



April 23, 2020

As the COVID-19 crisis hit we had about 1400 people in our two parish jails. We knew we had to try to get as many people out of the jails as possible. On March 13th, I met with the Chief Judge, representatives from law enforcement, and the District Attorney to discuss reducing the jail population. Fortunately, the Chief Judge was proactive. Although the DA was resistant, we left the meeting agreeing to have line defenders and Assistant District Attorneys meet to identify people who should be released. Law enforcement officials agreed to limit arrests to situations where there was an actual public safety issue.

Our defenders compiled a lengthy list of people who should be released either due to medical issues or because of their inability to pay their bonds. The ADAs push back hard. In the end we only agreed on the release of about 100 people. But our lawyers were undeterred. They fought for the release of roughly another 400 people over the state's objection, bringing the jail population down to just over 900.

Beyond this reduction, the judges have not been receptive to lowering bonds for the remaining people. After feeling optimistic about the people, we have been able to get out, our defenders now feel like they have hit a brick wall. Watching people suffer and terrified in jails has taken a toll on our staff. However, our public defender continue to file motions on behalf of these clients setting out individualized reasons why the clients should be released. We haven't won any of these motions, but not for a lack of trying. We try to remember that not accepting injustice is progress, even if we have not yet gotten all the results we are fighting for.

When release seems impossible, we have started to work with the courts to try to get some people moved to drug treatment facilities.

Keeping the team inspired during this pandemic is certainly challenging. To make matters worse, because Louisiana is a "user-funded" system, the closure of court has impacted my funding for the remainder of the fiscal year dramatically. As a result, I was forced to furlough two attorneys and seven support staff. I was struggling with having to make that decision. I was immediately reminded of the selflessness and dedication of our team. The next day, I received calls from one of the attorneys and a legal assistant asking if they could continue doing their work from home during the furlough.

Public defense is not a job; it is a commitment to transforming our criminal legal system.

Story provided by:

John Lindner

Chief Public Defender

22nd Judicial Circuit Public Defender Office (St. Tammany and Washington Parishes)