

FIVE WAYS TO ENGAGE COUNTY ELECTED OFFICIALS IN YOUR JUSTICE INITIATIVES



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Justice initiatives need support at every level in county government in order to be successful. While most justice-related work is undertaken by leaders and staff in the sheriff's office, department of corrections and the courts, elected county leadership has a paramount role in pushing justice initiatives forward. These champions can inform justice policy and implementation, assist with securing funding and resources for justice initiatives and act as the public face of local efforts. NACo, supported by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation's **Safety and Justice Challenge**, created this brief to highlight strategies local leaders can use to better engage elected officials in criminal justice initiatives.

1 REGULARLY EDUCATE ELECTED COUNTY LEADERS ON JUSTICE INITIATIVE EFFORTS

- Update elected officials on the progress of justice initiatives happening within the county on a continuous basis through memos, briefs and/or presentations at county board meetings. These updates should include justice initiatives' implementation status, intended and/or realized benefits for the county and any relevant data.
- Host site visits, tours and events to showcase the initiatives and include testimonials from direct beneficiaries of programs to deepen elected officials' understanding of the impact of the efforts. Many communities invite their elected officials to program graduations to put a human face on the data they regularly share.

- Brief elected officials on emerging justice innovations and solutions happening at the county level nationwide and encourage them to learn more. NACo conferences, meetings and virtual events are great opportunities for county elected officials to learn about and share strategies with peers.

2 LISTEN TO ELECTED COUNTY LEADERS' IDEAS AND CONCERNS, AND BE RESPONSIVE

- Engage elected leaders at the beginning of their term to educate them on current and past local justice initiative efforts and discuss areas that still need improvement or where the leader has identified his or her own priorities for change.
- Initiate meetings with elected officials to hear their ideas and concerns at the beginning of any



effort and continue the conversation to ensure an open exchange of information and identification of potential barriers and opportunities for improvement to better inform decisions and policy.

- Set common goals for any justice initiatives to ensure alignment among the leader's overall policy goals and secure political support for your efforts.

3 ENCOURAGE ELECTED COUNTY LEADERS TO BECOME ACTIVE CHAMPIONS FOR JUSTICE INITIATIVES

- Invite elected officials to join or initiate a justice-focused task force or committee to help guide the county's efforts and enhance collaboration among county justice, health and human service stakeholders, as well as facilitate discussions with other county agencies and align policy with the state and other local jurisdictions.
- Position county officials as the public face for justice initiatives by setting up opportunities for public speeches and engagement with the media to show leadership on this issue.

4 WHEN SEEKING ASSISTANCE FROM ELECTED COUNTY LEADERS, MAKE SPECIFIC ASKS THAT ARE DATA-DRIVEN AND MEASURABLE, WHILE SHOWING BENEFITS TO THE COUNTY

- Request formal commitments that have a specific target and measurable outcome attached, such as passing a resolution to join a national initiative like Stepping Up to reduce the number of people with mental illnesses in jails. These types of commitments can bolster an elected official's impact as a champion for justice initiatives and increase positive national attention on your jurisdiction.
- Make concrete, detailed and data-driven asks for policy change or funding requests for overall needs. For example, making a request such as "We need \$100,000 for a pilot program to provide case management to 15 of the highest utilizers of our health and hospital systems to

help reduce jail bed days by 20 percent over one year" rather than "we need money for jail alternatives" gives policymakers the information they need to make an informed decision.

- Bolster requests for policy or funding changes by highlighting the impact these changes can have on the county using data and measurable outcomes such as recidivism, referrals to treatment or average daily jail population. Cost-benefit analysis, data showing areas of concern in the county's justice system and data from other jurisdictions enacting similar justice initiatives that show the impact on county resources, funding and outcomes for justice-involved individuals can justify support from county leadership.
- Present integrated data that shows links and effects on other policy areas, such as human services or health, in order to connect justice to broader county issues and show the wide impact your initiatives could have on the county.

5 GIVE ELECTED OFFICIALS TOOLS AND RESOURCES TO SHARE WITH THE MEDIA AND COMMUNITY TO DEMONSTRATE SUPPORT FOR LOCAL JUSTICE INITIATIVES

- Work with elected officials to create a comprehensive communication plan to address criminal justice questions and concern from the public. This can include talking points that highlight why specific policies or programs were implemented, their intended impact on public safety and the progress these initiatives have made.
- Train elected officials on giving presentations about justice initiatives to share with other county officials and justice stakeholders. County leaders should be able to accurately and effectively answer critical questions from the public and the press regarding justice efforts.
- Create a community engagement plan in order to educate and involve community members as stakeholders in justice initiatives to increase public support for efforts.

This brief was created with support from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation as part of the Safety and Justice Challenge, which seeks to reduce over-incarceration by changing the way America thinks about and uses jails.

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660 North Capitol St. NW | Suite 400 | Washington, D.C. 20001 | 202.393.6226 | www.naco.org
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