

A Co-Governance Success Story

Berks County doesn't have a great track record on locking people up, but thanks to Berks Stands Up and others, the situation is changing for the better.

In the past 10 years, twice as many folks have been jailed in Berks for “failure to post collateral” (i.e. fines) than second-place York County. On average, two-thirds of our inmates are pre-trial and have not been convicted of any crime. And in 2014, Eileen DeNino, a 55-year-old mother of seven, [died in Berks County Jail](#) over \$2,000 in unpaid truancy fines.

Building Justice in Berks, the BSU carceral justice team, has been working for years to put an end to such tragedies and make Berks the leader in genuine reform by building strong relationships with allies and elected officials.

The county is in the midst of a multi-year project to build a new jail, replacing a dangerously outdated 1,332-bed facility. It will be the most expensive project ever undertaken by the county, and thus is the perfect springboard for action. CGL, the consulting firm hired by Commissioners, initially recommended the new jail have 1,277 beds; the project was tabled during the pandemic. CGL returned this year with a recommendation for 962 beds. The prison population currently hovers around 720, a number that includes pre-trial, “weekenders” and those with mental illness, so all official projections assumed expansion.

Building Justice in Berks set our sights on drastically lowering the bed count, as well as building green and policy changes including an end to pre-trial detention.

We attended countless public meetings, questioned the data and planning process, and consistently argued that we could reduce our prison population while saving millions in taxpayer dollars.

In partnership with numerous state and local organizations, we presented a four-part Criminal Justice Reform Film Series, followed by in-depth conversations with the audience. County officials attended these screenings and, on this unusually level playing field, took part in discussions with people impacted by the system as well as those trying to help. We used the county's own slogan -- “opportunity for change” -- to suggest that this be an opportunity to change our entire system of criminal legal practices, from the size of the new jail to an end to pre-trial detention.

Throughout, we benefited from professional advice and support from the ACLU and the Prison Policy Initiative, and from courageous investigative reporting by our local newspaper.

Most importantly, we established close working relationships with stakeholders by being committed, honest, respectful and well-informed, and by claiming our right as the community to be part of the decision making process.

As of this writing -- under continual public pressure -- the Berks County Commissioners have committed to permanently cap the jail population at 700 and to put in place significant, sustainable reforms to its criminal legal system.

This represents a huge step forward, but the work is not finished. We will continue to monitor the process, press for an even lower bed count and a commitment to build to the LEED gold standard, and secure our set at the table in county co-governance.