

2015 Nomination for the Eastern Region – Montgomery County

The vision of the Montgomery County Criminal Justice Advisory Board (CJAB) is “to be a county leader by supporting innovative programs that promote justice for all citizens and communities of Montgomery County” with values focused upon service, expertise, professionalism and integrity. The truth of this vision statement is evident in every quarterly CJAB meeting since 2008 to every program this CJAB has supported or implemented in its nearly seven years of existence.

The Montgomery County CJAB was established when key criminal justice stakeholders gathered to explore ways in which the criminal justice system could function more efficiently through communication, planning, and problem-solving. Since that time, the CJAB has continued to be a strong and effective body of collaborative partners, whose progressive attitudes allow them to be open to, and accepting of, new and innovative programming. CJAB partners work together to enhance their local system of justice with an understanding that issues affecting one part of the system affects all parts of the system. Montgomery County relies heavily on its CJAB to plan and troubleshoot issues plaguing the criminal justice system through thoughtful, proactive planning.

Montgomery County, a second class county, is the third largest in Pennsylvania with 487 square miles of terrain that includes rural, suburban and metropolitan populations of over 812,000 people (2013 census estimate). Bordered by Philadelphia on its southeast side, Montgomery County is part of the five-county southeastern Pennsylvania metropolitan area. Its proximity to Philadelphia and its well-developed highway and mass transportation network facilitates easy movement of people within the region, but also allows for crime travel into its already crime-plagued county seat of Norristown.

In 2006 Montgomery County opened a drug court, the county’s first problem-solving court. The program is a highly structured, extremely demanding regimen that combines intensive treatment, drug testing and judicial supervision. In that time, 227 participants successfully completed and graduated from the program. In July 2008, the county was awarded a planning grant from PCCD for the development of a Behavioral Health Court to more effectively address the needs of persons with serious mental illness cycling through the court and prison system. The CJAB supported and worked collaborative to ensure the success of both programs. In 2012 they merged the Intensive Mental Health program, serving people with serious mental illness, with the Behavioral Health Court Program through a continuation and improvement grant from PCCD which allowed for continued funding to support probation officers and the addition of an Assistant Supervisor for the unit. Since inception, 135 people have successfully completed and graduated from the program. In 2011, the county instituted a Veteran’s Court to better serve the needs of justice-involved veterans and since then has graduated 37 successful participants. The county has calculated a savings of 106,336 prison days in 2014 alone due to the utilization of house arrest/electronic monitoring, Drug Treatment Court, Behavioral Health Court-Mental Health/Dual Diagnosed Intermediate Punishment Program, and Veterans Treatment Court. At every quarterly CJAB meeting, the three judges who preside over these problem-solving courts are invited to and do attend to provide reports to members on court operations, sustainability and success.

In 2011, the Adult Probation Department and the Correctional Facility restructured their organizations with input and guidance from the CJAB to identify and address the criminogenic needs of inmates in an effort to reduce rates of recidivism in the county, thus laying the groundwork for re-entry planning.

In September 2012, the CJAB adopted a five year strategic plan which included re-entry as a priority. This is noteworthy because at the time PCCD had not yet promoted the inclusion of re-entry into its planning initiatives, which illustrates the manner in which members of the Montgomery County CJAB

have a systemically progressive understanding of what needs to happen in order to reduce prison population and recidivism, long before “re-entry” became a popular buzz word. This is just one example of how Montgomery County stays in front of innovative and strategic criminal justice planning, allowing them to be proactive and not reactive as many county criminal justice systems are forced to be. In addition to what has been already stated, the following are additional examples of how Montgomery County has led the CJAB pack in terms of innovative programs developed through the collaboration of CJAB members, a list that certainly is not all-inclusive.

- **Intermediate Punishment Programming.** Montgomery County was one of the first counties to blend their Restricted Intermediate Punishment (RIP) program into their existing successful drug court to improve the outcomes of the program. The County also utilizes Intermediate Punishment funding to support a Mental Health Intensive Supervision Unit within the Adult Probation Office with voluntary participation in Behavioral Court for participants who chose to be involved in the court;
- **Forensic Bed Space Delay.** Montgomery County has been working with Erie County and the Mental Health and Justice Center of Excellence in seeking a solution for consumers who are decompensating in prison due to the delay in forensic bed space. The CJAB has formed a subcommittee dedicated to this issue;
- **Offender Risk and Needs to Assist with Prosecutorial Resources.** Through a PCCD grant, the Montgomery County District Attorney’s Office worked with the University of Pennsylvania to develop a front-end risk and needs assessment tool to evaluate the likely reduction in criminal activity that the prosecution of a particular case may bring, and, in turn, use this information to make educated and fiscally-sound decisions about the resources necessary for specific prosecutions. Additionally, these outcomes were used to identify individuals who were ideal for diversionary programs. This was a revolutionary tool, the first of its kind.
- **Re-Entry.** Re-entry has been a priority for this county for several years and was included in their formally adopted strategic plan in 2012. CJAB partners have been working together to create comprehensive re-entry programs and initiatives for returning citizens. This includes parenting classes both in the prison and upon release from prison, a family visitation room within the prison for inmates who have completed the class, partnering with a faith-based organization to provide mentors for returning citizens who work together for three months prior to release and six months after release; the development of a re-entry assessment tool, among other things. The County plans to hire a consultant and engage in formal re-entry planning this spring.

For a large county so close to the city of Philadelphia, the members of the Montgomery County CJAB work remarkably well together to identify and troubleshoot criminal justice issues before they become a problem. The group as a whole easily grasps new concepts and always responds to PCCD and other state-initiated priorities with a willingness to do what is suggested and forge ahead with a data-driven understanding of the issues and appropriate solutions. The CJAB has always included a County Commissioner. Their individual CJAB members are impressive leaders within their own fields, many having served on various state-level initiatives and organizations, lending to the credibility and dynamic nature of this group. While the strength of the CJAB was built upon the experience of these effective leaders, it is their working relationships that provide the backbone for their collaborative success. For these reasons, Montgomery County CJAB is being nominated for the 2015 CCAP Best Practices Award.