

COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

Listening to citizens, respecting lived experiences in Greene County

During the summer of 2021, the Greene County Coalition for Compassionate Justice (GCCCJ), met with five local groups to discuss the criminal legal system here in Greene County, Ohio. We approached existing groups so that we could learn what mattered to them. The groups included: Citizens for a Better Beavercreek, AME Church of Wilberforce, Inclusive Fairborn, Greene County Voices and the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship. Participants in the groups were predominantly white except for our meeting in Xenia with members of the United AME Church.

After introductions all the way around, we talked about personal stories of when a family member or friend was involved with the criminal legal system. Many of the stories described how a family member's lack of medical care while incarcerated had lasting effects. Two people described the deterioration of people with mental illnesses because they did not get their medicine while held in jail. Where drugs and alcohol were concerned, people did not get the help that they needed to stay out of jail.

A woman described the pain of her boyfriend's 16-year-old cousin discovering that his mother had been arrested again.

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"My boyfriend has a 16-year-old cousin that's like a little brother to him because his mom cares for the 16-year-old because the 16-year-old's mom has been dealing with drug abuse since basically he was a little child. Yesterday was his first day of school, for the year, and she was arrested again for drugs. This has been sixteen years, and all it's done is take his mom away. There's been nothing provided to support him. I just think about all the wasted time and resources that go into locking her up over and over and over again that helps nobody."

Punishments were seen as too harsh for what the person was convicted of—for instance, possession of small amounts of marijuana. Participants discussed the damage caused by taking plea bargains to get out of jail, in order to take care of children or to avoid worse consequences by going to trial.

One woman had an uncle who drank heavily, and had accumulated court debts from arrests in the past. When he was arrested again and unable to pay his debts, the judge indicated that he would be incarcerated for a very long time. She ended up paying for his court debts with her credit card. Had she not done that, she said, her uncle would have died in jail.

"I have a number of family and friends who have been incarcerated, mostly over alcohol. What bothers me is instead of treating the sickness, just arrest the person and throw 'em in jail. And they're eventually, hopefully, released and they go right back. It always bothers me to think of a new jail being built, but yet you're not going towards any treatment."

We asked participants to talk about what they would like to see in the Greene County criminal legal system going forward. The consensus in all of the groups was that people should not be put in jail for a mental health crisis or drug related illness and that there should be another intervention put in place to address those problems right when they happen, rather than having

them picked up by the police. People talked about the lack of mental health and drug rehab programs in Greene County, for the general population as well as for those in jail.

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There was a lot of concern about overcharging and the destructive effect of plea bargaining. People were shocked that a man who grabbed his girlfriend's cell phone and hid it in the hollow trunk of a tree was charged with a violent felony, and worse, accepted the plea deal rather than risk going to trial.

"Everyone always says if you go to trial, you'll have a much worse outcome. Maybe 2% of people have a better outcome when going to trial. So he took it. But because it was a \$10,000 bail and he was incarcerated, he couldn't get any resources to support [his case]...the public defender said to me, the prosecutor wants a...victory."

Overcharging and plea deals have led to a deep distrust of the legal system. They discussed the bail bond system needing to be revised so that people weren't held in jail because their families could not afford bail.

Regarding the proposed new jail in Greene County, there was agreement that the current jail is an unhealthy environment and should be taken down. No one in our discussions thought that the jail should be bigger. Some felt that the jail should be replaced by a new building in the hopes of getting additional services later. Others thought that there would be no leverage to get additional services later, once the new building is built.

We concluded our meetings by discussing current efforts at reform, including proposed legislation that is in the Ohio General Assembly to end cash bail for people facing a variety of charges, and the potential for these laws to lower the jail population considerably. This pending legislation is one of the many factors that may influence pretrial justice generally and greatly reduce the number of people held in jail in Greene County.

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