

Criminal justice group calls for limiting pretrial detention on eve of final film in series

Reading PA, May 2 -- The advocacy group Building Justice in Berks, hosts of a series of films about criminal justice reform, is calling for limiting pretrial detention as County Commissioners plan to build a new jail. The group will present *Unguarded*, the final film in the series, on Wednesday May 4th at 7pm at the GoggleWorks Center for the Arts.

Diverse audiences including Commissioners and other decision-makers, jail consultants, and formerly incarcerated people and their families viewed the first three films in the series.

“The robust conversations following each of the first three films give us hope that we can increase public safety by reducing the proposed size of the new Berks jail,” said Building Justice in Berks founder Crystal Kowalski. “We know this is a complicated decision, with multiple critical factors including the need for quality mental health care, addiction treatment, adequate housing, and fiscally responsible use of taxpayer money.

“Our Commissioners have labeled the jail project as an *opportunity for change* and assured us that plans will not be finalized until the end of 2023. Our goal is to ensure that all of us in Berks -- taxpayers, impacted community members, Commissioners and other stakeholders -- use these 18 months to explore and implement policies that result in a safer and more just Berks County.”

In recent years, Berks has made admirable strides in reducing our jail population, from a high of 1,210 in 2007 to a low of 674 last week, but we are still in the thick of a mass incarceration crisis. Since 1970, the total jail population in Pennsylvania has increased 428 percent, said Kowalski.

According to the ACLU-PA's recent report, [Broken Rules](#), Berks County has the fourth highest rate of cash bail across the state; MDJs set cash bail in more than half of cases. Even a few days of pretrial detention can mean people losing their jobs, housing, and families.

“Today, more than two-thirds of people in Berks County Jail are held pretrial, meaning they have not been convicted of a crime,” Kowalski said, “and many of them are incarcerated solely because they cannot afford to post bail. We could significantly reduce the size and cost of the new jail by limiting pretrial detention.”

On Wednesday, the film [Unguarded](#) goes inside the walls of APAC, the revolutionary Brazilian prison system centered on restorative justice and the full recovery of the person. The screening will be followed by a panel discussion and an opportunity for continued brainstorming.

Film series partners include Bullfrog Films, GoggleWorks Center for the Arts, Barrio Alegria, Berks Stands Up, Lancaster Bail Fund, League of Women Voters of Berks County, NAACP Reading Branch # 2289, Reading Film Fest, Sunrise PA and ACLU PA.