, 2020, <https://www.wamc.org/new-england-news/2020-07-15/hampden-county-jail-inmates-making-face-masks-medical-gowns-for-local-use>.

Step Two. Prevent

During the prevention phase, a jail's focus will be on stemming the spread of the disease inside the facility. Therefore, the best plan of action for jails is to ensure the facility is ready to prevent the community spread of the virus within its walls. The following steps are suggestions for how facilities can work towards containing the spread of a pandemic. The tenets are simple and can be revamped easily based on CDC or other government, medical, or scientific guidance.

Prevention checklist

- **Ramp up** the facility cleaning schedule and increase reminders for personal hygiene:
 - Frequently clean surfaces/objects that are touched often (doorknobs or handles, light switches, telephones, countertops, kiosks, etc.).
 - Provide and ensure access to hygiene supplies for both incarcerated individuals and staff at no cost.
- **Limit or temporarily halt** inmate transfers in and out of the facility, unless necessary for medical or security reasons.
- **Implement** screening procedures for everyone entering the facility including new intakes, staff, and visitors:
 - Update screening protocols
 - Ask if in the past 24 hours, the person has had any of the following (listed here are COVID-19 specific symptoms, which should be adapted to reflect the specific infectious disease)
 - ◆ Fever? Chills?
 - ◆ Cough?
 - ◆ Difficulty breathing?
 - Ask if the individual had close contact with a person known to be infected with COVID-19 (or other infectious disease) in the past 14 days.
 - Conduct temperature checks:
 - Wash hands following guidelines
 - Use mask, eye protection, and disposable gloves
 - Check temperature
 - If checking multiple individuals' temperatures, use clean gloves for each individual and clean the thermometer thoroughly
 - Remove and properly discard PPE
 - Wash hands again
- **Follow** social distancing guidelines and place or provide reminders as needed.
 - Areas and activities to be considered:
 - Common spaces
 - Recreation
 - Dining
 - Housing
 - Group activities (e.g., education, religious services, programming)
 - Medical

- **Encourage** noncontact visits or temporarily suspend personal visitation—increasing access to phone calls and videoconferencing options where feasible to keep inmates connected to family and loved ones.
 - Although personal visits can be suspended, an incarcerated individual should have access to counsel at all times, which could include barrier visits with proper PPE or increased access to privileged phone calls and videoconferencing if available in your jurisdiction. In addition, consider enhancing videoconferencing capabilities with the courts to expand remote access alternatives for in-court appearances, bench trials, etc.
- **Offer** residents and staff masks or respirators if they choose to wear them. To amplify prevention efforts, corrections and detention facilities can consider making mask or respirator wear required by incarcerated individuals, staff (including volunteers), and anyone else who may be entering the facility.
- **Promote** vaccinations with education on effectiveness and safety, and ensure supplies are available for all incarcerated individuals and staff.
- **Consider** suspending work release or other programs where individuals are in and out of the facility frequently, remembering that the goal is to reduce movement and the potential to spread the virus/disease.
- **Conduct** testing:
 - Viral vs. antibody (understand the various testing capabilities and their uses and limitations)
 - Viral tests diagnose current infection
 - Antibody tests detect past infection—it is *not recommended to use antibody tests as the sole diagnostic test*
 - When to test (as guided by the CDC or local public health officials):
 - An individual is showing signs/symptoms
 - To control transmission: an individual with recent known or suspected exposure
 - For early identification: an individual without known or suspected exposure but located in a community with moderate to substantial rates of community transmission
 - Movement-based testing protocols for incarcerated individuals:
 - Test at intake
 - Test before transferring to another facility
 - Test before release
 - Test before and after community visits, such as medical, court, or community-based programming

A priority for sheriffs is keeping those incarcerated connected to family and loved ones. Wood County (Ohio) Sheriff Mark Wasylyshyn began providing free video visitation options because he understood the value and effect visitation can have on the morale of incarcerated individuals.

Source: “Wood County Jail Providing Inmate Video Visitation,” WTOL11 News, last modified September 29, 2020, <https://www.wtol.com/article/news/health/coronavirus/wood-county-jail-providing-inmate-video-visitation/512-1c05e6a2-a97f-4966-90d8-9c951cbd3976>.

Cook County (Illinois) Sheriff Tom Dart credits “aggressive testing” as the reason why the virus has not spread as rapidly in his facilities as it has in others across the country. Ensure testing is a medically driven decision and not a security-driven one.

Source: Matthew Hendrickson, “Sheriff Dart Warns Second Wave of COVID Cases Threatens Efforts to Contain Virus Inside Jail,” Chicago Sun-Times, November 12, 2020, <https://chicago.suntimes.com/2020/11/12/21562453/sheriff-dart-warns-second-wave-covid-cases-threatens-efforts-contain-virus-inside-cook-county-jail>.

Step Three. Manage

While a facility is attempting to quell the spread of illness, its staff will also be managing and treating current cases. Much of the focus during management will be on medical isolation, quarantine efforts, and ensuring proper supply levels of both PPE and cleaning and decontamination supplies are available. The following checklist can be easily adapted based on CDC and other guidance specific to a pandemic.

Management checklist

- **Suspend** all nonmedical transfers.
- **Include** screening into pre-release planning.
- **Continue** coordination with public health officials.
- **Isolate or quarantine** symptomatic individuals and close contacts.
 - Isolation:
 - Who? Symptomatic individuals
 - What? Mask and separate
 - When? Immediately at appearance of symptoms
 - Where? In an individual cell when and where possible
 - Length? Varies based on whether symptoms are present or if testing is done
 - ◆ If *not* immunocompromised: 10 days after symptoms first appeared or first positive viral test, at least 24 hours without a fever (without the use of fever-reducing medications), and after symptoms have improved
 - ◆ If immunocompromised: 20 days after symptoms first appeared or first positive viral test, at least 24 hours without a fever (without the use of fever-reducing medications), and after symptoms have improved
 - ◆ **REMINDER:** Stay updated on current CDC and other government guidelines in determining the specifics of medical isolation.

- Quarantine:
 - Who? Close contacts of or those exposed to known or suspected cases
 - What? Separate and monitor
 - When? Once contact is identified
 - Where? For inmates, in an individual cell if possible; for staff and personnel, at home
 - Length? 14 days
- **Ensure** PPE is being worn in adherence to guidelines.
- **Provide** clinical care or transfer for care.
- **Minimize** movement between housing units, as well as with the community:
 - Reducing/restricting work release programs
 - Reducing movement to different areas of the facility, as well as between facilities
 - Implementing or augmenting virtual visitation options
- **Check** that current ventilation systems are operating properly and being maintained or enhanced (by using portable HEPA filters or ultraviolet germicidal irradiation systems (UVGI)).
- **Communicate** clearly and often—preferably in person, in a manner that can be understood by non-English speakers or those with low literacy levels or cognitive, intellectual, or physical disabilities, and allow incarcerated individuals to ask questions (e.g., town hall format)
 - Also remember to keep in mind the considerations of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) II as you continue communicating with incarcerated individuals.

Madison County (Alabama) Sheriff Kevin Turner has attributed his jail's lack of COVID-19 cases to the quarantine process in place at the facility. "When we bring people into the jail, whether it's a new arrestee, we put them through medical screening. After they're done with the medical screening, they will go to a particular cell for quarantine, which has a different ventilation set up than the rest of the jail. They will stay in that cell (unless they bond out) for 15 days. We quarantine them there for 15 days then we send them back through medical before we send them into population." Quarantine procedures are medically driven decisions that are done for the safety of all who live and work within the facility and are not meant as punishment.

Source: Lauren Harksen, "Madison County Jail Inmates Have Yet to Test Positive for COVID-19," News19, last modified November 11, 2020, <https://whnt.com/news/coronavirus/madison-county-jail-inmates-have-yet-to-test-positive-for-covid-19/>.

Richmond (Virginia) Sheriff Antoinette Irving invited Dr. Danny Avula, Director of the Richmond City and Henrico County Health Departments, to her jail, and both spent an hour answering questions from the inmates about COVID-19. The town hall was livestreamed on the Richmond City Health District's Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/tavares.marx/videos/3334053320022892/>.

A.J. Nwoko, "Dr. Avula, Sheriff Irving Address Inmates' COVID-19 Concerns in Jails during Virtual Town Hall," 12 On Your Side, last modified September 23, 2020, <https://www.nbc12.com/2020/09/23/dr-avula-sheriff-irving-address-inmates-covid-concerns-jails-during-virtual-town-hall/>.

Final Wrap-Up

It is important that jails be prepared to handle a pandemic, and the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent Delta and Omicron variants have provided a plethora of examples to learn from in the development of guidelines for future reference. Whether it is COVID-19 or another virus or health pandemic, sheriffs are extraordinary strategists at keeping all who live and work in their facilities safe. The key components of community policing—partnerships, problem solving, and organizational transformation—are also key components to successful jail preparation and the management of a pandemic in the correctional setting. Engaging staff and partners in the preparation, prevention, and management of a pandemic for those living and working in the jail community will ensure awareness, buy-in, successful implementation, and enhanced organizational trust both internally and externally and will ultimately promote public safety and health outcomes for everyone.

For more information, see the following resources:

Advocates for Human Potential, Preparing People for Reentry from Jails and Prisons During the COVID-19 Epidemic (Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Assistance, n.d.,)

<https://www.rsat-tta.com/Files/RSAT-COVID19-Reentry>.

Minton, Todd D., Zhen Sheng, and Laura M. Maruschak, *Impact of COVID-19 on the Local Jail Population, January–June 2020, Special Report* (Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2021),

<https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/icljppj20.pdf>.

Appendix. Case Study

Pandemic in the Prairies: How one rural sheriff has addressed—and continues to address—COVID-19

Sheriff Bill Brueggemann is the chief law enforcement officer in Cass County, Nebraska, a rural county of 566 square miles and approximately 26,250 residents. The Cass County Sheriff's Office (CCSO) has 75 total employees and a 110-bed jail facility.

Once Nebraska started seeing COVID-positive cases (early March 2020), Sheriff Brueggemann and the CCSO began implementing mitigation efforts in their facility. The measures included the following:

- Temperatures taken for all staff and inmates prior to entry
- Sanitation stations at all entrances and housing units
- Mandatory masks for all staff, and gloves when interacting with inmates
- Mandatory masks for all inmates when in the housing units or outside of their cells
- Designated housing areas according to levels of COVID exposure (quarantine, isolation)
- A 14-day quarantine for all inmates coming in from the outside



Gloves and masks have now become part of the CCSO's uniforms in the fight against COVID-19 in the jail.

In March 2020, the sheriff's office had no previous plan set in place to deal with a pandemic. Sheriff Brueggemann noted that one of "the two biggest obstacles we faced was trying to reconfigure our jail space into three different quarantine or housing areas, which also cut our capacity to about 55 percent of normal. Our second biggest obstacle was obtaining supplies, i.e., masks, gloves, sanitation supplies."

Sheriff Brueggemann also noted that many programs popular with the incarcerated population were temporarily suspended during the pandemic. These programs included domestic violence classes; Alcoholics Anonymous; G.E.D. courses; religious services; face-to-face attorney/client visits; and fingerprinting services for firearms permits, truck drivers, and by special request.

When asked what advice he would pass on to his fellow rural sheriffs, Sheriff Brueggemann responded, “My first response would be to close their office and their jails and go work for a farmer out in the fields, away from everyone else, and I don’t think anyone would disagree with me. Realistically, my words of wisdom would be that as sheriffs, we can’t do it all by ourselves, and we shouldn’t be afraid to take off our hats and ask for help. I was so dependent on national associations, emergency management, state associations, and local resources, and my pride wasn’t tarnished one bit. These people are there to help us, and I am humbled from the help they gave my office.”



Inmates have been more than cooperative in doing their part to maintain the social distance guidelines.

“The inmates were great at understanding the situation that we were in and they were just as concerned about getting the virus as the staff was. Almost nine months later, we still are not providing all of the services we offered previously. It is far from perfect, but we found that continued help for the inmates is a necessity.”

– Cass County (Nebraska) Sheriff Bill Brueggemann

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About the National Sheriffs' Association

The **National Sheriffs' Association (NSA)** is a professional association, chartered in 1940, dedicated to serving the Office of Sheriff and its affiliates through police education, police training, and general law enforcement information resources. The NSA represents thousands of sheriffs, deputies, and other law enforcement agents, public safety professionals, and concerned citizens nationwide.

Through the years, the NSA has provided programs for sheriffs, their deputies, chiefs of police, and others in the field of criminal justice to perform their jobs in the best possible manner and to better serve the people of their cities, counties, or jurisdictions.

The National Sheriffs' Association headquarters is located in Alexandria, Virginia, and offers police training, police information, court security training, jail information, and other law enforcement services to sheriffs, deputies, and others throughout the nation. The NSA has worked to forge cooperative relationships with local, state, and federal criminal justice professionals across the nation to network and share information about homeland security programs and projects.

The NSA serves as the center of a vast network of law enforcement information, filling requests for information daily and enabling criminal justice professionals—including police officers, sheriffs, and deputies—to locate the information and programs they need. The NSA recognizes the need to seek information from the membership, particularly the sheriff and the state sheriffs' associations, in order to meet the needs and concerns of individual NSA members. While working on the national level, the NSA has continued to seek grass-roots guidance, ever striving to work with and for its members, its clients, and citizens of the nation.

The NSA has through the years assisted sheriffs' offices, sheriffs' departments, and state sheriffs' associations in locating and preparing applications for state and federal homeland security grant funding. The NSA record and reputation for integrity and dependability in such public safety programs among government agencies is well recognized and has led to continuing opportunities to apply for grants on the national, state, and local levels as well as management of service contracts.

To learn more, visit the NSA online at www.sheriffs.org.

About the National Policing Institute (formerly known as the National Police Foundation)

The **National Policing Institute** is a national, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to pursuing excellence through science and innovation in policing. As the country's oldest police research organization, the National Policing Institute has learned that police practices should be based on scientific evidence about what works best, the paradigm of evidence-based policing.

Established in 1970, the National Policing Institute has conducted seminal research in police behavior, policy, and procedure and works to transfer to local agencies the best new information about practices for dealing effectively with a range of important police operational and administrative concerns. Motivating all of the National Policing Institute's efforts is the goal of efficient, humane policing that operates within the framework of democratic principles and the highest ideals of the nation.

To learn more, visit the National Policing Institute at www.policinginstitute.org.

About the COPS Office

The **Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office)** is the component of the U.S. Department of Justice responsible for advancing the practice of community policing by the nation's state, local, territorial, and tribal law enforcement agencies through information and grant resources.

Community policing begins with a commitment to building trust and mutual respect between police and communities. It supports public safety by encouraging all stakeholders to work together to address our nation's crime challenges. When police and communities collaborate, they more effectively address underlying issues, change negative behavioral patterns, and allocate resources.

Rather than simply responding to crime, community policing focuses on preventing it through strategic problem-solving approaches based on collaboration. The COPS Office awards grants to hire community policing officers and support the development and testing of innovative policing strategies. COPS Office funding also provides training and technical assistance to community members and local government leaders, as well as all levels of law enforcement.

Since 1994, the COPS Office has been appropriated more than \$20 billion to add community policing officers to the nation's streets, enhance crime fighting technology, support crime prevention initiatives, and provide training and technical assistance to help advance community policing. Other achievements include the following:

- To date, the COPS Office has funded the hiring of approximately 130,000 additional officers by more than 13,000 of the nation's 18,000 law enforcement agencies in both small and large jurisdictions.
- More than 800,000 law enforcement personnel, community members, and government leaders have been trained through COPS Office-funded training organizations and the COPS Training Portal.
- Almost 500 agencies have received customized advice and peer-led technical assistance through the COPS Office Collaborative Reform Initiative Technical Assistance Center.
- To date, the COPS Office has distributed more than eight million topic-specific publications, training curricula, white papers, and resource CDs and flash drives.
- The COPS Office also sponsors conferences, roundtables, and other forums focused on issues critical to law enforcement.

COPS Office information resources, covering a wide range of community policing topics such as school and campus safety, violent crime, and officer safety and wellness, can be downloaded via the COPS Office's home page, <https://cops.usdoj.gov>.

Jails are communities in and of themselves, whose members are the individuals incarcerated and the correctional staff employed there; they are also part of the broader communities in which they are located, where the correctional staff live and to which the incarcerated population will eventually return. Community-oriented policing is as important in jails as it is in towns, cities, and counties; this compendium of community policing and procedural justice practices and programs, developed by the National Policing Institute and the National Sheriffs' Association, features research and promising practices as well as eight successful programs operated by seven sheriffs' departments that will be illuminating for other agencies nationwide.



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