



Spotlight on Sheriffs

Police Executive Research Forum

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Spotlight on Dakota County Sheriff's Office

Intro

The Dakota County, MN Sheriff's Office (DCSO) is a full-service law enforcement agency that has encountered many of the same challenges that law enforcement across the country have faced over the last few years. The DCSO has had to manage the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, both in their jail as well as with deputies in their patrol, investigative, and specialized units. They have also had to manage fallout from the George Floyd protests in neighboring Minneapolis and Saint Paul. Sheriff Tim Leslie and the DCSO worked through those challenges with innovative programming, technology and collaboration with other agencies.

Adapting to Recent Challenges: COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a major challenge that law enforcement agencies across the country have had to confront. Many sheriffs' offices have had the unique challenge of not only preventing

their members from contracting the virus but also protecting against the virus's spread inside their jails and keeping inmates healthy. At the time of PERF's visit in November 2021, since the start of the pandemic, the Dakota County Jail had only 20 positive COVID-19 cases out of over 10,000 bookings.

Sheriff Leslie attributed the relatively low number of cases to his staff's proactivity in preventing the virus from entering the jail. The DCSO focused on several initiatives that reduced the virus's spread. These included:

1. **Collaborating with regional law enforcement:**

In Spring 2020, Sheriff Leslie worked with sheriffs in the region – the Scott, Washington, Carver, and Goodhue County Sheriffs' Offices – to create a mutual agreement on how to respond to any outbreaks of COVID beyond an individual jail's ability to respond. To protect both law enforcement personnel and inmates, the sheriffs agreed to work cooperatively if one of the jails became impacted by COVID.

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About This Series

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

by the support of the Howard G. Buffett Foundation.

At the invitation of Sheriff Tim Leslie, PERF staff members Dan Alioto and Matt Harman visited the Dakota County, MN Sheriff's Office in November 2021. Alioto

and Harman met with Sheriff Leslie, Chief Deputy Joe Leko, Commander Patrick Enderlein, and Sergeant Jacob Schak. PERF toured DCSO's Headquarters, Jail, and the Safety and Mental Health Alternative Response Training (SMART) Center.

About the Dakota County Sheriff's Office

Dakota County is located in the Minneapolis–Saint Paul metropolitan area of Minnesota. It covers 587 square miles and has a population of approximately 425,000. The county seat is located in the city of Hastings.¹

The Dakota County Sheriff's Office has nearly 200 employees and is organized into two divisions: Operations and Detention Services. Operations includes the civil, investigations, and patrol divisions. Detention Services includes the court security, jail, and transport divisions.² The Dakota County Jail houses up to 263 inmates.³

Sheriff Tim Leslie started his law enforcement career with the Saint Paul Police Department. He has served as Sheriff since 2015. Prior to being elected Sheriff, he was an Assistant Commissioner at the MN Department of Public Safety and Chief Deputy for Dakota County.



Sheriff Tim Leslie



Grand opening of the Dakota County Safety and Mental Health Alternative Response Training (SMART) Center (**top left**)

DCSO command staff at a Domestic and Sexual Violence Awareness Luncheon held by 360 Communities, a local non-profit (**above**)

The Jail Resource Fair, when DCSO brings representatives from area resources that help inmates transition away from incarceration (**left**)

1. <https://www.co.dakota.mn.us/About/Pages/default.aspx>

2. <https://www.co.dakota.mn.us/Government/Sheriff/Divisions/Pages/default.aspx>

3. <https://www.co.dakota.mn.us/LawJustice/Jail/Pages/default.aspx>

The sheriffs' offices would spread their responsibilities across the five jails. For example, one jail could be responsible for new prisoner intake, another jail could house those inmates who had been sentenced and were awaiting transfer, and another jail could house those convicted and serving sentences. While the five sheriffs' offices never had to enact this plan, the Joint Power Agreements (JPAs) they created serve as a model should similar cooperative actions be needed in the future.

- 2. Reducing the chance of COVID entering the jail:** The DCSO adjusted their inmate intake process to help prevent COVID from entering in the jail. The DCSO ensured that their members were following CDC recommendations throughout the pandemic. They had registered nurses work during all shifts in the jail. Nurses also assisted during the intake and quarantine stage by administering tests and monitoring for COVID symptoms.

In addition, during the classification process, the DCSO used a separate housing unit where all new arrestees would be quarantined for 14 days, regardless of whether they were showing symptoms. Both nurses and deputies would monitor the inmates for symptoms. After 14 days, the inmates were required to take a COVID test. If the test came back negative, they would be placed in a more permanent housing unit. If an inmate tested positive during that time, they moved to isolation and continued to be monitored by the jail's medical staff. To further prevent the spread of COVID, small groups of inmates were allowed out of their cells in hourly intervals, rather than allowing all inmates to interact with one another.

Finally, all jail visitations were already conducted virtually prior to the pandemic. As a result, the DCSO did not need to adjust its policy and practice once COVID hit.

- 3. Reducing jail population:** To help reduce the risk of the virus spreading in the jail, the DCSO implemented a plan for reducing the overall jail population during the pandemic. The DCSO worked with partner agencies to determine who needed to be in jail during that time and who could be released.

DCSO Commander Patrick Enderlein met with the Chief Judge and members of the County Attorney's Office and the Community

Corrections Department to devise a plan for reducing the jail population during COVID. The group set criteria for who truly needed to be in jail during the pandemic and realized that other entities in the justice system, such as community corrections, could handle many non-violent arrestees once they were booked.

DCSO created a workgroup which included the Chief District Court Judge as well as representatives from the County Attorney's Office and Community Corrections Department. The group used a combination of a risk-assessment tool and considered other factors related to each inmate. The inmate group was looked at in its entirety, including those who were held on pretrial status as well as those who were already convicted and serving sentences. Those factors included how much time an inmate had left on their sentence, if they had medical concerns that made them at-risk for contracting COVID, the nature of the crime the inmate committed, and the impact to any crime victims.

Many of those who were in jail awaiting trial went on electronic monitoring or were placed in a pretrial diversion program. On February 2, 2020, the DCSO reported having 282 inmates in jail. By May 2, 2020, the jail was down to just 71 inmates.

Sheriff Leslie obtained a court order allowing him to quash non-violent misdemeanor warrants issued in Dakota County. If a misdemeanor suspect came into contact with law enforcement, they would not need to be arrested, transferred, and booked at the DCSO jail reducing the intake of arrestees.

- 4. Reducing the chances of COVID spreading inside the jail:** During the height of the pandemic, the DCSO leaders met twice a day to stay informed on the COVID numbers among deputies and within the jail. The DCSO adjusted strategies and implemented procedures based on the evolving information. The DCSO developed a step-by-step guide with protocols for safely operating the jail during the pandemic and drafted multiple contingency plans depending on the scenario. Staff also adjusted program activities in the jail. One of the biggest adjustments was to the Inmates Motivated to Change program, which provides educational opportunities to inmates (see next page). Instead

of cancelling classes entirely, the DCSO shifted to conducting classes virtually. Class instructors taught remotely while inmates sat socially distanced in the jail's gym.

Adapting to Recent Challenges: The Murder of George Floyd

In June 2020, a few months into the pandemic, the DCSO, along with law enforcement across the country, faced a new challenge – responding to the killing of George Floyd as well as the civil unrest that followed.

1. **Law enforcement response to protests:** Since Dakota County is a suburb of Minneapolis and Saint Paul, MN, the Sheriff's Office was impacted differently than other areas of the country. While Dakota County has approximately 425,000 residents, there is no one large municipality like Minneapolis or Saint Paul within the county that became the focal point of protest activity. For DCSO, the challenge involved monitoring and responding to any protest activity in the county while also providing mutual aid support to more urban areas that were experiencing large-scale demonstrations. While responding to protest activity within areas of the county closest to Saint Paul, the DCSO provided riot response assistance to Saint Paul in the immediate aftermath of George Floyd's murder on May 25, 2020 and provided support leading up to the trial of former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin.

Immediately following George Floyd's death, Sheriff Leslie and the DCSO participated in weekly meetings with other chiefs from around the region. The DCSO trained with the Saint Paul Police Department and formed the East Metro Response Group (EMRG). Other agencies in the EMRG included the Washington, Ramsey, and Rice County sheriffs' offices, the Minnesota State Patrol, the Minnesota National Guard, the Metro Transit Police, the Saint Paul Fire Department, and local police agencies from those counties.

The DCSO said it required a lot of time, effort, and collaboration to set up and operate the EMRG, but it resulted in a successful response protocol and created strong relationships among the law enforcement officials in the region. The EMRG continues to meet and prepare for situations.

2. **DCSO and community outreach:** In June 2020, Sheriff Leslie and the DCSO began proactively reaching out to and communicating with the communities in the county. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, conducting community outreach was sometimes challenging but still critically important to understanding and working to address community concerns. Sheriff Leslie himself spearheaded many of these efforts, including:

- a. Participating in several interviews with other law enforcement officials on local media outlets explaining law enforcement's response to the unrest following George Floyd's murder.
- b. Sitting on community panels to discuss racial equity and the role of law enforcement.
- c. Helping the advisory board of a local community college that teaches law enforcement make changes to their curriculum and be more inclusive and equitable.
- d. As a member of the FBI's Civil Rights Advisory Group (CRAG), holding a meeting with the community on the need to be mindful of the impacts of historical racism on the community and the role law enforcement has played at times.

Focusing on Re-entry: Inmates Motivated to Change

Inmates Motivated to Change (IMC) is a program run in the Dakota County Jail by Sergeant Jake Schak that provides educational opportunities for a cohort of DCSO inmates.

The DCSO began its IMC program in 1999, and it remains one of the only re-entry focused jail programs in the state of Minnesota. At the time PERF staff visited the DCSO, there were 33 inmates enrolled in the IMC program, but the program can accommodate up to 36 inmates at one time. Since 2017, 429 Dakota County inmates have participated in the program. To apply for the IMC program, inmates must show motivation to excel in the program, participate in an interview, and be discipline-free for two-weeks before entering the unit.

Program Mission

The purpose of the IMC unit is to create an environment that is supportive for us to make positive changes that will enable us to become successful, contributing members of society. We work to maintain a self-governed atmosphere where we are able to implement what we have learned and reinforce the fundamental core values of the unit:

- Responsibility
- Accountability
- Respect
- Initiative

Our goal is to learn, practice, and build positive thinking patterns. Ultimately, we strive to build a foundation for a successful future for ourselves, our loved ones, and for the community at large.⁴

The IMC program has its own housing unit in the jail. Once admitted to the IMC program, the inmates are assigned a caseworker who helps them navigate the program as well as the re-entry process. The program is staffed by correctional deputies with additional training-related specifically to IMC. It is a sought-after program, both for the deputies who staff it and for the inmates who participate. The program helps deputies and inmates have positive interactions in the jail.

The IMC program offers approximately 35-40 classes for inmates to take. Examples of classes include:

- Cognitive Thinking
- Anger Management
- Employment Readiness
- Parenting Skills
- GED – College Prep.
 - » The Dakota County Jail is an official Minnesota GED test site.
- Conflict Resolution
- Relapse Prevention

Leveraging Technology

The DCSO continues to use technology to improve operations and enhance safety for both deputies and inmates.

The Sheriff's Office began using **body-worn cameras** in the Dakota County Jail in 2014. Anecdotally, deputies say the cameras have reduced the number of inmate complaints, because the deputies' actions are recorded. Sheriff Leslie and DCSO leadership believe the body-worn cameras serve another important purpose: as debriefing tools when reviewing critical incidents that occur in the jail. The cameras capture the communication between jail deputies and Special Response Team deputies whenever they need to make a cell extraction or when an inmate is having a mental health crisis. Whenever force is used, the event is reviewed by a use-of-force committee. The committee often uses body-worn camera footage as research for developing training for individual deputies or agency-wide.

In September 2021, the DCSO installed a **body scanning machine** for use during the inmate intake process. After searching inmates for weapons or other contraband, jail deputies use the body scanner to detect items attempting to be smuggled into the jail. At the time of PERF's visit, the DCSO reported it had confiscated two items detected by the body scanner from inmates entering the jail.

4. Dakota County Jail Programs, 2014: <https://silو.tips/download/dakota-county-jail-programs>

All jail inmates have access to **tablets** upon assignment to a housing unit. Inmates can use the tablets to access educational software and the law library. In addition, inmates are able to purchase additional content like movies and games.

Vitals™ App: The DCSO uses the Vitals™ app to help identify and deliver services to community members with disabilities. Vitals™ Aware Services designed the app for caregivers and first responders. Caregivers can help people enroll in the Vitals program and set up an account profile which is called the Vitals beacon.

People who have disabilities can create profiles with the app, so when law enforcement encounters these persons, they can easily access their personal information and respond to their needs. First responders can access individuals' profiles through the Vitals First Responder app. Beacon profiles provide easily accessible information for first responders, such as caregivers' contact information. Sheriff Tim Leslie sees Vitals™ as a great resource that helps his deputies keep people safe.

Inclusion, Diversity, and Equity

In 2021 the DCSO created a transparency website which lists several initiatives and includes policies related to:

- Inclusion, Diversity, and Equity
- Staff Wellness
- Ethics
- Accountability
- Mental Health and De-escalation
- Use of Force Data
- Drone deployments

During their site visit, PERF staff spoke with Kelsey Demmert, who, among other initiatives, leads the DCSO's Inclusion, Diversity, and Equity efforts. Ms. Demmert explained the Champions Group, which includes members from different units within the DCSO. The group works to make the DCSO more culturally responsive and inclusive.

When the group was first formed, it mostly focused on building knowledge about equity and inclusion internally. After George Floyd's murder, there was increased participation from other

members within the agency. In the months that followed, the group pivoted slightly. They held six discussions, each with about 7-12 different people attending. Those discussions focused on current workplace culture and training efforts.

From those discussions the DCSO developed training on implicit bias. The DCSO also is working on better integrating some of the training the agency provides. For example, merging DCSO's use-of-force, emotional intelligence, and interpersonal communication trainings would allow deputies to learn and incorporate different skills during classroom and scenario-based training.

The DCSO has also worked to establish Ethical Policing Is Courageous (EPIC), a peer intervention program that teaches staff how to intervene with their colleagues to stop a wrongful or unethical action before it occurs. The program empowers staff – no matter what their rank – to stand up and say to their partners, colleagues, and even their managers, “what you are about to do is wrong; it will hurt someone and will hurt you, your family, and your career.” It is a program through which all personnel agree to the following: “I authorize you, regardless of your rank, to intervene upon me if I am about to do something wrong.”⁵ EPIC was created by the New Orleans Police Department, and the DCSO sent two supervisors to New Orleans to receive EPIC training and bring it back to the sheriff's office, where it was implemented.

In addition to EPIC, the DCSO has a peer support team made up of members from all areas of the Sheriff's Office. This includes the members that work in the jail, in patrol, and members of the support staff. The DCSO also has access to an employee assistance program. Dakota County uses the Sand Creek Group to give all employees access to licensed counselors for support in areas including mental health symptoms, substance use issues, financial concerns, and marriage and family issues. The Peer Support Team worked with the Sand Creek Group to ensure that law enforcement specific counselors are available to help with the specific challenges of working in this field. All deputies are required to attend a one-hour check-up session with a psychologist every year.

5. https://www.policeforum.org/assets/docs/Subject_to_Debate/Debate2016/debate_2016_julsep.pdf

SMART Center

The Dakota County Safety and Mental Health Alternative Response Training (SMART) Center is a state-of-the-art facility for training first responders on how to handle individuals in crisis and other critical incidents. The SMART Center is managed by the DCSO but provides space for other Minnesota agencies to train and collaborate. Importantly, it serves as the training site for the Minnesota Crisis Intervention Team (MN CIT). It also houses DCSO's virtual reality use-of-force system which is used to supplement live-fire activities at the target range. In addition to being a training location, the SMART Center houses multiple DCSO investigative and task-force units.

Investigative Units: The investigative units housed in the SMART Center are the Dakota County Electronic Crimes Unit and the Dakota County Drug Task Force.

The Electronic Crimes Unit (ECU) specializes in extracting evidence from smartphones and other digital devices. Agencies in Minnesota can send investigators to the SMART Center to become certified in recovering forensic evidence from smartphones.

This ECU received a 5-year grant from the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Violence Against Women (OVW) to fund one investigator. The investigator compiled, analyzed, and reported crime data on female victims throughout the grant period. The data demonstrated the value of investigating these crimes as a way to reduce more serious crimes, including homicides, which declined during the grant period. When the grant ended, Dakota County provided the funding to pay for this investigator through the DCSO budget.

The Dakota County Drug Task Force is made up of representatives from many of the county's law enforcement agencies. There are 13 task force agents, 2 civilian support staff, and a Minnesota National Guard crime analyst.

Jail Integrative Health Unit

The Jail Integrative Health Unit provides specialized support for inmates to increase the likelihood of success while in custody and after release, which impacts individuals, their families, and the community. Approximately 25% of their inmate population has serious health needs that should be addressed while they are in custody, but it is a

challenge for the DCSO to dedicate appropriate space to this care. A 2020 study recommended a dedicated addition to the jail. The DCSO is constructing this addition to house those who may be vulnerable in the general population, as well as those who have physical health limitations, substance use disorders, or mental health needs.

Conclusion

Like many other law enforcement agencies, the Dakota County Sheriff's Office was forced to adjust how it operated during the COVID-19 pandemic. The DCSO made several critical decisions during the early portion of the pandemic to ensure that both their inmates and deputies stayed safe. The DCSO worked with other agencies in the region to share jail space in the event COVID-19 spread rapidly in any of their jails, it reduced its inmate population to just those offenders who needed to be incarcerated, and it adjusted its inmate intake process to reduce the risk of COVID-19 entering and spreading within the jail. This planning and coordination paid off: only a small number of jail inmates contracted COVID.

Because of its proximity to the Twin Cities, the aftermath of George Floyd's murder uniquely impacted the DCSO. The agency coordinated with regional agencies like the Saint Paul Police Department to respond to civil unrest in the city and provide security assistance during Derek Chauvin's trial. Sheriff Tim Leslie also participated in lengthy media interviews and several community panel discussions on law enforcement, equity, and historical racism.

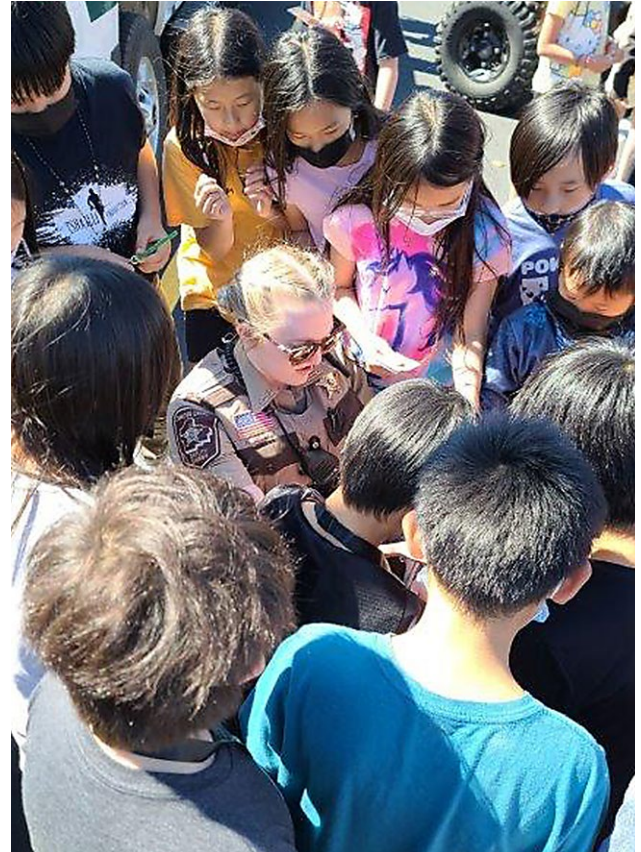
In addition to responding to the unique challenges of the last two years, the DCSO has implemented and expanded a number of other innovations.

The Inmates Motivated for Change (IMC) program has been a positive initiative for inmates in the Dakota County Jail since its inception in 1999. For inmates, it offers an educational experience by providing 35-40 classes, an opportunity to earn a GED, and a caseworker to help them through the reentry process.

The DCSO has also worked to increase the quality of life for its members. It provides wellness opportunities for its employees, encourages participation in enhancing equity and diversity within the DCSO, and is focusing on improving training opportunities for its deputies.

For the DCSO, as well as law enforcement agencies across the state, the Dakota County SMART Center has become a major training asset and investigatory hub. The Minnesota CIT hosts its 40-hour training at the SMART Center. The SMART Center is equipped with the space and resources to

provide realistic scenario-based training, including recordings for debriefs. The SMART Center is also outfitted with technology to greatly enhance the capability of DCSO investigative units and task forces to investigate and close cases.



Deputy Jessica Perez and Ranger Brian Hernández, members of the National Latino Peace Officers Association, attend “Navidad con un Policía,” which translates to “Christmas with a Cop” (left)

Deputy Heather Nelson speaks with a group of children during a community event hosted by Hmong College Prep Academy in Saint Paul, MN (right)



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