

For the 2020 County Commissioner's Association of Pennsylvania (CCAP) CJAB Best Practices Award, I nominate Montgomery County from the Eastern region of Pennsylvania.

The Montgomery County CJAB was established in June 2008. The mission of the CJAB is to "examine and address criminal justice issues from a systemic and policy perspective and recommend ways in which public safety agencies and private organizations can efficiently, effectively and collaboratively deliver criminal justice programs throughout those communities encompassed by Montgomery County."

For 22 years, the CJAB meets its mission each year by creating collaborative, innovative solutions to address the issues that mire all county criminal justice systems. However, its proximity to Philadelphia as a bordering neighbor creates its own set of challenges, for which this CJAB constantly adapts its goals to meet those burdens. In addition to addressing local issues, the CJAB members also lend their voices to bring attention to shared issues of Commonwealth counties, such as IP Level 2 offenders having the greatest need, and likely to be the most successful, if Intermediate Punishment was available to them. Additionally, they were a leading voice in the wait time for forensic bed dates and other important issues.

Montgomery County has a robust and successful treatment court structure. The drug treatment court was formed in 2006 under the contagiously enthusiastic leadership of Judge Steven O'Neill. In addition to intensive treatment, participants receive compassionate judicial support and encouragement from this judge who holds a strong conviction that his participants will be successful in turning their lives around. Judging by the hundreds of graduates his court has produced, with a very low rate of recidivism, he's right in his beliefs. In addition to being an active and equally enthusiastic member of the CJAB, Judge O'Neill has won numerous awards for his leadership and trailblazing efforts, not only in his county but on a statewide level as well. The Montgomery County Drug Court program is a well-known go-to for any other Pennsylvania county wishing to start a drug court. The partnerships, collaboration and communication that evolved from the creation of this successful court program created an excellent platform on which the CJAB now operates with an effective system of engagement and collaboration.

The drug court program and the CJAB became a springboard for many other successful collaborations. In 2010, the county's Restrictive Intermediate Punishment program was merged with the drug treatment court to help improve the outcomes, one of the first counties in Pennsylvania to do so. A behavioral court as formed in 2008, and the CJAB and a series of grants from PCCD supported the continuing development of this court. In 2011, the county added a Veteran's Court to its treatment court structure. They also created a veteran's mentoring program through the Montgomery County Bar Association to link veteran attorneys with court participants to provide free legal support. In 2018, the CJAB supported the creation of the Targeted Opioid Phase Program (TOP), a fast track for opioid-addicted participants engaged in the drug and behavioral health courts that provides early intervention, pre-trial programming and as other support. The program identifies candidates entering Montgomery County Correctional Facility (MCCF) who have a heroin/opioid use disorder, links them with an attorney and, if eligible, participants are released from MCCF and placed in treatment within two weeks. Between the drug, behavioral health and veteran's courts, over 105,000 jail days were saved in 2018.

Other CJAB successes include the fact that Montgomery County was one of the first counties to sign a resolution for Stepping Up and has since been named an innovator county. While it was later in developing a reentry coalition, Montgomery pulled the existing resources and community partners already doing reentry before the creation of a formal group, and recently completed a Reentry Risk and Needs assessment to identify barriers to successful reintegration as well as working with PCCD to create a plan.

The county is also involved in the Goldring Initiative through the University of Pennsylvania School of Social Work. This program, established in 2011, works to ensure successful reentry following incarceration by addressing the epidemic of mass incarceration and the many barriers individuals incarcerated in the Philadelphia Department of Prisons (PDP) face upon release. The program employs Master of Social Work students to address the barriers to successful reentry using a person-centered and holistic approach.

As a neighbor of Philadelphia, Montgomery County works collaboratively with the City to provide effective transfer and supervision of clients. Recently, the county began working with Philly's JEVs program, which targets low-level drug dealers, ages 18-25, who are not drug or alcohol addicted and who basically sell drugs to earn a living. The program takes the offenders, who are facing felony charges, out of prison and gives them 1 year of an ARD-type probation where they are provided with job skills and other training. During their period of probation, they must either find and maintain a full-time job for the full year or be enrolled in school.

Perhaps, however, the greatest asset of the Montgomery County CJAB is not only its membership, but its leadership as well. Their President Judge Thomas Del Ricci is actively involved in the CJAB, along with several other judges who provide quarterly reports to the membership about the treatment court successes. Clerk of Courts Michael Kehs has successfully orchestrated the CJAB as a coordinator since its inception in 2008. Many other members who sit at the table today were there for the first meeting 22 years ago, yet the membership is constantly evolving to include community and other partners.

In November 2019, Commissioner Valerie Arkoosh was re-elected to a second term as Chair of the Montgomery County Commissioners. She is an impassioned and active member of the CJAB, leading the charge for many of its important initiatives. One of these initiatives is the creation of a pre-trial program, of which Commissioner Arkoosh is leading the charge. At a recent CJAB meeting, President Judge Del Ricci commended the Commissioner for her dedicated and passionate advocacy and support of the creation of the pre-trial program, which he feels is one of the most important CJAB initiative to date. The Commissioners recently funded a Director of Supervision Services to support this initiative. They also recently trained the MDJs in pretrial services and many of those judges are so supportive, they offered to be pilot sites for the new programs that will be put in place. The Commissioner was instrumental in the county's ID program, working with PennDOT to assist sentenced inmates to apply for photo IDs. She was also instrumental in helping develop the Medically Assisted Treatment services in MCCF. As a physician, she is especially focused on criminal justice and health-related issues, such as the opioid epidemic. She has a great working relationship with key stakeholders and is able to make great strides in the CJAB initiatives along with other county personnel. She serves as a great example of how much a CJAB can get done when a county leader is an active and engaged member of the Board. Because of the Commissioner and her CJAB partners, the county is enjoying the lowest prison population since 2005, knowing that offenders' needs are being addressed from the point of pre-entry through reintegration into the community. As the third largest county in the Commonwealth and its proximity to Philadelphia, it is important that Montgomery County stay as much on the cutting edge of criminal justice and behavioral health innovation, and as a result of the best practice initiative-driven focus of this CJAB, and its very active and engaged leaders and members, it does just that.

*To document its successes each year, the CJAB produces an impressive, bound annual report for both the adult and juvenile systems. I will be happy to share this report if you would like to see it.*