

# Framing the Problem

## Use a Broader Approach to Alleviate Overcrowding

By Margaret S. Bower

A good friend of mine is an amateur photographer. During the past five years or so, I've watched him improve his timing, composition and technical skills. The thing he has always had an instinct for, though, is framing the picture. Where I might focus my eye on one item of interest, he zooms back and captures the mundane around the spectacular, defining its striking qualities from the contrast. His innate ability to frame the picture makes all the difference in the view he presents.

Criminal justice planning is a lot like photography. The analytical components of a typical jail or prison study are standard fare. A truly innovative plan, however, is carefully composed and analyzed, with each element weighed against the others. It requires policy makers who are willing to take a risk and planners who can take a broader view. It will also spur a change in operations, in the way inmates are treated, and in the way the system relates to offenders.

Recently, I was fortunate enough to work in two jurisdictions where the vision of the project leadership resulted in a systemic change in the way offenders are treated, and a focus on rehabilitation as a complement to punishment.

### Jail crowding

Jail crowding is a prevalent issue nationwide and as the incarceration rate creeps to an all-time high, there are few unaffected jurisdictions left. A recent Bureau of Justice Statistics report noted

that at midyear 2005, prisons and jails nationwide were admitting more than 1,000 inmates each week. This admissions increase represents a 2.6 percent rise from mid-2004 to mid-2005. The resulting increase in average daily population is particularly acute at the county jail level. The national jail average daily population grew by almost 34,000 inmates to a record-high of 750,000 prisoners in 2005 — a 4.7 percent increase in a one-year period.

City, county, state and federal agencies are bombarded by the challenges of crime, public safety, threat to quality of life and the demands of managing offenders. Citizens' demand for public safety competes with their insistence on low-cost solutions to create a balancing act that is precarious at best, further complicated by escalating growth in correctional populations.

### The Franklin County Solution

Franklin County, Pa., was initially focused on jail structure when it embarked on a jail-needs study to help alleviate overcrowding.

The county experienced significant growth in the last decade and has a population that now exceeds 100,000 residents. This growth, along with a rise in crime, pushed the 194-bed jail county jail to twice its inmate capacity, with levels sometimes reaching 400 inmates.

I served as the lead criminal justice analyst and planner for Franklin County's project and was responsible for assessing the need for a new, larger jail. It quickly became clear that projected bed space needs exceeded the county's budget.

While the county knew it must expand its jail, it also sought a solution for lower-risk chronic offenders to mitigate the size of that expansion and bolster what it recognized as an incomplete continuum of alternatives to incarceration.

We assembled a team with the warden, commissioners, court officials, the probation department, and other key stakeholders to analyze the flow of defendants through the county's criminal justice system for both pre-trial defendants and sentenced offenders. We conducted interviews, analyzed lengths of stay, admissions, and the average daily population levels over time for various population groups. Through this process, we were able to identify a large population at the jail that included non-violent, low-security offenders, many of whom had substance abuse problems.

This discovery was not surprising. In almost every correctional facility, a majority of the new admissions are repeat offenders with substance abuse issues who have been re-admitted after drug and alcohol violations while on probation or parole.

As part of the solution at the jail in Franklin County, we proposed development of a treatment-focused day reporting center for 150 offenders, paired with a new 450-bed jail. Franklin County residents and criminal justice staff were enthusiastic about the prospect of a rehabilitation alternative, and embraced the concept. The committee and I developed a plan that described program goals, organizational structure, job descriptions and admission/release procedures. Warden John Wetzel requested and received grant funding from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to start the program.

After considering all of the options, including separating the desired services, hiring internal staff, and contracting services, the county outsourced the entire day reporting operation to BI Incorporated, a long-time community corrections organization that operates 30 similar centers nationwide.

By adding a day reporting center as a release valve and building a smaller jail than originally forecasted, Franklin County saved an estimated \$10 million in new construction costs. It also created an almost immediate solution — within several months, while the jail was still in design, more than 100 offenders were participating in programs at the day reporting center.

The jail population, which had been hovering around 375 inmates, dropped to 286 inmates within four months of the center opening — the lowest average daily population in four years. The average length of stay for inmates declined from 72 days to 59 days within 60 days of the center opening. Additional savings of \$3.2 million and \$650,000 were achieved by operating a smaller jail and avoiding a premium to house prisoners in nearby counties.



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### Nebraska Expands Options

Nebraska, like many states, has encountered unprecedented offender population growth, attributable in part to crimes related to methamphetamine and other drug-abuse violations.

This profile matches national trends where more than six in 10 convicted offenders were regular drug and alcohol abusers prior to conviction.

As the lead analyst on a master plan update for the Nebraska Department of Correctional Services in 2005-06, our project team was asked to identify areas of special needs within the system.

Together with department staff, the team mapped out the various custody levels (maximum, medium, minimum and community) and population groupings (female, youth, sex offender, treatment) within the prison system. A cross-tabulation revealed a shortage of substance abuse treatment beds for medium- and minimum-custody men, particularly for those in pre-release status.

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The master plan noted the shortage, recommended strategies to address the problem, and suggested a follow-up study to develop a solution to both the treatment shortfall and overcrowding.

Working closely with correctional, treatment and administrative staff, a new project team outlined the conceptual, philosophical and operational framework that would be the basis for the design of a new facility. The facility will focus on rehabilitation and pre-release preparation for inmates within two years of release. While it is not currently scheduled for construction, it will be planned as a stand-alone component of the next prison built in Nebraska.

The population, which must have a diagnosed need for treatment of addiction, will move through the 256-bed facility with



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increasing levels of responsibility and freedom, mirroring their success in the treatment program. Initial housing will be in dormitories; second phase housing will be in double-occupied cells. The third phase of housing will be in a normative, four-person living unit, complete with shared bathroom, kitchenette (microwave, sink), laundry, and small living-room type area.

Living in close quarters with peers will offer inmates the opportunity to learn interpersonal skills that will help them succeed post-release, and rewards those who have succeeded in treatment with greater privacy and freedom of movement. Increased freedom within a controlled environment permits failure to be met with both corrective action and support.

**Tangible, Intangible Benefits**

Ultimately, the goal of reduced recidivism is cost savings. Studies of correctional treatment programs in California have shown that taxpayers save approximately \$2.50 to \$4 for every dollar invested in treatment for non-violent offenders. These results, documented by a UCLA study of more

than 120,000 adults with drug-related convictions, give solid financial incentive to pursue higher levels of treatment for those in prison.

One of the secondary goals of treatment in both Nebraska and Franklin County is to return inmates back to society with better employment and decision-making skills, and an infrastructure of continued care to help them to become better citizens.

As with framing a photo with a clear

eye, what made the difference in these two examples was the willingness of policy makers to take a broader view, to trust in the planning process, and to be open to an innovative solution.

The more creative solution only emerged after taking a non-traditional view of the problem. The best solution emerged not by limiting the analysis to the subject of interest, but by expanding the view to include the whole system. The answers emerged after

framing the problem more broadly.

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**Internet Network Could Link Ohio Courts**

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Governor Ted Strickland has proposed funding in the state budget to launch a new Web site that could provide a wealth of information from courts throughout the state.

The Ohio Courts Network project would contain records from 385 Ohio courts in 88 counties, making it easier for attorneys and judges to locate and identify court records from all parts of the state.

The governor has proposed spending \$10.5 million during the next two years to jumpstart the program and maintain it.

The proposal is subject to discussion in the state Legislature, which could force changes to the program. The public would have limited access to court records and officials have not yet decided what guidelines will be used to determine the availability of information.

Opponents have raised concerns about privacy and who will have access to the information. Some people have also questioned the cost of the program.

Although the state will pay for the bulk of establishing the network, various court fees will have to be increased to pay for the long-term maintenance of the network.

Some courts currently have complete, up-to-date Web sites, but others have an almost nonexistent presence on the Internet.

Some court officials says that although it makes sense to create the network, the logistics will be difficult because every court has a different case management system.

If funding for the program is approved, a pilot system could be created within three months.

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