

METHODS BRIEF:

ACHIEVING RACIAL EQUITY & IMPROVING CULTURE IN JAILS USING A COMMUNITY-ENGAGED QUALITY IMPROVEMENT PROCESS

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We would like to acknowledge the tremendous support from the County Jail project site, from the administrators to correctional staff to individuals who are incarcerated in the jail. Without their active participation and support, we could not have done this project.

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PROJECT BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

Over 10 million individuals go to jail each year, and individuals of minoritized groups are disproportionately represented in all phases of the criminal legal and justice systems. Jails are the most frequently utilized correctional entity in the criminal justice system, and the related decisions that occur during confinement have reverberating effects on incarcerated individuals, their families, and the communities in which jails are located. Further, individuals who work in jail often face difficult working conditions, particularly in a time of reduced or under-staffing, post COVID-19.

Much is to be learned about how to improve the culture and climate in jails, particularly around racial equity. One approach is through collaborations across jails, community based organizations, and universities. Such collaborations can produce replicable, innovative, efficient, and effective approaches to promoting racial equity and cultural change.

The purpose of this methods brief is to describe a method entitled Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) – a data driven organizational change process that can be used to understand racial disparities in jail settings and can be used to promote cultural change and racial equity within a jail context. PDSA provides a structured process to identify problematic policies, procedures, and practices and then

develop, implement, evaluate, and refine interventions that reform these problem areas.

In this brief, we will describe how the PDSA approach was carried out in one jail setting. The brief also describes the outreach and relationship building strategies used that were necessary to this particular change process which can inform other jurisdictions interested in pursuing similar strategies to improving racial equity and jail culture.

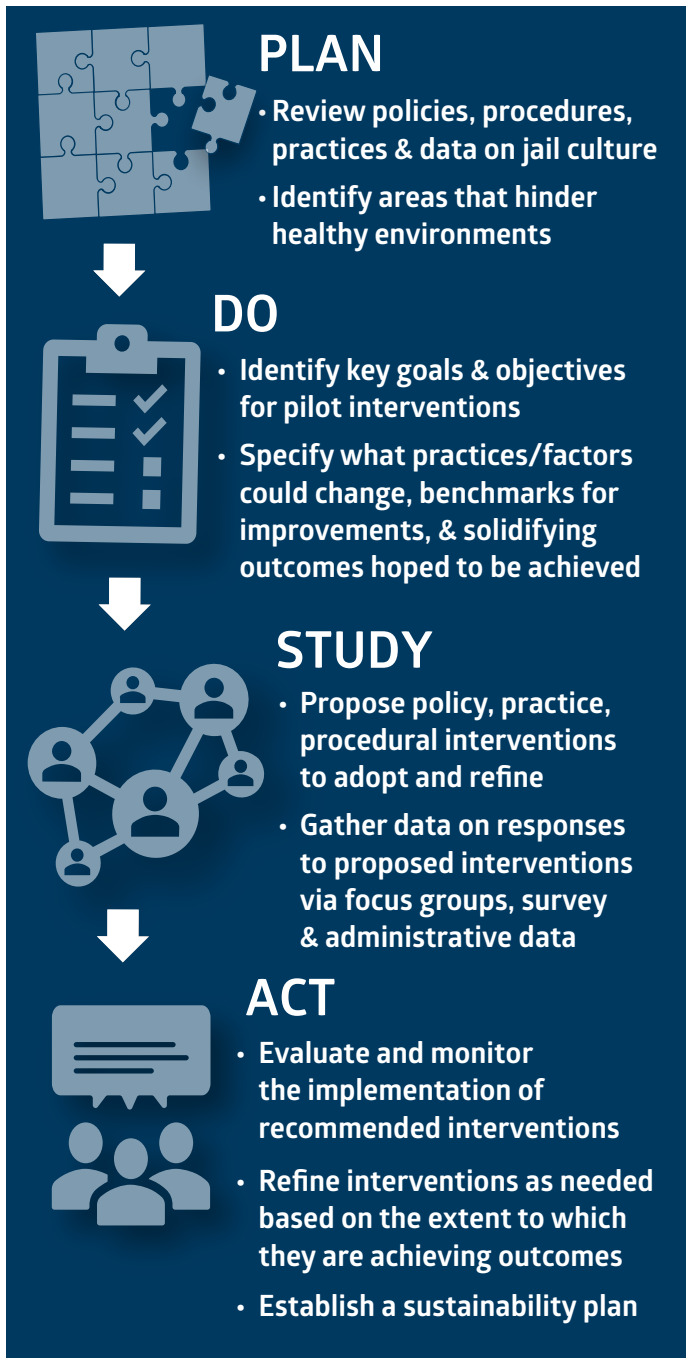
PDSA is a form of community engaged research that centers on focused action, and can be completed in a shorter timeframe than other similar approaches. PDSA captures the voices and perspectives of a variety of stakeholders at all levels of a jail, including programmatic staff, corrections staff, corrections administrators, and residents of the jail using both workgroup and survey based strategies. PDSA is adaptable in that each stage can be modified based on feedback from participants in the process and the needs of the jail. PDSA uses formal administrative record as data while also acknowledging that participants in the PDSA process have a lived experience of working or residing in the jail and therefore their perspectives are also data. Through careful facilitation of PDSA activities, personal opinions are bounded by administration data and the combined representations of experience assist participants in the PDSA process in developing consensus on the type of interventions needed to address racial equity and jail culture issues. PDSA gives particular attention to implementing change based on consensus of participants in the PDSA process.

The research questions that guided the Jail Equity and Culture Project

1. How, when, and where do racially biased policies, practices, and procedures influence jail culture?
2. What policy and practice strategies may be adopted by the jail to promote racial equity?

3. How feasible and acceptable are the proposed recommended interventions (designed to promote racial equity) from the perspectives of jail staff and residents?
4. How are policy, procedure, and practice strategies that promote racial equity implemented and sustained?

Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) Method



CASE STUDY: A COUNTY JAIL

The project described in this Methods Brief was implemented in a local county jail which serves the entirety of the county. The local region has a lengthy history of institutionalized racism. The intersection of racism within the criminal legal system burst into the national consciousness with the death of Michael Brown, a black man, on August 9, 2014, at the hands of a white police officer, and the resultant upheaval in Ferguson, Missouri. Since that time, significant efforts have been made to address racial bias in the criminal legal and justice system throughout the county and the MacArthur Safety and Justice Challenge (SJC) has provided tremendous data and resources to help support that effort.

The county jail of focus employs approximately 360 staff, and the jail has a maximum capacity of 1,232 beds. Like many other jurisdictions, this county jail is confronting issues with limited jail resources, staffing challenges, and public health concerns related to COVID-19. This project employed a team of researchers, jail staff and residents, and a community-based partner who worked together to define interventions for promoting racial equity and improving jail conditions and culture. The following sections of the document outline the steps taken to achieve the project goals.

OUTREACH AND RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING STRATEGIES

We used numerous and evolving relationship-building strategies throughout the study. Notably, the study site was already a part of the Safety & Justice Challenge, and the research leads had longstanding relationships with the local community and jail leadership. However, there were new researchers as a part of the project and a new community partner external to the jail who facilitated workgroups comprised of staff and residents; therefore,

of the project. Below, we organize our strategies based on best practices in community-engaged research identified by the National Academy of Medicine workgroup on health equity.ⁱ

Building Trust and Being Trustworthy

- The PDSA process was implemented through the use of workgroups. One set of workgroups were comprised of staff and another set of workgroups were comprised of residents. Each set of workgroups met eleven times. Prior to the start of the work groups, the project team met with interested staff and jail administration to orient them to the project and to discuss the purpose and goals of the PDSA process. In doing so, we gained the “buy-in” and support of the administration. In turn, the leadership agreed to encourage and support staff and resident participation without the threat of being penalized or experiencing retaliation and ensuring staff positions were covered during the work group sessions.
- Throughout the project, the research team held monthly meetings with jail administrators. The administration was kept up to date on the progress of the workgroups and the progression throughout the PDSA process. At the same time, data being collected during the workgroups were not communicated to administrators, as to maintain the confidentiality of the process to promote open discussion and dialogue among workgroup participants.
- The project team included a community-based, experienced, and relatable facilitator who had high credibility in the greater community. An external facilitator is a key element of a successful process like this because they are able to serve as a conduit between the participants, administrators, and the research team. Quality facilitators are trained in effective communication and collaboration, particularly around sensitive topics.
- Regular communication was directed to the workgroup participants by the facilitator of the PDSA process. Each group was oriented to the project, given regular updates

on tasks, and provided a timeline of each activity relevant to the stage of PDSA.

Bidirectional Exchange of Information Between Community Partners and Researchers

- The research team conveyed to workgroup participants that their perspectives were crucial and would be used to develop recommended interventions. The perspectives of participants were gathered through dialogue and debate and recorded through ethnographic notetaking and, at times, audio recorded. The facilitator communicated a synthesis of the research team’s understanding of the data gathered back to workgroup members to assess accuracy of understanding.
- Administrative data were presented to the workgroups, and participants were asked to reflect on the data along with their own experiences. If/when workgroup participants felt the administrative data conflicted with their perceptions, more data was sought, either from jail leadership or other sources, and then given back to the workgroups for discussion.
- As recommendations for interventions were compiled, the workgroups were re-engaged to sort and prioritize recommendations.
- Surveys and focus groups were conducted widely with jail staff and jail residents who were not a part of the workgroups in order to facilitate an exchange of information with non-workgroup members and the project team (research + workgroup members).

Participant-Inclusive Design and Establishment of Equal Status Between Researchers and Workgroup Participants

- Jails are 24-hour facilities and are typically understaffed. Shift schedules and staff coverage are important for planning workgroups and collecting survey and/or focus group data to ensure that as many jail staff as residents had the ability to participate.

- Programming, work assignments, and court proceedings can interfere with residents' schedules; therefore, coordination with administration in advance was essential so as to create equal opportunities for participation.
- The lack of available meeting space in the jail can impact the length of workgroup meeting times. The project team was in regular contact with jail leaders to plan for meetings and to adjust when changes were needed.
- The research team acknowledged that the jail staff and residents were experts in the project topic area and that they were generously providing their time and ideas. Therefore, the research team provided various appreciation tokens such as gas cards, food, and certifications of recognition for participation.ⁱⁱ

Co-Created Knowledge

- The PDSA process is designed to facilitate the co-construction of knowledge. As such, all participant perspectives were considered important and equal to official data. In addition, the researchers conducted data analysis (qualitative and quantitative) for the purpose of relaying the data back to the group for additional feedback and guidance (e.g., ranking of policy, practice, and procedural intervention recommendations). Participants were given multiple opportunities to participate in the data generation.
- Knowledge was not concentrated to one group. Instead, the workgroup participants, the greater staff and resident community, and administrators provided input and guidance at every step along the way of the project. The participants also provided input into plans for implementation, evaluation, refinement, and sustainability of the recommended interventions.

Culturally Centered & Participant-Inclusive Design

- The experienced facilitator encouraged candid dialogue and empowered workgroup participants throughout the project to share their authentic thoughts. The facilitator had substantial experience leading discussions around race and system transformation which was a substantial advantage in this type of work.
- The design of the workgroups, the presentation of materials and data, and the ways in which perspectives were gathered were driven by the norms of the participant category (e.g., staff vs resident participants) and the emergent issues that came up within the jail or the workgroups themselves.
- Crucial to the process of cultural humility and being culturally centered is the ability to evolve and adapt a project plan in a way that is responsive to the project stakeholders. We made numerous adaptations in order to be culturally responsive.

Participant Safety

- To implement this type of program, one must consider the various power dynamics at play. As a result, every step possible was taken to minimize risk and protect participants against concerns of power dynamics and consequences of their participation. This includes the power dynamics in group construction, within groups—regarding line staff and managerial staff—as well as between groups with jail staff and residents.
- Precautions were taken to minimize the risk associated with participation. We held separate work groups that encompassed different categories of stakeholders—male residents, female residents, and staff from varied levels of the organization (custody staff, correctional officer, sergeants, lieutenants caseworkers, non-custody, program case managers, mid-level administrators). Participants were in workgroups with individuals in similar categories. The staff meeting times were structured so that multiple shifts could participate.

IMPLEMENTING THE PDSA PROCESS

Recruitment Strategy

Workgroup participants were selected in several phases. First, jail administrators nominated mid-level staff from diverse backgrounds that could serve as “ambassadors” to help identify and recruit staff and resident workgroup participants. In addition, an initial project full day orientation meeting was held which included presentations from the County Executive, the jail director, and the research team. The community facilitator then provided an intensive orientation to the prospective “ambassadors” on the PDSA process and the overall goals of achieving racial equity and improving jail culture. The orientation workshop participants engaged in example PDSA sessions and talked about why they felt the project was important for the jail as well as provided guidance on how they felt the workgroup sessions may need to be approached. The research team also spent a lot of time talking with the group about the importance of reinforcing emotional and occupational safety for those who choose to participate in the workshop and guarding against real or perceived retaliation as a result of participation. The potential for actual or perceived retaliation was monitored closely throughout the project, and creating safety for participation in the initiative was reinforced by and with jail leaders throughout the project.

Next, the ambassadors were provided parameters on the characteristics of prospective participants for the work groups. This included factors such as: (1) 18 years or older; (2) been employed with the jail for at least six months (staff); or (3) been a resident of the jail for at least seven days; the seven days allows an individual sufficient time to transition to the jail setting and be provided a permanent housing placement.

Individuals were excluded from participation if they were: (1) assessed to have cognitive impairment that would interfere with their ability to participate in workgroups; or (2) determined not to be conversational in English. In

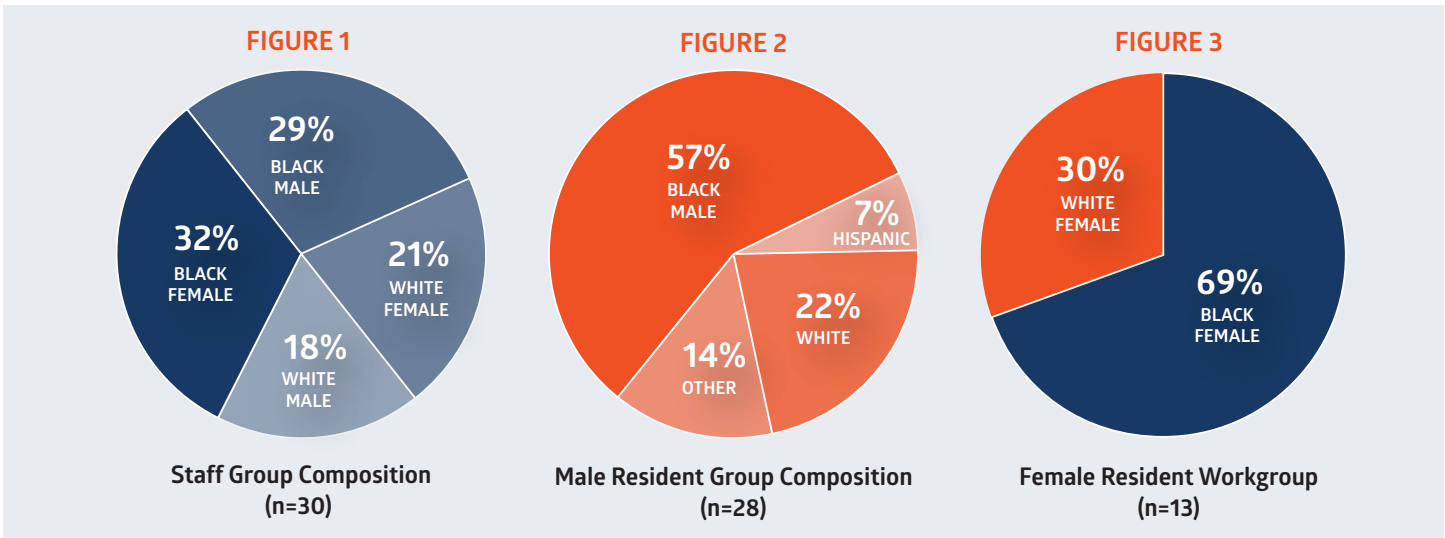
addition to these criteria, jail leaders were encouraged to identify prospective staff participants that represent a diversity of thought – those who might be both receptive and in opposition to project goals. The research team was provided comprehensive lists of potential study participants representing all the stakeholder groups in the jail: a) administrators, b) program staff and contractors, c) corrections officers and supervisors, and d) current residents. Prospective jail staff and jail resident participants were recruited via one-page flyers, emails, and in-person communications. Participants were consented into the study following human subjects board procedures prior to participating in any of the workgroup or subsequent surveys or focus groups.

Workgroups and Racial Caucuses

Over the course of the 18-month study, 11 total work group meetings were held for each stakeholder category (i.e., staff and residents) and each were approximately 2-hours in length. In total, 30 staff, 15 male residents, and 13 female residents (N=58) participated in the workgroups. In addition, four separate Racial Caucus sessions were convened, providing staff and residents the opportunity to assess recommended actions through a racial equity lens. The female and male residents participated in separate racial caucus meetings, and staff were allowed to identify if they wanted to attend the caucus for Black or White individuals. Participants were instructed to examine potential disparities related to the recommendations and consider possible inequities that might emerge when recommendations are put into practice.

To ensure equitable application, participants were asked to consider specific questions:

1. Who do you think this recommendation will benefit? And how?
2. Who, if anyone will it harm or disadvantage? And how?
3. Are there any patterns of racial bias that we need to consider or be mindful of?



4. What could we do differently when implementing this recommendation to decrease or eliminate any negative impacts or racial bias?

Facilitation

All workgroups were led by the same experienced facilitator. The facilitator was a Black woman with extensive experience facilitating sensitizing topics, coupled with deep-seated community ties, which played a pivotal role in creating a safe atmosphere for authentic dialogue with participants. The facilitator was instrumental in ensuring rapport building, effective communication, trust, and confidentiality among participants. Additionally, cognizant of the racial dynamics associated with this research, the team decided that a member of the qualitative research team of similar racial demographics should conduct focus groups. As a result, all focus groups were facilitated by a Black woman with qualitative experience with vulnerable populations.

Ethnographic Notetaking

In order to understand and document resident and staff perceptions and experiences with jail culture and equity, we collected data on all of the workgroups. These data were collected using ethnographic field methods with focus on the study of groups of people in

their typical social setting. Two researchers recorded ethnographic fieldnotes of all workgroups and focus groups throughout the data collection process. Fieldnotes describe experiences, observations, behaviors, actions, conversations, interpersonal interactions, or any other aspect of the observable human experience.

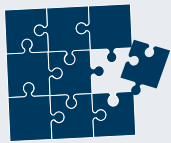
Researchers were tasked with denoting the following: the number of participants; the perceived race and gender of participants; the date and start and end time of each workgroup; the type of workgroup (e.g., staff, male residents, female residents). Qualitative researchers provided detailed (de-identified) notes of each workgroup experience, contextual observations, and group dynamics. To bolster privacy and confidentiality, the researchers were seated in the back of the room to minimize interruptions from correctional staff that may try to enter the room while workgroups are in session and not disrupt the dialogue between the facilitator and participants. After each workgroup, members of the research team met to corroborate notes, debrief any challenges or concerns, and provide suggestions for subsequent meetings.

Additionally, ethnographic field notes were augmented with reflexive memos. Memo-writing provides the space to make comparisons between data, data and codes, and codes and categories. During this analytical process, researchers provided additional contextual information to

the observations, identified gaps in the analysis and other potential avenues of inquiry, and also considered how their personal experiences and social identities shaped their interpretation of the data.

All transcriptions and reflective notes were replaced with the name of the respective workgroup as well as the date. These files were uploaded and securely stored on password-protected secure servers with access granted only to authorized study personnel.

PDSA Workgroup Activities



1. During the **PLAN** phase, the following workgroup activities occurred:

- a. Established uniform definitions of racial equity, racial disparities, jail culture, racism, racial bias, and conditions of confinement.
- b. Engaged in an introduction to research, the use of data, and the PDSA process.
- c. Reviewed data gathered from existing records (e.g., housing/programming/work assignments; distribution of infractions; security and staffing resources; court dates/warrants/transfers; staffing issues) and compared that data with lived experiences of staff and residents in the workgroups. This was an iterative process of reviewing data with the workgroups, getting questions/contradictory experiences from workgroup participants, seeking more data from the jail or prior research conducted with the jail, and reviewing the data with the workgroups again.
- d. Conducted ethnographic documentation of meeting data and memo reflections of the experiences within the groups.
- e. Monitored confidentiality and potential for real or perceived retaliation as a result of participating in the workgroups.



2. During the **DO** phase, the following activities occurred:

- a. Over a course of 11 workgroup sessions with staff and 11 workgroup sessions with residents, workgroup participants proposed 74 intervention recommendations to policies, practices, and procedures. The intervention recommendations were aimed at improving culture of the jail, conditions of confinement, gender equity, and racial equity.



3. During the **STUDY** phase, the following activities occurred:

- a. Assessed the acceptability, feasibility, and likelihood of adoption of the 74 policy, practice, and procedural interventions using surveys and focus groups with 68 staff and 40 residents who were not previously participants of the workgroup sessions.
- b. Identified additional intervention recommendations through survey and focus groups of staff and residents who were not participants of the workgroups.
- c. Hosted racial caucuses with race-specific groups to examine the prioritized intervention recommendations for their impact on race. Gleaned additional recommendations from these caucuses.
- d. Workgroups narrowed the intervention specification and recommendations to approximately 30 recommendations sorted by effort and impact on racial and gender equity, jail culture, and conditions of confinement.



4. During the **ACT** phase, the following activities occurred:

- a. Presented recommendations to existing and incoming administration and devised a plan for implementation of priority interventions.
- b. Workgroups established evaluation metrics and preliminary evaluation plan of the implemented interventions.

PRESENTATION OF THE RECOMMENDED INTERVENTIONS TO JAIL ADMINISTRATION

With all data gathered, synthesized, and interventions prioritized, the research team and the community facilitator presented the recommended interventions to jail administrators. Although our original intention was to present 3-5 recommended interventions, we presented approximately 30 recommended policy, practice, and procedural interventions. This number was just under half of those recommendations identified by the workgroup, survey, and focus group participants. Prior to the Racial Caucuses, each workgroup was presented the list of

recommendations and asked to consider each through the lens of high impact/high effort (Major Projects) high impact/low effort (Quick Wins), low effort/low impact (Fill-in Jobs) and high effort/low impact (Thankless Tasks). The workgroups were asked to consider that administration may not have the ability to implement all the recommendations, and to consider a balance of recommendations of Major Projects and Quick Wins. With the presentation of possible interventions, we provided the following implementation process recommendations in order to preserve the intention of participatory action process and racial equity and jail culture improvement in the work.

SUGGESTED STEPS FOR THE REVIEW AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SELECTED RECOMMENDATIONS:

TIPS - Guidance to the Administrative Team on Selecting Interventions to Adopt



CONCLUSION

Corrections is the response to the issues in the community with the jails serving as the point of entrance for individuals into the criminal justice system. Unlike prisons, the jails do not have a release process in the form of parole but rather the release process is regulated through the bond process and the manner by which cases are adjudicated by the courts. Currently jails are facing a myriad of issues which includes exceeding capacity, staff shortages, increasing number of admissions with untreated behavioral health issues which impacts the delivery of services. This impacts not only the staff but the residents in terms of the safety and security of the residents and staff.

The PDSA process allowed for flexibility with delivery of the process to workgroup participants and validation of the recommendations through the survey/focus group activities. The PDSA process allowed workgroup participants the opportunity to identify the issues which impact racial equity and jail culture through the lens of data but more importantly through the lens of their experience as a staff member or a resident. It was through this validation of their experience that trust was established. Initially participants shared what they viewed as the issues impacting the jail culture and

allowed the courage to share what they saw as issues which impacted racial equity. Unlike staff, the residents who served as workgroup participants acknowledged they may not realize the impact of the recommendations. However, through this work they were able to contribute to a process which will allow for more racially just and equitable treatment within the jail system.

Residents embraced this responsibility and allowed this to serve as a way they could contribute as an individual who has walked in their shoes by having the experience of being in jail and allow this experience to shape what can be as opposed to what is. Of utmost importance will be the ongoing implementation and monitoring of the interventions that become adopted to ensure they are achieving the intended outcomes. Implementation and sustaining the PDSA and change process is crucial to the true promotion of equity and improved culture in the jail and to honoring the vulnerability that workgroup participants subjected themselves. These participants openly shared and debated about strategies to tackle the challenges of racism and destructive organizational cultures. PDSA workgroup participants did the hard work of identifying change processes and transformational adaptations to existing operations, it now falls on the jail administration to ensure that this work is memorialized and actualized.

ⁱ Organizing Committee for Assessing Meaningful Community Engagement in Health & Health Care Programs & Policies. 2022. Assessing Meaningful Community Engagement: A Conceptual Model to Advance Health Equity through Transformed Systems for Health. NAM Perspectives. Commentary, National Academy of Medicine, Washington, DC. <https://doi.org/10.31478/202202c>.

ⁱⁱ Incarcerated individuals are not able to receive cash as remuneration for participation and were instead given food during meetings. Jail residents were also given a certificate that recognized their participation in the project. The jail leadership asked that gift cards be provided to employees in lieu of cash.


ⁱⁱⁱ In total, 19 individuals attended the male resident group information session. Two male residents were removed by administration because of safety concerns and four individuals did not consent to participate. During the course of the study, 10 male resident participants were released from custody as a result of the adjudication of the pending charge (8) or released on a pre-trial bond (2). There are three male participants who remain in custody. In total, 13 female residents attended the initial workgroup. At the end of the process, there are 9 women who remain in custody with four released from custody due to adjudication of charge (1), released to other authority (2) and released on recognizance bond (1).

^{iv} Emerson, R. M., Fretz, R. I., & Shaw, L. L. (2011). Writing ethnographic fieldnotes. University of Chicago press.

^v Charmaz, K. (2006). Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis. sage.



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