

**RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE COMMUNITY ADVISORY COMMITTEE OF ALLEGHENY  
COUNTY  
SAFETY AND JUSTICE CHALLENGE**

**Submitted November 23, 2021**

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Dear members of the SJC Implementation Team:

We, the Community Advisory Committee, are writing to submit the attached recommendations for review by the SJC Implementation Team. We are requesting that you review the recommendations and respond in early 2022 with the following information: 1) Whether the recommendation will be implemented 2) If it will be implemented, what department will be responsible 3) Point of contact for implementation, 4) an estimated timeline for implementation, and 5) an explanation of any recommendations that cannot be implemented.

We would also like to invite you to a meeting on **December 13th from 2:00-3:00 pm** where we will present the recommendations and answer clarifying questions about them. If you have clarifying questions about the recommendations, please direct them to the Community Engagement Coordinator by **December 3rd**. We are looking forward to finalizing this process.

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### **About the Committee**

Since February of 2021, Community Advisory Committee members have met on a monthly basis to learn about Allegheny County's current strategies as a part of the Safety and Justice Challenge project and develop their own recommendations to reduce the jail population and racial disparities. The committee's charge has been to identify gaps in the criminal justice continuum that allow disparities to persist.

The members of the Community Advisory Committee are comprised of diverse stakeholders from the faith-based community, people with lived experiences within the criminal justice system, immigrant and refugee populations, as well as other populations who have been affected by the justice system or who are committed to improving the justice system. The committee was appointed by County Executive, Rich Fitzgerald, and President Judge Kim Clark.

### **Members of the SJC Community Advisory Committee are:**

#### **Monica Ruiz, Executive Director, Casa San Jose**

Monica Ruiz-Caraballo is the Executive Director at Casa San José. Mónica has been working with Casa since 2014 when she started as an intern, then moved to service coordinator and then community organizer. Prior to that, she worked for Catholic Charities as a case manager. She was born in Cleveland Ohio and has Latino roots from Guatemala and Puerto Rico, where her mom and her dad are originally from. Mónica holds a master's degree in Social Work with a focus on Community Organizing and Social Action. She earned her bachelor's degree in Social Work from the University of Pittsburgh with a concentration in Psychology.

#### **Taili Thompson, Director of Violence Prevention Initiative, Operation Better Block**

Taili Thompson leads violence prevention efforts in the region alongside the city of Pittsburgh to help intervene during crime and crisis. Prior to joining Operation Better Block, he served as a Manager for the Office of Violence Prevention in the Allegheny County Health Department. His experience included ten years working for the violence prevention organization, One Vision One

Life. Mr. Thompson also served as the Program Manager for the Pittsburgh Initiative to Reduce Crime (PIRC), for three years. He co-founded Youth Opportunities Development (Y.O.D.) in 2012 with the mission of developing young leaders in communities that had high exposure to the disease of violence. He served as Executive Director of YOD from 2012-2016.

**Kurt Mennitti, Job Developer - ReEntrant Specialist, Pittsburgh Community Services Incorporated**

Kurt Mennitti is the ReEntrant Specialist for Pittsburgh Community Service Inc (PCSI) where he instructs a monthly workshop for individuals with a criminal record. Kurt works with employers and formerly incarcerated individuals to help them translate their lived experience into a meaningful opportunity with employers.

**Val Dixon, Founder & CEO of The Pact (Prevent Another Crime Today) Initiative, Victims Advocate, Center for Victims of Violence and Crime, Vice Chair-Black Political Empowerment Project**

Valerie Dixon, a graduate of Westinghouse High School and a licensed plumber, has been on a mission to bring awareness to critical issues of crime and violence since the death of her one and only son, Robert James Dixon in 2001. She created a billboard campaign called "Prevent Another Crime Before it Happens" with the faces of those that have lost their lives to violence and a \$5,000.00 reward to encourage the community to come forward with information on these crimes. Her work in this field has contributed to 39 arrests, 35 trials, 32 convictions, 2 acquittals, 1 mistrial and approximately \$68,000.00 in cash rewards to date. Valerie is currently the Executive Director of her own organization called the P.A.C.T. Initiative (Prevent Another Crime Today), she's also the Vice chair of B-PEP (Black Political Empowerment Project) and Co-convenor of the Coalition Against Violence which since 2008 has collaboratively created the Coalition Against Violence "Strategies for Change" documents depicting over 800 strategies which could contribute to reducing violence from A to Z. Ms. Dixon's vast work and commitment has led her to be appointed to several state-wide and local committees such as the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (DMC), and the COPCVO (Coalition of Pennsylvania's Crime Victims Organization). Valerie prides herself in the theory that strong collaborations are the only way we are going to make a REAL difference on the issues and concerns of our communities as she continues to work with many other programs and projects throughout Metropolitan Pittsburgh and across Allegheny County. Valerie is an active member of East Liberty Presbyterian Church.

**Dante Works, Executive Director, House of Veterans**

Dante Works, a former Allegheny County Parole and Probation Officer, has worked for the Allegheny County Court of Common Pleas, Western Psychiatric Institutional Clinic, and the Hill House Association. He has a Bachelor of Science degree in Criminal Justice from Virginia State University.

**Cornell Jones, Violence Intervention Coordinator City of Pittsburgh**

Rev. Cornell Jones is a pastor and activist. He is currently the Group Violence Intervention Coordinator for the City of Pittsburgh where he brings outreach teams and law enforcement together to counteract and prevent violence in the Community. Rev. Jones served as the Protestant Chaplain at SCI Pittsburgh Prison (formerly known as Western Penitentiary) for over 10 years.

**Claire Shubik-Richards, Executive Director, PA Prison Society**

An attorney with extensive public policy experience, Shubik-Richards most recently served as Policy and Research Director for the National Campaign to Reform State Juvenile Justice Systems, a Washington D.C.-based advocacy campaign to improve juvenile justice laws around the country. Previously, Shubik-Richards worked at the Pew Charitable Trusts and taught as adjunct faculty at Carnegie Mellon's Heinz College of Public Policy in Pittsburgh. She is a graduate of Vassar College and of Boston University School of Law.

## **Recommendations**

### **Issue: Court Costs and Collections**

**Why it matters:** The Department of Court Records utilizes a collection agency to ensure that unpaid court-ordered fees and fines are collected. When an individual fails to make a payment

on their court-ordered fines and fees for over two years, with notice, they are sent to collections. During the collections process, an additional 25% fee is assessed on top of the owed court costs to fund the administration of the process. This process negatively impacts an individual's credit, jeopardizing their ability to secure a home, a car, and many other important life essentials.

The Community Advisory Committee submits the following recommendations associated with court costs:

- The Fifth Judicial District should develop a standardized method of communication during the Adult Probation interview process and demonstrate a good faith effort to share with individuals on probation about their court costs at the beginning of supervision as well as when their cases are closed if there is a remaining amount.
  - During the intake interview, the assigned probation officer should review an itemized list of court-ordered financial obligations and have the individual on probation sign an agreement that they have reviewed the fines and fees owed to the court with their probation officer.
  - When probation cases are closed with outstanding court costs, Adult Probation should make a documented attempt to communicate the balance of remaining costs to individuals.
- The Fifth Judicial District should formalize and make public a process for removing court costs from collections, in cases where an individual is trying to fulfill his or her court cost obligations.
- The Fifth Judicial District should establish an indigency policy for fees that are not statutorily mandated, and consider a sliding scale for payment based on an individual's income, similar to the sliding scale used for those that are on Electronic Home Monitoring.
- The Fifth Judicial District should forgive a percentage of the \$477 million in uncollected court costs, particularly those associated with marijuana convictions.
- The Fifth Judicial District should determine a process that allows the collections company to negotiate fines and fees that are not mandated by state statute.
- Allegheny County should consider rebidding the contract for the company that collects court costs to ensure that the lowest possible administrative fee is charged and to encourage a diverse group of firms to apply.
- While the Community Advisory Committee understands that the Fifth Judicial District does not have the role of advocate, it is the recommendation of the Community Advisory Committee that court operations be fully funded by the State of Pennsylvania and that they are not funded by the people who are going through the system who are disproportionately black and brown.

**Issue: Language Access for Court-Ordered Programs:**

**Why it matters:** If a defendant is referred to a program that is funded by a government entity (like DHS) or a program that receives federal funding, then those programs would have an obligation under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, to provide language assistance services. However, a gap exists when programs that are needed to fulfill a court order or have charges dismissed are not required to provide services that are accessible to English language learners. Limited English should not be a barrier to individuals completing these programs or services.

The Community Advisory Committee submits the following recommendations associated with ensuring the ability of English language learners to fulfill court requirements:

- The Fifth Judicial District should develop a comprehensive list of frequently court-ordered programs and the languages that they are provided in to give to judges, attorneys, and probation officers.
- The Fifth Judicial District and Allegheny County Department of Human Services should collaborate to identify a central point of contact for English language learners who need to connect to accessible services to fulfill court obligations.
- The Fifth Judicial District and Allegheny County Department of Human Services should collaborate to expand language access for court-ordered services and programs that do not currently provide services for English language learners.

### **Issue: Immigration and Customs Enforcement Policy for the Fifth Judicial District**

**Why it matters:** A person's immigration status should not affect their ability to participate in the court process. When Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) is present, community members fear engaging in the court process, because they worry that instead of being treated as a victim, that they will be punished because of their immigration status. Research has shown that ICE courthouse arrest activity has had a significant impact on court participation and perception of the justice system.<sup>1</sup>

The Community Advisory Committee submits the following recommendation to proactively ensure that an individual's immigration status does not impact their experience of the court system:

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<sup>1</sup> Ceres Policy Research, 2019

The Fifth Judicial District should create a policy to demonstrate its commitment to equitable treatment of all individuals, regardless of immigration status. The policy should clarify that employees of the Fifth Judicial District shall not:

- Assist with federal immigration enforcement activities in the course of their employment, in any courtroom of the Fifth Judicial District
- Inquire into the immigration status of any individual within any courthouse unless such information about a person's immigration status is necessary for the determination of program, service or benefit eligibility or the provision of services.
- Provide any information to immigration enforcement officers regarding persons appearing before the court, such as location of the individual, phone number, or address.

Additionally, the Fifth Judicial District should ensure that employees are trained on the new policy.