

# An Investment in the Future: La Crosse County Charts a Course for Transition from Jail to the Community

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What does the criminal justice system really want from people who are involved in the system as offenders—retribution? Justice? Punishment? Deterrence? Fewer crimes?

La Crosse County is one of six communities nationwide selected to implement the Transition from Jail to Community (TJC) Initiative, an innovative, evidence-based transition model developed by the National Institute of Corrections (NIC) and the Urban Institute (UI). The TJC Initiative seeks to improve public safety and to enhance the success of individuals returning to the community from local jails through effective jail/community partnerships. The county entered into the TJC project with the goal of devising a jail transition strategy that is responsive to local circumstances, resources, and priorities.

The process for creating systems change is similar to facilitating an individual's successful transition from jail to the community. In each case, the system needs to:

- Assess the need for change;
- Provide the motivation to change;
- Target the interventions provided to change behavior;
- Train the system in the new process;
- Reinforce positive change; and
- Engage community partners while measuring relevant practices and providing feedback.

This article will describe the process La Crosse County developed during the 30-month technical assistance project supported by NIC and the Urban Institute.

## About La Crosse County

La Crosse County is located in the southwest corner of Wisconsin along the Mississippi River. It has a population of approximately 114,000 people, and in 2011 the average daily jail population was 172 people. Case management and supervision is provided in the community through Justice Sanctions, a county-funded program that is not connected to the Wisconsin Division of Community Corrections, the agency that provides state probation and parole supervision.

Historically, Justice Sanctions has been a court-driven program that screened and assessed offenders referred by a judge. In 2011, Justice Sanctions provided pretrial case management and supervision for a daily average of 145 people and provided the same service for a daily average of 69 sentenced people. Justice Sanctions also coordinated the Drug Treatment Court and the Operating a Motor Vehicle While Intoxicated (OWI) Treatment Court, with an average population of 25 and 139 people respectively.

With this as the backdrop, in 2009 La Crosse County asked to be one of the sites for the Transition from Jail to Community Initiative being offered by NIC.

The county's application requested assistance in the following areas:

- 1) Review the current criminal justice system process to identify opportunities for improvement;
- 2) Improve data collection and understanding of the data; and
- 3) Establish systems for self-evaluation.

It was believed that by following the TJC principles and the roadmap provided, La Crosse County would be on solid footing to provide evidence-based services in a more streamlined and effective manner. The core team for the project included jail administrator Doris Daggett, jail program coordinator Mike Kiefer, county board supervisor Vicki Burke, YWCA Executive Director Mary Kay Wolf, and myself, Justice Sanctions manager Jane Klekamp.

As the writer of the original application, I would like to thank my teammates for the time, energy, and talent they brought to the table. The initial work of this core team of five people gave an indication of how complicated it would be to expand the concept to a larger community of judges, service providers, prosecutors, defense attorneys, and probation and parole agents, among others. Maintaining a consistent core team was invaluable in developing the process in La Crosse County.

## Addressing TJC Target Areas

So, how did La Crosse County benefit from the TJC process? Advancements were made in all of the five TJC target areas:

1. Leadership, Vision, and Organizational Culture
2. Collaborative Structure and Joint Ownership
3. Data-Driven Understanding of Jail Reentry Issues
4. Targeted Intervention Strategies
5. Sustainability and Self-Evaluation

### Leadership, Vision, and Organizational Culture

La Crosse County is extremely fortunate in having an established Criminal Justice Management Council (CJMC) and a supportive sheriff to provide the long-term leadership for the TJC Initiative. For

almost two decades, La Crosse County has been committed to the process of systems change to reduce the jail population and reduce recidivism. The TJC Initiative provided further information, tools, and assistance to guide and inform leadership in the implementation of evidence-based practice within the county.

Sheriff Steve Helgeson supported the application process and committed the jail administrator and the jail program coordinator to the project. The core team had consistent and engaged membership, with all five members serving throughout the TJC period. The core team provided the ongoing commitment and support for the project by providing continuing education to the County Board of Supervisors and the Criminal Justice Management Council. The core team has also committed to continue meeting to discuss, plan, and implement the recommendations made in the final report emerging from the TJC project.

### **Collaborative Structure and Joint Ownership**

The process of developing joint ownership of the TJC Initiative proved to be a difficult but fruitful component of the period of technical assistance. With the encouragement of the UI and NIC advisors, La Crosse County convened monthly stakeholder meetings to help engage community partners. The first few months were spent in the traditional group formation process: What are we doing? Why are we doing it? How will it help? What is my part in this?

By the end of the official technical assistance period, members of the community partners group also had been trained together in the Thinking for a Change program (T4C) for offenders and the Offender Workforce Development Specialist (OWDS) staff development program. This knowledge is helping the county to provide better services to people in the jail and in the community. Both T4C and OWDS are evidence-based practices designed to reduce recidivism for those involved in the criminal justice system.

Collaborations with our community partners resulted in at least three major accomplishments benefitting county residents:

- **Housing assistance**—The first accomplishment is limited housing vouchers through CouleeCap, a nonprofit organization that assists low-income residents in our four-county area. CouleeCap offered five slots in one of the housing programs for people receiving case management in the community. Each housing slot is available for up to 18 months and allows the transitioning person time to complete other requirements toward becoming more self-sufficient. As La Crosse is not a large community, five housing slots are a significant resource for the people transitioning from the jail to the community in our area.
- **Valid identification**—The second accomplishment is significant because it is a true partnership, involving community volunteers, use of public transportation, and limited county dollars. It was often noted that people transitioning from the jail to the community did not have a valid form of identification. Recognizing that a valid ID is imperative to living a productive life, a community

volunteer stepped up to help people obtain needed identification. He agreed to meet people without ID's on the first Monday of every month (which happens to be "free bus" Monday), check the client's supporting documentation to ensure it is complete, obtain a purchase order from the county for the cost of the ID's, and ride the bus with the clients to the Department of Transportation, where they can apply for an ID card. This seemingly simple operation also helps clients understand the bus system and shows them where the department is located so they can get there on their own in the future.

- **Improvements in jail visitation**—The third change was initiated when community members commented that the visitation area at the jail was unwelcoming and cold. Volunteers came together and developed a play area for children, a place for magazines and books, and a computer workstation where people leaving the jail can locate resources in the community, such as housing and food pantries. Volunteers staff the area intermittently and answer questions visitors may have. In addition to giving people a better feeling about the jail, the interaction between these volunteers and jail visitors has created a channel for the jail to hear about issues that may never have come to its attention otherwise.

#### **Data-Driven Understanding of Jail Reentry Issues**

Is there is a county anywhere that does not have issues with data? While it is understood that data is one of the most important features of our work, it is often the most ignored. The TJC Initiative helped La Crosse County identify and prioritize the data issues to be solved with further technical assistance from NIC. A technical advisor reviewed the county's current processes and made recommendations to the Sheriff's Department that were acted upon by the Information Technology Department. While we continue to collect and analyze some data manually, much of the reporting is now completed electronically for easier review and evaluation. The core team will continue to analyze data as a way to further understand reentry issues.

#### **Targeted Intervention Strategies**

La Crosse County had begun using the Proxy and the Level of Services Inventory-Revised (LSI-R) assessment tools prior to the TJC Initiative. With the project under way, the TJC advisors worked with us to develop a plan to better utilize the results of the Proxy and the LSI-R by targeting interventions at different points along the jail-to-community continuum. Targeted interventions can improve reintegration and reduce reoffending, thereby increasing public safety. The county's new plan defined a decision-making process that is focused on delivering specific interventions to a specific population, rather than offering services to the first people who sign up to participate in the program.

Because the jail population has a high turnover rate, we developed targeted intervention strategies that would reach both inmates and people transitioning to the community.

- Training on T4C, a cognitive-behavioral intervention designed to address pro-criminal orientation, was provided to jail staff, Justice Sanctions staff, and community partners. After T4C training was completed, the team established T4C program groups in the jail and the community. We set up these programs to allow handoffs between the groups, so that a person can begin the T4C program while incarcerated and complete it in the community.
- Employment screening and assessments, as introduced in OWDS training, can be completed in jail or in the community.
- SMART Recovery groups for addiction treatment are now facilitated in the jail and in the community.

La Crosse County also is initiating case conferencing for people transitioning to the community. Jail staff, probation and parole, and Justice Sanctions social workers are establishing a process to share information and case plans between agencies. This is being streamlined through the State Department of Corrections' use of the COMPAS tool from Northpointe, Inc. COMPAS, an actuarial risk and needs assessment tool and case planning system, was recently implemented in the State of Wisconsin for people on probation, on parole, and in prison. Using the same risk and needs assessment tool in all areas of the system is making case conferencing across systems much easier.

During the TJC project, La Crosse County also developed an Intervention Inventory that has proven to be helpful for clients, system providers, and community partners. It is a guide to services for people involved in the criminal justice system, including cognitive behavioral groups, housing assistance, substance abuse treatment, economic support, food pantries, and shelters. It was developed with the assistance of the community partners and is scheduled to be updated regularly.

### **Sustainability and Self-Evaluation**

The La Crosse County Criminal Justice Management Council has provided a significant amount of support for the sustainability piece of the TJC Initiative. The CJMC's public relations committee developed a presentation about evidence-based practices that their staff delivered to community agencies and systems agencies almost 20 times in 2011. The CJMC, in collaboration with the La Crosse Tribune and WXOW-TV 19, conducted a live town hall meeting from inside the jail in a newly built direct supervision pod that was not yet housing inmates. Most recently, the CJMC wrote a letter to state legislators and the local newspapers indicating an employment bill being considered by the legislators is not in the best interest of the community, as it will not reduce recidivism and decreases the possibility of rehabilitation.

Data is crucial to the sustainability and self-evaluation of any criminal justice program. The TJC Initiative helped La Crosse County understand how to take data collection and self-evaluation to the next level. With the assistance of the county Information Technology Department we have been able to more easily collect the data necessary to evaluate the success we are having.

## Mapping Our Way to Long-Term Benefits

La Crosse County has a long way to go to fully integrate its systems for criminal justice and related services, but it has made significant advancements.

- The county has improved its relationships with community human services agencies, because of the emphasis placed on partnering. Sub-committees are currently working together on housing issues, employment services, group facilitation, and resource fairs to better serve the transitioning jail population.
- The core team initially formed to collaborate on TJC has become more engaged, trusting, and collaborative. While the members have always had cordial relationships, this process has produced a true “team” that works together toward the same goals and objectives. Participating in trainings together, bi-weekly phone calls with the technical assistance providers to help us focus and prioritize the objectives, and site visits from the technical assistance providers have allowed the core team to develop a better understanding of evidence-based practice and each other.
- Due to the logical structure of the TJC Initiative, the course charted for La Crosse County is manageable and takes local circumstances into consideration. The county’s ability to collect data, direct resources, and plan for the future was guided locally, which increased buy-in from the core team and community partners. As a result of the highly collaborative nature of the process, La Crosse County continues to be heavily invested in its success.



The La Crosse County implementation team also gained an incredible amount of information from the other counties participating in the TJC Initiative. The national partners in this project were the City and County of Denver, Colorado; Douglas County, Kansas; Davidson County, Tennessee; Kent County, Michigan; and Orange County, California. It was helpful to hear how other counties were managing the process of systems change, and their experiences often gave our team in La Crosse County new ideas for managing the change in a more productive manner.

La Crosse County Sheriff Steve Helgeson summarized our experience by stating,

*The TJC Initiative has helped the criminal justice system develop a long-term, sustainable plan while operating more collaboratively with community partners in developing programs that reduce recidivism and change lives.*

Mary Kay Wolf, Executive Director of the YWCA of the Coulee Region, commented as follows:

*To sit in a room with community members and “system” managers and be on the same page with the same goal in mind is invigorating. When the same TJC theme starts to show up at other meetings in the community, it is an encouraging sign that the torch is being shared with many more than just a small group.*

The five members of the TJC core team all agree that the La Crosse County justice system has made great strides toward becoming more data-driven and more informed by evidence-based practice. While the core members have often commented on the intensity of the TJC Initiative, we are pleased with the results, as we have made great strides toward providing improved services in the jail and in the community.

## Resources

### TJC Toolkit

The TJC Toolkit is a self-paced, web-based learning resource designed to guide jurisdictions through implementation of the TJC model, in whole or in part. It is useful for anyone interested in jail reentry, whether they work in criminal justice or a community-based service organization.

The nine Toolkit modules incorporate examples from jurisdictions across the country, tools developed to facilitate implementation in the six current TJC learning sites, resource suggestions, and detailed content. The TJC Toolkit is available online at <http://www.jailtransition.com/toolkit>.

### Additional Material

For more, see the Urban Institute website at <http://www.urban.org/projects/tjc/> and UI’s resource page, <http://www.urban.org/projects/tjc/resources.cfm>.

See also NIC's featured content on the Transition from Jail to the Community Initiative at <http://nicic.gov/JailTransition>.

Document available at:

[http://community.nicic.gov/blogs/national\\_jail\\_exchange/archive/2012/03/20/an-investment-in-the-future-la-crosse-county-charts-a-course-for-transition-from-jail-to-the-community.aspx](http://community.nicic.gov/blogs/national_jail_exchange/archive/2012/03/20/an-investment-in-the-future-la-crosse-county-charts-a-course-for-transition-from-jail-to-the-community.aspx)

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