

2015 Nomination for the Western Region – Erie County

Erie County's Criminal Justice Coalition (ECCJC) dates back to the 1980's with the formation of an Intermediate Punishment (IP) Board established to reduce jail overcrowding resulting from an increase in individuals being sentenced to incarceration, coupled with a rise in their length of stay. Recognizing that alternative sanctions offer more than just a choice between probation and prison, the IP Board sought to develop a continuum of options to meet the needs of the Court, the community, and the offender by matching the resources and constraints of programs, with both the risks and needs of their offender population. The evaluative and planning efforts lead to the establishment of Intermediate Punishment and Pre-trial programming in Erie County.

An extensive evaluation later revealed that both programs offered increased community safety, while being cost effective and replicable alternatives to incarceration at both the front and back door of the criminal justice system. Both programs also boasted favorable participant success rates and a reduction in re-arrest. With data collection leading to the establishment of population profile comparisons across the criminal justice system, the needs of the County began a metamorphosis; the IP Board soon transitioned into a Corrections Advisory Board, charged with the development, planning and monitoring of current IP programs in order to meet the local criminal justice system's obligation to offer the community a wide spectrum of sentencing options in order to effectively manage limited correctional resources.

In the mid 1990's, Erie County established a Criminal Justice Advisory Board (CJAB), which later transitioned into the Erie County Criminal Justice Coalition (ECCJC) that exists today. In 1999, Erie County received funding from the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency to support their CJAB; this opportunity allowed them to establish a consulting agreement with the Mercyhurst University Civic Institute to provide research, evaluation, and facilitation services for criminal justice initiatives. These efforts continue today, and are reinforced by annual gap analysis and strategic planning efforts across the criminal justice, behavioral health, and community sectors.

Over the last three decades, Erie County's various iterations of criminal justice planning coalitions have continued to strengthen the collaborative spirit within the County. Since inception, the coalitions have grown to include the presence of key decision makers within the criminal justice system and local community including: the President Judge and Court Administrator, the Erie County Warden, Sheriff, and District Attorney, both Victim's and Human Services, the Public Defender, and Erie County's Drug and Alcohol Commission. What sets them apart are the remaining contributors comprised of local academia, as well as other community, State and Federal agencies, which provides for strong interconnectivity and resource sharing across the County, the State, and even the Nation.

In 2012, Erie County's Criminal Justice Coalition stakeholders reached out to the Pennsylvania Center of Excellence on Mental Health and Justice to conduct a Cross-Systems Mapping workshop to promote progress in addressing criminal justice diversion and treatment needs of adults with mental illness coming into contact with the criminal justice system. This process further outlined the great work that Erie County's boards, coalitions, and stakeholders had done over the past three decades. Erie County behavioral health consumers, and those coming into the criminal justice system, have a wealth of opportunities available to keep them from further penetrating or returning to the system, including walk-in, residential mobile crisis, and other treatment services. Pre-trial services and Problem Solving Courts such as Mental Health Court, Veterans Court, Treatment Court, and a Family Court now offer vital diversions and alternatives to incarceration. Additionally, individuals that do penetrate the justice system and find themselves at the Erie County Jail, undergo a thorough screening process to determine medical and mental health needs. The jail contracts with a local service provider to offer psychiatric, drug and alcohol, and educational services within the jail. Those that are eligible may also be placed

at the Community Corrections Center. Upon release, individuals with MH and/or drug and alcohol needs have access to a myriad of community supports including peer support, mentoring, case management, and other services.

Working alongside and in collaboration with the Erie County Criminal Justice Coalition are a number of other groups, not limited to their Drug Overdose Task Force, Truancy Task Force, Erie Together (a community anti-poverty initiative) and most recently the Erie County Reentry Support and Services Alliance (ECRSSA). The ECRSSA, formed in 2013, benefits from cross pollination of membership from the CJAB and representation of Federal, State, and Local entities, as do most of the coalitions and Task Forces in Erie County. ECRSSA is tasked with addressing the needs of individuals returning to the community; they continue to meet bi-weekly to address the transportation, housing, and important opportunities for partnering with local companies and organizations on workforce development. The ECCJC is currently working with Erie Together and the members of the ECRSSA to seek funding to support their efforts in statistical analysis to complete their work in developing a three-year re-entry plan.

Over the years, the ECCJC has been home to varying committees; current standing committees include Expanding and Improving Crisis Services to address the training and supportive service needs of local law enforcement and mental health consumers. To that end, the CJAB, in collaboration with various agencies, has recently received funding to offer both the traditional Adult Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) and the MHFA Veterans curriculum to law enforcement in Northwestern Pennsylvania. Other committees include their Sexual Offender Containment Committee, and Housing Committee, both of which are tasked with identifying and addressing the needs and resources of their respective populations across all levels of the criminal justice system. Lastly, their Mental Health in Corrections Committee continues to work on a number of issues encountered by mental health consumers who have become involved with the criminal justice system. Having closed the gap on the issues identified at the Cross-System Mapping in 2012, a Follow-up Mapping will be held in the summer of 2015.

With extraordinary attention to detail and a lengthy history focused on strategic planning and evaluation, Erie County has proven to be among the oldest, most highly effective, and forward thinking Criminal Justice Advisory Boards in Pennsylvania. Keeping one eye on the horizon and one on their strategic plan, the members of the Erie County Criminal Justice Coalition appear to live by the words of Winston Churchill, "Let our advance worrying become advance thinking and planning." It is because of these accomplishments, and many others, that PCCD Staff is proud to nominate the Erie County Criminal Justice Coalition for the 2015 CCAP CJAB Best Practices Award.