



Spotlight on Sheriffs

Police Executive Research Forum

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Reform Efforts in the Denver Sheriff Department

Like other sheriffs' agencies across the United States, the Denver Sheriff Department (DSD) faces a range of challenges in managing its jail population and keeping both staff and inmates safe. Under the leadership of Sheriff Patrick Firman, the DSD has undertaken a reform initiative over the last three years to enhance operations, improve the care and treatment of inmates, and ensure the safety of personnel.

A major push for reform at DSD began in 2014 after several lawsuits were filed against the department alleging excessive use of force. Denver



Mayor Michael Hancock initiated a top-to-bottom review of DSD that included four task forces of community leaders and former law enforcement officials, Denver's Office of the Independent Monitor, and two consulting firms, Hillard Heintze and OIR Group.¹ These groups produced hundreds of

Continued on page 3

1. "City of Denver picks 2 firms to evaluate Denver Sheriff Department -- Hillard Heintze & OIR Group." The Denver Channel, Oct. 16, 2014. <https://www.thedenverchannel.com/news/local-news/city-of-denver-picks-2-firms-to-evaluate-denver-sheriff-department-hillard-heintze-oir-group>

About This Series

As part of PERF's Sheriffs Initiative, researchers are conducting site visits to sheriffs' offices around the country in order to study and document their operations and share innovative practices with the profession.

At the invitation of Sheriff Patrick Firman, PERF staff members Dan Alioto and Allison Heider visited the Denver Sheriff Department in May 2018. They met with Sheriff Firman and Dr. Sasha Rai, Director of Behavioral Health, and were briefed about

the agency's challenges and recent reform efforts. PERF Project Assistant Nora Coyne assisted with this publication.

Future editions of *Spotlight on Sheriffs* will report on other agencies across the country.

About the Denver Sheriff Department

Unlike most sheriffs in the United States, the sheriff in Denver is not an elected position. Rather, the sheriff is appointed by the Mayor of Denver.

Sheriff Patrick Firman was appointed by Mayor Michael Hancock in October 2015, following a 25-year career of uniformed patrol and jail management experience. Sheriff Firman began his career in 1990 as a detention deputy in the Lake County, IL Sheriff's Office. He went on to serve as Deputy Chief and Chief of Corrections in Lake County from 2000 to 2009, and then as Deputy Chief of Corrections in the McHenry County, IL Sheriff's Office from 2009 to 2014. Sheriff Firman has taught courses on corrections issues as an adjunct professor at the College of Lake County and Trinity International University, both in the Chicago metropolitan area.



Sheriff Patrick Firman

Along with the Police and Fire Departments, the Denver Sheriff Department (DSD) is part of Denver's Department of Public Safety. The DSD's responsibilities include jail operations, security for the court system, transportation of state prison inmates, extradition services, fugitive and K-9 units, and a Community Corrections and Work Release Facility. The department is accredited by the American Correctional Association, the National Commission on Correctional Health Care, and the Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies.

As of October 2018, the DSD employed approximately 1,123 personnel, including 870 detention employees. The DSD has an annual operating budget of approximately \$142 million.

The DSD operates two jails in Denver, which have a combined average daily population of almost 2,200 inmates. The Downtown Detention Center (DDC), located at the courthouse, serves as the county's inmate intake center. Arrestees are housed there until they post bail or go to trial. The DDC has a capacity of 1,500 inmates. The second facility is the county jail, which can hold 830 inmates. The jail holds offenders who have been sentenced or are awaiting transfer to the state prison system.

The DDC and the jail each have their own issues and challenges. The DDC manages a greater proportion of individuals who have immediate needs for medical or mental health care or substance abuse treatment.

Additional information is available at <https://www.denvergov.org/content/denvergov/en/sheriff-department.html>

Twitter: @DenverSheriff. Facebook: www.facebook.com/denversheriffsdepartment/

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recommendations for DSD on use of force, discipline, complaint investigations, and other areas.²

The report by Hillard Heintze and OIR Group issued 14 findings (including findings on a number of strengths and innovative programs) and 277 recommendations, which were organized into nine categories:³

- Leadership, Supervision and Strategic Planning
- Organization and Administration
- Jail Management and Operations
- Staffing and Performance Optimization
- Training
- Human Resources
- Technology
- Emergency Preparedness
- Community Engagement

A new sheriff to implement reforms: One of the key areas requiring reform was leadership and supervision throughout the department, and Hillard Heintze recommended hiring a new sheriff from outside of the organization. That recommendation led to Sheriff Firman’s hiring in 2015. Sheriff Firman was tasked with implementing the range of recommendations from the consultants and the task forces. As of September 2018, DSD had taken action on a large majority of the recommendations. Some remaining recommendations relate to a multi-year Jail Management Software project that is projected to be completed by the end of 2019.⁴

Culture change: In addition to updating many DSD policies, procedures, and practices, DSD is working toward bringing about a major culture change within the department. “Major change is hard,” he said; one challenge was that some deputies felt that reform plans suggested that DSD cared more about the inmates than the deputies. Sheriff Firman emphasized that the changes were designed to increase officer safety as well as inmate safety.

The jail experienced an increase in inmate assaults on staff members, which some attributed to confusion about the new policies and deputies’



In Crisis Intervention Training, a role player is dressed as an inmate in crisis, and the responding correctional staff member demonstrates how he would work to communicate with the inmate and stabilize the situation. Staff members are rotated through such scenarios during the training.

concerns about being disciplined for not following the policies. However, after reviewing the assault data, DSD learned that a majority of the attacks involved inmates with mental health issues, so the department focused on training deputies to manage those types of encounters.

Next Step: Increased Training

The new policies and procedures adopted in the reform process called upon deputies to attempt to de-escalate many types of situations. Department leaders knew if deputies were to be successful at de-escalation, the department needed to provide more training and give deputies additional tools to effectively defuse different types of encounters.

Crisis Intervention training: To begin with, the Sheriff made a 40-hour Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) training program mandatory for all deputies. Rather than phasing in the training over years, he sought and received funding that allowed him to fast-track the training. And to ensure that all new employees receive the same instruction, the CIT training is now incorporated into the deputies’ probationary year.

2. “New Vision, Brighter Future: The Denver Sheriff Department. Transforming the Leadership, Operations and Culture of the Department.” Hillard Heintze LLC, May 21, 2015. <http://bit.ly/1JE0Dqw>

3. Ibid., page 11. See also “Denver Releases Independent Recommendations to Reform the Sheriff Department.” Denver Mayor’s Office news release, May 21, 2015. <https://www.denvergov.org/content/denvergov/en/mayors-office/newsroom/2015/denver-releases-independent-recommendations-to-reform-the-sherif.html>

4. The City of Denver tracks implementation of the reform recommendations on its website: <https://www.denvergov.org/content/denvergov/en/mayors-office/programs-initiatives/sheriff-department-reform.html>.



The DSD's Change Pod is a programming unit that focuses transition resources, such as drug treatment and educational programs, on inmates who are motivated to make better decisions and create positive change in their lives.

DSD Captain Shayne Grannum, a national CIT trainer, helped to lead the department-wide training effort. One adjustment that DSD made was to use a detention-specific curriculum for jail staff members. The classroom (academic) part of the detention-based training is the same as in the patrol-based CIT program. However, different scenarios are used in the scenario-based exercises; the detention-based CIT focuses on situations that deputies are likely to encounter in a correctional setting.

Increasing deputies' confidence: According to Captain Grannum, the CIT training has increased deputies' confidence in responding to incidents involving persons in a mental health crisis. "Crisis Intervention Team training has had a profound effect on our deputies' level of comfort when interacting with inmates with mental illness," he said. "Our deputies are now better educated and equipped to identify the behaviors of individuals living with a mental illness. They are more comfortable in their approach and communication skills for addressing someone in crisis."

In addition to the full 40-hour CIT curriculum, the DSD now devotes eight hours every year for mental health training. In 2017, this training time was devoted to a Mental Health First Aid course.

Engaging the Community and Promoting Peaceful Interactions Between Deputies and Inmates

Captain Grannum works to build relationships with the community as well. During CIT training, he

takes deputies to mental health "drop-in centers" – facilities where people who live with mental health challenges can go to socialize in a supportive environment. Drop-in centers have activities such as yoga and meditation, playing musical instruments, cooking classes, billiards, creative arts, etc. Denver Sheriff's deputies are out of uniform when they visit drop-in centers, so they appear more approachable.

A recent meeting of Denver Sheriff's captains was held at the Harm Reduction Action Center, a community organization that provides advocacy and services to persons with drug addictions. Captain Grannum said the site visit helped the captains better understand the individuals they encounter on a daily basis who use drugs.

Using a direct supervision model: As part of a "culture shift" within the department, Sheriff Firman is also working to change how deputies view their interactions with inmates. He wants his deputies to see more of the human side of inmates, while maintaining deputies' safety. One approach has been to expand the "direct supervision" model within the jail. (The direct supervision model is intended to increase the amount of time that inmates spend in open areas interacting with deputies, rather than isolated in locked cells.⁵) By providing more opportunities for staff and inmates to engage in non-confrontational settings, direct supervision can reduce incidents of violence within the facility and support inmate programming.

Another approach has been to provide deputies with more information about the inmates they supervise. In the past, for example, detention deputies were not always informed of the charges an inmate was facing. Now, deputies are given that information, which helps them to understand who they are dealing with, so they can more safely and effectively approach inmates and build rapport with them. The importance of deputy-inmate interactions, safety, and security is stressed at all levels.

Hiring and Retention of Personnel: A Focus on Wellness

The consultants' reports identified weaknesses in the recruiting, hiring, and retention of employees in the Denver Sheriff Department. At the time of its analysis, Hillard Heintze found that DSD was short 47 deputy positions, 34 of which were "unfunded,"

5. "Direct Supervision Jails." National Institute of Corrections web page. <https://nicic.gov/direct-supervision-jails>

meaning they had to be filled by mandatory overtime among current deputies. Deputies were sometimes working 16-hour shifts due to staffing shortages.

DSD has worked to increase the size of the department and address the staffing shortages. In 2016, Sheriff Firman's first full year as sheriff, DSD hired 100 deputies. DSD has experienced a turnover rate close to the number of annual hires for several years, so while these additional hires were greatly needed by the agency, the department is still about 35 deputies short, operating at 89% of recommended staffing levels.

Training less experienced officers: Stepped-up hiring of deputies has had an impact on the demographics of the sheriff department; overall, DSD deputies today are younger and less experienced than in the past. Of the 800 sworn deputies working in the jails and courts, 28% started at DSD in 2016 or later. This has created a challenge for the agency to ensure that staff members are well-trained and that they receive the support and guidance they need to effectively carry out their duties.

Making sure recruits understand the nature of the work: Like other law enforcement agencies, DSD also faces challenges in retaining deputies. Some incoming deputies have not fully understood what the job entails, and they tend to leave the department soon after starting. To address this situation, Sheriff Firman and DSD have increased efforts to ensure that recruits have a thorough understanding of the job. DSD now requires that recruit candidates tour the jail facilities, to get a better sense of the nature of the job. The agency also has changed its recruiting materials to more accurately reflect the job of deputies.

Wellness benefits: To increase deputy retention, DSD is focusing on staff wellness programs. DSD offers physical wellness benefits, such as fitness classes and access to free physical therapy. The DSD created a Wellness Coordinator position in 2016. This position is staffed by a deputy who understands the demands of the job and the benefits of fitness, financial well-being, and mental wellness. The DSD also has an Employee Outreach Program (EOP) that provides a hub of information about free and confidential resources for sworn and civilian staff members. The EOP connects staff with resources that will help with their professional and personal success. Staff can self-refer or anonymously refer another employee to the EOP. The EOP

also analyzes indicators that can help identify when employees may be in need of assistance or resources.

Data Collection and Analysis

To support its reform efforts, DSD has worked to be proactive in collecting data and anticipating how, when, and why problems may arise. DSD created a Data Science Unit to lead these efforts. It is staffed by civilian data analysts and serves as the clearinghouse for all data generated in the department.

For example, the unit helped Sheriff Firman understand why so much overtime—about \$14 million a year—was used in previous years. After reviewing the data, the Data Science Unit found that 80 percent of overtime spending was the result of staffing shortages. Data collected has helped supervisors manage how overtime is utilized, resulting in significant savings. Even though DSD continues to be understaffed, the additional hires reduced overtime spending by \$1 million from 2016 to 2017, and the department is on track to reduce it by another \$1 million in 2018.

Removing logjams at intake: The Data Science Unit also analyzes processes to increase efficiency and reduce costs. The unit discovered that due to a backlog in the classification of inmates at intake, more deputies were needed to supervise inmates waiting to complete that step. The Data Science Unit's findings resulted in the streamlining of several classification processes, which sped up the process and reduced the need for personnel, thereby cutting overtime costs during the classification process.

The Data Science Unit also studied "length of stay" data for inmates, and found that inmates with a mental health condition were staying nearly three



A 2017 Academy Class graduation ceremony.

times longer than other inmates. Inmates with mental illness tend to have a combination of other issues, including substance abuse and limited employment histories, that make it more difficult for them to obtain pretrial release on bond. DSD is exploring options with the court system and other agencies to prevent unnecessarily lengthy incarcerations of persons with mental illness.

Factors that result in use of force: This unit also explored use of force within the facility, looking closely at the details of assaults that took place inside the facility. The review revealed that 60% of the detention deputies' uses of force were directly related to breaking up fights between inmates. Younger deputies were also found to be involved in proportionally more use-of-force incidents. Most assaults on employees were committed by inmates on a mental health alert. This information was shared with the DSD training academy, so it could develop updated training for both new recruits and experienced deputies.

Overall, the Data Science Unit is helping DSD identify issues it needs to address to improve its management of facilities. To further increase efficiency and accountability, DSD has an internal inspections unit that conducts audits on various issues and helps DSD address problems as they arise.

Managing a Changing Inmate Population

Like many sheriffs' departments that manage jails, DSD has experienced an increase in the number of inmates with severe mental illness, to the point that the jail has become one of Denver's largest mental health facilities. Sixteen percent of inmates are on antipsychotic medication, and 30% are on some sort of psychotropic medication. To address these challenges, DSD has built a strong partnership with Denver Health, a local hospital, and the jail receives discounted pricing on medication through the 340b insurance program. Under the 340b program, pharmaceutical manufacturers must enter into an agreement with the Department of Health and Human Services to provide a front-end discount on certain outpatient drugs for specified providers like Denver Health. Denver Health also staffs 15 inmate beds in a secure unit in the lower level of its main facility, which is outside the DSD jail complex.

Increase in female inmates: DSD also has seen an increase in the female inmate population, largely as a result of substance abuse. Many of the women in DSD custody have a history of trauma and use

substances as a coping mechanism. In response, DSD is developing a gender-specific, trauma-centered facility to serve this growing population of women inmates. The entire staff at this jail (and eventually all DSD personnel) will receive training on trauma-informed practices. The training will be coordinated and conducted by the city's Office of Behavioral Health Strategies. The facility will have a lactation area for new mothers, and the design and furnishings will have a less institutional appearance than a typical detention facility. This facility will also have programming specifically geared toward its female population.

Drug and Mental Health Treatment Programs

Another major focus of DSD is on drug treatment services within the jail. Although the jail does not track people who report substance use issues, addiction is prevalent among detainees. DSD is one of approximately 20 jails in the country that utilize a complete Medication-Assisted Treatment (MAT) program. Vivitrol, buprenorphine, and methadone are available to inmates with opioid addictions. If a new inmate coming into the facility is currently using methadone, the jail staff verifies the dosage and provides the same medication during the inmate's stay in jail. DSD does not attempt to detoxify an individual who comes into jail on methadone.

Arrestees entering the facility while currently taking suboxone (a combination of buprenorphine and naloxone) continue to receive the same dosage, as with methadone. Upon release, medical staff working with DSD provide a prescription to help bridge the time until the individual can get to a medical facility for evaluation and treatment. If someone comes into jail in withdrawal, medical staff in the jail use buprenorphine as a withdrawal/taper agent.

Reducing drug withdrawal: Dr. Sasha Rai, Director of DSD's Behavioral Health Program, indicated that the MAT program has been successful in decreasing the number of inmates experiencing withdrawal. This is significant because withdrawal can cause additional problems, such as extreme discomfort for the inmate, the need for jail staff to closely monitor individuals for symptoms, and in some cases, death. When an individual is released from jail, medical staff can provide a 30-day prescription paid for by DSD.

Working with a hospital: MAT and related programs are possible because of the strong relationship between DSD and Denver Health. The

two agencies work together to ensure that inmates receive the treatment they need, with necessary protections. For example, to prevent the diversion of medications entering the jail, DSD and Denver Health have safeguards in place, including dispensing drugs through a dissolvable sheet placed under the tongue.

Similar protocols are used for inmates entering the jail who are taking medication for mental illness. Upon intake, every inmate undergoes a thorough mental health and medical screening. If there are signs of mental illness, or if inmates indicate they are on medication for mental illness, they are forwarded to the psychiatric nurse for a more focused mental health evaluation. The nurse also follows up with the inmate in a few days, and based on the immediacy of need, the individual may be placed in the Behavioral Health Program. At any given time, at least one-third of the jail inmate population is on medications for mental health issues.

A full counseling team to help inmates:

Counseling is another important part of the DSD's approach to drug abuse and mental illness. Denver Health supplies a full counseling team of approximately two dozen psychiatrists, psychologists, and other behavioral health treatment providers. The Mental Health Center of Denver and the Colorado Homeless Coalition also come to the jail to conduct outreach to inmates. Individuals can be referred to group and individual therapy by staff members at the jails. Therapy typically occurs once the individual is at the county jail and is more stable mentally, physically, and emotionally.

Re-Entry Programs Aim to Reduce Recidivism

Providing re-entry opportunities for inmates leaving jail is a priority for DSD. The department continues to seek improvements in addressing the needs of inmates, their families, and community stakeholders. DSD provides assessment and transition specialists at the downtown detention center to determine what re-entry services may be beneficial to the inmate. Program services types include:

- Educational
- Substance abuse
- Cognitive behavioral education
- Behavioral health
- Health and wellness
- Vocational and employment assistance
- Medication assisted treatment
- Religious services.

Re-entry planning begins immediately:

Re-entry planning begins as soon as inmates enter the jail. DSD assessment and transition specialists at the downtown detention center screen and assess inmates as they enter jail to evaluate their needs for re-entry resources and eventual transition back to the community. In addition, through its Life Skills program, DSD provides re-entry case managers at the county jail to work with inmates and assist in transition planning. DSD also collaborates with the city's re-entry services provider, the Transition from Jail to Community Collaborative, to support the transition from jail to community. This collaborative provides services inside the jails and works with former inmates when they are back in the community.

Community Outreach and Partnerships

Diversion of minor drug offenders: Although it is primarily a jail-focused agency, DSD conducts community outreach with other public safety agencies in Denver. DSD works with the Denver Police Department's co-responder program to divert individuals from jail who have substance use issues when police encounter these individuals on the street for low-level offenses. The program pairs a patrol deputy with a mental health professional from a community organization. Instead of arresting low-level offenders, the police officer and mental health professional work to get the person into treatment or programming. This diversion program has helped to reduce the jail population.

In 2017, DSD created the Sheriff Advisory Board. This board serves as a formal mechanism to strengthen relationships between the community and DSD, with a focus on inmate safety, services, and re-entry. Board members come from various community organizations, with expertise in criminal justice, mental health, addiction, and homelessness.

Special populations: Additional community-based initiatives are in the works. For example, the department created a new policy on interacting with transgender inmates, which DSD plans to share with other law enforcement agencies. DSD is also working to build relationships with the LGBTQ community, Orthodox Jews, and mental health care consumers, among others.

DSD maintains an active Twitter account (@DenverSheriff), with more than 8,000 followers, that focuses on jail information as well as safety tips and other topics for community members,

including domestic violence, traffic safety, and assistance programs for residents.

Conclusion

After joining DSD in 2015, Sheriff Firman was faced with a daunting challenge: implement hundreds of recommendations to reform the department. Over the past three years, DSD has worked to address these and other challenges.

A **focus on training** has been instrumental in providing deputies with additional tools for working with inmates. As DSD works to reduce uses of force within the jails, command leaders have recognized the need to give deputies other options. A key advancement is the use of a detention-specific **Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) training** curriculum for managing inmates with mental illness.

DSD also is stepping up recruitment and hiring of new deputies to **reduce staffing shortages** that have plagued DSD for years. New programs are also in place to help the department retain employees, with an emphasis on physical and mental health wellness programs.

DSD also has sharply increased its **data analysis** capabilities. A new Data Science Unit is providing invaluable information in several areas, including reducing uses of force that result from inmates' mental illnesses.

Inmates are a transient population, and the makeup of the jails is constantly changing. Sheriff Firman has **partnered with a local hospital**, Denver Health, to address the mental health and substance abuse issues that DSD's two jails face. This partnership allows DSD to offer full Medication Assisted Treatment (MAT) to inmates, who also receive a full mental health assessment upon intake



In 2018 DSD held a Special Olympics Basketball Tournament fund-raiser.

to help ensure they receive the resources they need while incarcerated.

DSD also has several **community partnerships** to help inmates successfully re-enter the community, including the Transition from Jail to Community Collaborative. DSD also works with the Denver Police Department to conduct community outreach. DSD personnel are in the community, including places such as the Harm Reduction Action Center, to build positive relationships with members of the Denver community.

DSD also is working to open a new **women's facility** with several features and programs specific to the needs of the female inmate population, especially those who have experienced trauma.

Under Sheriff Firman's guidance and leadership, and with the support of the entire staff, DSD has taken many positive steps and has implemented innovative programs that are helping to improve the safety of both deputies and inmates.



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