

Contact Crystal Kowalski, didyoupractice@aol.com (610) 301-6878

Building Justice in Berks says jail decision premature without additional analysis

Reading PA, July 25, 2022 -- The advocacy group Building Justice in Berks (BJB) is calling for further data collection and analysis before County Commissioners approve the Needs Assessment Update prepared by jail consulting firm CGL. The decision is scheduled for this Thursday, July 28.

“The new jail, expected to be in place for 50-75 years, will be the most expensive project in Berks County’s history,” said BJB founder Crystal Kowalski.

“Our Commissioners have reiterated the importance of ‘getting this right’ and have committed to work diligently to make a well-informed decision. The public was given one week to submit comments on the Needs Assessment Draft. Three weeks later, CGL’s ‘response to community questions’ provided some limited additional information but not the critical data about who has been and will be incarcerated and why. Neither did it include input from the community at large, including incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people and their families, and groups who serve and fight for them.

“In order to make an informed decision, our Commissioners need this updated data and input from impacted communities,” Kowalski said. Building Justice in Berks is calling for six changes to the Needs Assessment:

1. Update Table ES-1 without changes to classification
2. Interview and take into account the views of additional stakeholders.
3. Eliminate the disproved correlation between an increase in county population (at-risk-population included) and an increase in the jail population. Data shows the jail population decreasing as the county’s population increased.
4. Subtract any of the 60+ beds projected for “Protective Custody” that would be used for solitary confinement. Solitary confinement has been deemed a form of torture by the United Nations and has no place here.
5. Limit pretrial detention, which currently accounts for approximately two-thirds of the Berks jail population, and reduce projected bed count accordingly.
6. Recognize that projection models relying on historical data and conventional industry norms are rooted in a culture of mass incarceration, and utilize models that seek to ameliorate this pervasive problem.

Building Justice in Berks appreciates the collaborative way many stakeholders, including the Commissioners, have worked and continue to work to reduce the jail population, and would like to see these accomplishments reflected in CGL's bed space need projection.

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