

Crisis & Collaboration: 5 Ways We're Adapting to COVID-19 in St. Louis County

As the criminal justice system works to respond to the COVID-19 global pandemic, system actors are tackling a new frontier of crisis responses. The sudden need to work remotely was challenging for a group that thrived on the coordinated and structured in-person weekly meetings, but the St. Louis County team has risen to meet this challenge.

Since March 2020, St. Louis County has made swift efforts to heed pandemic precautions and safely reduce its jail population by more than 21%. The Courts, prosecuting attorney and defenders' offices, jail staff, and community partners have worked collaboratively to achieve this result while implementing new measures to promote access to counsel for people who remain in jail. Thus far, those released—candidates for substance abuse programs, those charged with non-violent offenses, and those with medical vulnerabilities—have contributed to the release of over 190 people from the County jail. What's more, the efforts to achieve this result can ideally continue long after the crisis subsides. This brief highlights some of the steps the County took to achieve these results with partnership from local entities, support from the MacArthur Safety & Justice Challenge, and technical assistance from the Center for Court Innovation.

1. ***Consider the Data***: Prior to the pandemic, our Population Review Team met weekly. Population Review Teams (PRT) are a cross-section of local criminal justice practitioners who meet weekly to determine if there are people in the local jail that could be released in a manner that would not compromise community safety. As with many others around the country, social distancing practices led us to embrace virtual meetings. Currently, representatives from the Courts, the jail, and the prosecuting attorney's office and the defense bar—the same agencies represented in PRT— still meet weekly via video. We analyze the County's overall progress toward reducing the jail population, including arrest and booking trends, and consider systemic solutions to promote fairness and equity for people released and for the detainees who remain in jail. Additionally, a smaller group—attorneys as well as Court and jail staff—meets continuously to consider detained individuals for further releases.
2. ***Promote Access to Counsel***: Due to COVID-19 precautions, access is very limited to the county jail for non-jail personnel. To facilitate contact with detainees, including those who may benefit from bond review or a hearing, we purchased tablets to place at the County and nearby rural jails. These tablets allow attorneys to conduct video interviews and meetings with their clients and also communicate about cases as they are postponed as part of the crisis

response. The tablet technology has allowed us to continue, and even expand, our pilot where a public defender represents people at initial appearances. Defenders utilize the tablets to conduct video interviews of detained people before initial appearance, which has allowed us to expand this pilot from two days a week to, now, Monday through Friday.

3. *Facilitate Communication for Community Release:* To facilitate the release of more people to the community, we have worked with the Bail Project to allow for phone interviews for people who are in jail and cannot afford bail. Whereas these interviews previously took place in person at the jail or in court, the Bail Project is now able to screen candidates for bail assistance via a free phone call. For defendants without access to cell phones, we have teamed up with the Public Defender's Office to provide cell phones to clients in need. These phones serve multiple purposes—for court reminders, check-ins with their pretrial case managers, communicating with their attorneys while awaiting court dates, and for maintaining contact with family and their communities. To date, we have obtained 10 phones (and activated three) for pretrial clients under this pilot program.
4. *Establish Video for Probation Clients:* The pandemic shift has reminded us that not all technology is created equally. For those held on probation violations, transitioning to a virtual platform was difficult because the probation department's laptops were not video camera-equipped. As a result, we have worked with the Missouri State Probation and Parole Office to provide video cameras to assist with interviewing people who could be released and for check-ins for those who are in the community. Additionally, the Probation Office has put a formal agreement in place to govern remote communications with the jail, which will promote operations continuing smoothly.
5. *Increase Support for Essential Staff:* Jail and pretrial staff are currently experiencing longer hours and overtime shifts to cover staff shortages due to COVID-19 precautions. These staff help process people to be seen in court and to be released from the jail, including by conducting intakes, pretrial assessments, and administering pretrial services. To help maintain morale of these essential staff members, we occasionally are able to provide some refreshments—donuts, boxed lunches—for jail staff, who must continue to report to work daily.

Looking Ahead: As we have rethought a safe and effective crisis response, we've seen that many of the changes we have enacted during this crisis provide opportunities for lasting change. Using video platforms for meetings and remote check-ins for people on pretrial release and probation are just a few examples of contingency protocols that can become sustainable features of the St. Louis County criminal justice landscape. Additionally, the new protocols developed during the COVID-19 pandemic will enhance the County's capacity to address future crises (e.g. health, weather, etc.).