

COUNTY JAILS AT A CROSSROADS

AN EXAMINATION OF THE JAIL POPULATION
AND PRETRIAL RELEASE



NACo WHY COUNTIES MATTER PAPER SERIES • ISSUE 2 • JULY 2015 • www.NACo.org

MESA COUNTY, COLORADO

THE OPPORTUNITY FOR CHANGE

Mesa County, Colo., historically operated a pretrial bail system like many other jurisdictions in the United States, where cash and surety bonds are the primary ways a defendant is released and empirical information is not available or used. This meant that many high-risk defendants were bonding out of jail while many low-risk defendants were staying in, based on money alone. Several years ago, the county's chief judge read an article about evidence-based practices for judicial officers that made him question if Mesa County's system was set up appropriately. He started pushing for an examination of the county's judicial practices, and in 2010 Mesa County was chosen as one of seven sites in the United States to receive technical assistance from the National Institute of Corrections (NIC) to analyze current practices and make evidence-based upgrades to its system. This assistance did not come with any financial support but did help catalyze a group of system leaders to take action.

MESA COUNTY'S MODEL

Much of Mesa County's success in improving its pretrial system is thanks to the county identifying data targets and tracking results from the very beginning. "If you collect evidence that shows this new approach is working, and you stick with it, you're going to break down resistance," Joel Bishop, program manager for Mesa County Criminal Justice Services, says. "It's hard to argue with good data."

The county invested a great deal of time at the outset to ensure that useful and appropriate outcomes were being tracked. Assistance from the Pretrial Justice Institute helped the county determine and set up some basic tracking mechanisms, while other outcomes and questions were easily identified as Mesa County has tracked outcomes in other areas for years. System leaders also came together and discussed what additional results they wanted to monitor.

Some of the outcomes that Mesa County monitors include:

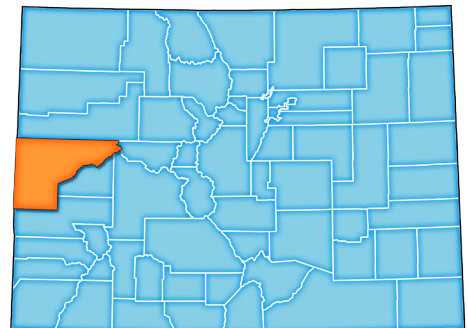
- the local predictive value of its risk assessment tool
- court appearance rates by risk category
- public safety rates by risk category
- average length of stay by risk category

MESA COUNTY, COLORADO

POPULATION: 148,255 (2014 estimate)

COMMUNITY MAKEUP:

87% URBAN | 3% RURAL



For the full report and the companion case studies, see the
County Jails at a Crossroads website at www.naco.org/CountyJails

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- number of those held in jail by risk category
- percentage of pretrial program costs by risk category and supervision level, and
- bonds ordered by risk category and by offense.

Mesa County currently tracks all of this information using Excel spreadsheets. Pretrial officers update the spreadsheets before they go home every day, and daily administrative support staff double check that data. Staff also spend time at least once or twice a month looking at closed cases to examine outcomes.

SUCCESSSES AND OUTCOMES

Mesa County's implementation of evidence-based pretrial reform has resulted in a number of positive changes, and the county's continued monitoring of outcomes has bolstered its success. First, tracking results from the beginning helped convince skeptics that the new process utilizing a validated risk assessment was a good one. The county knew the risk assessment tool worked at the state level, but needed to ensure that it also worked locally—which the data has borne out.

For lower-risk defendants, up to 88 percent of supervised pretrial cases remain crime-free during their pretrial period and up to 93 percent of cases make all their court appearances before trial. For higher risk defendants, these rates are up to 75 percent and up to 87 percent, respectively.

The county has also been able to show that the jail is now being used mainly for higher-risk defendants, with **only about 25 percent of the jail's pretrial population being lower risk.** Similarly, from July 2013 through December 2014, community supervision rates rose 24 percent and the pretrial jail population dropped 27 percent—while public safety rates stayed consistent. This has both **saved the county money in reduced jail bed days and reduced collateral consequences for many defendants.**

"Keeping track of these outcomes has been crucial in getting stakeholder buy-in, and convincing those who were skeptics at the beginning of this process," Bishop says. Mesa County continues to provide regular statistical updates to stakeholders, which helps sustain confidence in the system and keeps leaders engaged and aware of when changes may be helpful or necessary.

LESSONS LEARNED

INVOLVE KEY STAKEHOLDERS AT EVERY STAGE: "You can have all the good ideas in the world but you have to have collaboration to actually get it implemented and make it work," Bishop says. "Get your key stakeholders involved not just in the ideas phase but also in actually developing the program. It's also important to have lower-level line staff involved—they're the ones who will be doing the work and have an important perspective."

SOMETIMES CHANGE NEEDS TO BE INCREMENTAL: In Mesa County, some stakeholders weren't comfortable completely removing monetary bond as an option at first. "We knew keeping those money ranges in wasn't the best practice, but it was a step in the process to where we needed to be," Bishop explains. "If we'd jumped right to no money bonds our system wouldn't have been ready for it." A slower pace also gave Mesa County time to gather local data that showed that a system without money bonds would work.

MONEY ISN'T EVERYTHING: "We didn't get a penny from NIC or any other provider," Bishop says. "What we got was technical assistance, which is basically available for anyone who's serious about reform. Yes, it cost us a lot of time, working on formatting and building new pretrial reports and spreadsheets, and required time of our data analyst—but it didn't cost money. You just need the will and the desire to do it."

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