

Vera Institute for Justice and Pew Charitable Foundation
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Connecticut Workgroup Session Summary

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The Connecticut workgroup focused much of their discussion and planning activities on identifying issues that would contribute to comprehensive sentencing and corrections reform in the state. The group reached a consensus that there is not a clear understanding of how offenders are moving through the criminal justice system and agreed that there are several specific points that should be the focus of reform. Access to system wide data appears to be a significant obstacle to achieving a comprehensive understanding of current practices. Although there is independent agency level data, the data is not shared among agencies, thus the data may fulfill an agency's needs but not the criminal justice system's needs. The workgroup strongly felt that there needed to be a clear understanding and sharing of data among the courts, probation, corrections and parole to avoid duplication of efforts and to enhance public safety in the state. Listed below are the major issues identified:

- Current agency data is stored in silos and not easily accessed or shared among criminal justice agencies
- There is no clear understanding of what data is being collected by individual agencies and the format in which it is collected – electronic or paper
- There are both technical and administrative barriers to sharing data among criminal justice agencies
- In addition to completing a data inventory for each agency – data deficiencies need to be identified
- Automation of paper files and assessment of storage retrieval issues are necessary
- Agencies should identify what questions they are unable to answer at the current time
- A unique identifier needs to be developed or assigned to identify an offender across agencies and evaluate the impact of various criminal justice interventions

The workgroup was in agreement that as part of the need for significant sentencing and corrections policy changes, it is critical to have a clear and concise understanding of how offenders are entering the system, how long they are in the system and how they are leaving the system.

The data discussion illuminated the need to have a permanent body to evaluate data, policy and practices across criminal justice agencies. The group identified a sentencing commission as a possible vehicle to achieve this goal, although there were some thoughts expressed that a different name for the body may be more appropriate since sentencing commissions are often associated with sentencing guidelines and the group, as a whole, did not support the development of sentencing guidelines. One possible name was the "Sentencing Policy and Research Board" or some variation of that. However, regardless of the name there was agreement that a permanent body was necessary. There was an in-depth discussion on the development of a permanent body that would be effective in CT. Issues regarding the commission were divided into two

categories: (1) Pre-permanent body (The Connecticut Sentencing Task Force already established by PA 06-193) and (2) Post-permanent body.

Discussion regarding the pre-permanent body focused on issues that would need to be addressed in the design and structure. It was important that the body be viewed as objective and non-political, focusing specifically on sentencing and offender based data analysis and providing data driven policy, and outcome evaluation of proposed legislation, enacted programs and policy changes to ensure effective use of limited state resources and enhance public safety within the state. Those issues included:

- Name
- Location – which branch of government
- Membership and appointing authority
- Authority to make policy recommendations
- Duties and responsibilities assigned to the body
- Staff and resource needs

In addition to the issues outlined above, the workgroup identified several priorities that the permanent body, once established, should address to assist both the legislature and the executive branch in effectively addressing criminal justice policy issues. Those priorities include:

- Identify critical data needs and gaps to effectively evaluate criminal justice issues and policies
- Provide a comprehensive overview of the types and movement of offenders through the criminal justice system on a case level basis to include: arrest data, conviction data, sentencing data, probation data, corrections data, parole data and revocation data. This overview should be done on an annual basis and presented to the legislature, executive branch, criminal justice agencies and other appropriate parties
- Conduct research on topics assigned by the legislature or executive branch targeting recidivism, alternatives to incarceration, sentencing options for vulnerable populations or effective community placement/supervision of non-violent offenders
- Provide both fiscal and policy impacts on proposed legislation to evaluate the impact on prison, probation, parole populations, defense and state attorneys and any associated resources (staff or caseload impact) in addition to identifying any potential unintended consequences of the proposal
- Analyze and identify practices or policies that contribute to racial, geographic and gender disparity in sentencing
- Through the use of data analysis and simulation projection models assist the state in preparing for controlled prison growth and community supervision options.

Finally, the group tackled the issue of the availability of offender specific information and risk characteristics needed by decision makers in the criminal justice system. Previous discussions among CT participants have focused on identifying specific offender populations or felony classes that would require mandatory pre-sentence investigations (PSI's) even though additional resources would be required. Subsequent conversations revealed that although PSI's contain some important and valuable offender information, it may be somewhat outdated in the type of information that the current system needs in order to deal with offender related decisions, especially as related to risk factors.

Probation is currently completing a risk/needs assessment but that information is not necessarily available to other criminal justice agencies and does not follow the offender through the system, thus there is no comprehensive record of placements, treatments, interventions and other offender related information. It was suggested that a possible course of action was to combine the significant and predictive information from the pre-sentence investigation report and the risk/needs assessment into one document that would follow the offender from initial contact with the criminal justice system through the final exit from the system – with each agency inputting any actions taken while the offender was in their custody. This would assist the state in developing an extensive database on which both research and policy analysis could be conducted to identify specific offender populations suitable for alternatives to incarceration and the impact specific programs/placements have on recidivism. Cost-benefit analysis could also be conducted on various options for the state of CT. The main points surfaced during this discussion are as follows:

- There is no comprehensive record of offender information that follows the offender through all points of decision making in the criminal justice system; currently various agencies are conducting a variety of offender assessments which makes it difficult to identify or measure the impact of the various interventions
- It is crucial to match offenders with the most appropriate and effective program placements to enhance public safety, reduce recidivism and ensure efficient use of limited state resources
- Recidivism reduction contributes to public safety and the overall effectiveness of the state's criminal justice resources
- Any form developed should be in an electronic format and accessible to all criminal justice agencies
- A working group should be established to begin initial discussions on the information that should be included on this form

Although the workgroup focused on the various activities and issues noted above, the constant that surfaced multiple times was the need for valid reliable data on which to base policy and research to improve the effectiveness of the criminal justice system and to maximize the public safety benefits of limited resources in Connecticut.