

Winona County justice programs

Q&A with Winona County officials

County employees and elected officials participated in an April 29 forum, where they responded to a number of questions posted during a March listening session. County officials also provided written followup responses to other questions in early May.

The responses are not transcriptions. They are edited for length, clarity and accessibility, while preserving the content of the answers.

The questions, in order in this document, are:

- Is the county willing to adopt a zero incarceration policy?
- What is the difference between a secure and non-secure facility?
- Is the county willing or able to end youth solitary confinement and disciplinary time?
- What are numbers, demographics, and racial breakdowns of juveniles incarcerated in Winona County?
- What prevention or diversion programs are there and what is their impact? Which ones are managed by the county, DOC, or other authorities?
- How do we get a commitment from our elected officials to divert more funding for community support programs? How realistic is this request?
- What are the key sources to bring in funding for community-based programs? Are there ways community members can help?
- What does Restorative Justice look like today? Are there opportunities to expand to work with adults?

- Why is Restorative Justice part of the system? Why is it being used for truancy?
- Could youth groups, homes, or programs be managed by the community or a non-profit?
- How is the county addressing out-of-home placement of children? Was there a significant increase?
- Is there intention to build a juvenile detention facility?
- Why can't the money it would cost to build a jail or juvenile facility be used for community services or other programs?
- Are numbers tied to finances - meaning there's no motivation for keeping incarceration rates low? Does the jail or the juvenile center have a profit motive?
- The intention behind why beds for children are needed in the Winona County Jail is still unclear. Some members of the CJCC have explained that kids need a place to go when there is a CHIPS issue, unsafe housing issue, "parenting issue", etc. Is this the case?
- What is the process and the timeline of the jail? What does public input look like? What is the relationship between the city and the county - who is involved in what?
- How can community members & groups, nonprofits, others help with supporting or creating programs outside of the system? Where do we start?
- We've heard references to SIM Mapping. What is that?

To watch the forum, here's the link:

https://youtu.be/Lg-y_zl4lt8



Is there intention to build a juvenile detention facility?

Chris Meyer, Winona County Commissioner

The answer is no. I don't have a plan. Some things I have heard described in the media, something like a jail with locked cells and bars - no, of course I wouldn't support that. What is the need? That's really what I want to hear. And I would certainly want a ton more information before I would be willing to make any kind of financial commitment. I am one out of five votes on the board, but that's my answer.

Marie Kovecsi, Winona County Commissioner

This question keeps coming up, and we keep answering it, and I keep being surprised that it keeps coming back up.

The county board approved an option to proceed with an 80-bed jail option with no plans for juvenile resources, and no plans for revamping the old jail. There are no plans for a juvenile detention center.

Marcia Ward, Winona County Commissioner

Some of the question of a juvenile detention center comes from when we went to the Legislature, maybe two years ago, looking for financial resources. We did entertain the idea for a regional juvenile detention facility - without any research or fact-finding or anything. It was just a concept. The board has not had any kind of discussion, and has not been presented with any facts, findings, staffing reports, or anything.

Justin Green, Jail Advisory Committee Chair

The jail committee, when it was formed by the County Board, was given the instruction to research the question of a replacement jail. The committee considered two questions that the board had not specifically asked us to address, but we thought were important. One was mental health in the jail, and the other was a juvenile facility.

We knew about the way we handle juveniles now. We have to take them to a place approved by the state. Many times, that results in a four-, or five-, sometimes six-hour travel and sometimes out of state.

We knew all along that the board was not particularly interested or concerned about the question of how to handle juveniles, since they had their hands full with the jail ... There is nothing on the board's agenda that says they have done anything about a juvenile facility. I simply point to the paragraph in the final report of the Jail Advisory Committee ... we just



said, this is a question related to the jail, related to what the board asked us to investigate, so we did.

Ken Fritz, Winona County Administrator

We know that there is concern with sending juveniles out of town - there's a cost to it, there's a social cost to it as well. So one of the questions (when architects were designing the new jail) was, "Is there a chance we could reuse some of the existing space for something constructive?" That's what McCarthy (architects) was responding to. In the plans, or similar plans, you'll see options that were exploring those areas. It never went past that point.

Is the county willing to adopt a zero incarceration policy?

Karin Sonneman, Winona County Attorney

The county can't adopt one - it's a state issue and ultimately up to the Minnesota Legislature to be considered.

It is also a public safety issue. We would like to see nobody in jail. We would like to not have to prosecute people. But there are situations, both juvenile and adult, where there is no option - for the safety of the community, or the safety of the child or the adult themselves.

The presumption when a child comes before a judge is they will be released unless certain factors are met. The county takes very few juveniles into custody any given year.

Jeff Mueller, Winona County Deputy Sheriff

It's certainly a goal to work toward that. It's not under our control - the Sheriff's Department is responsible for housing people ordered by the court to be in custody.

What is the difference between a secure and non-secure facility?

Jeff Mueller, Winona County Deputy Sheriff

A secure detention facility is more like a jail - you are not free to walk out of the building, there are locked doors. Non-secure facilities, the doors are not locked, it is more like a house. It is a house, it has bedrooms.



Whether someone is in secure or less-than-secure detention is based on the circumstances. The (courts) always attempt to go for the lowest level of security for juveniles or adults. In my experience at Winona County, non-secure juvenile detention is often a priority.

Is the county willing or able to end youth solitary confinement and disciplinary time?

Karin Sonneman, Winona County Attorney

In Winona County, we haven't had any children in solitary confinement. When a child comes before a judge, the presumption is that they will be released, unless there is probable cause they have committed a very serious crime, like murder or criminal sexual conduct.

If the question is about solitary confinement for a child who might be at the Red Wing correctional facility, that's out of our control. That's a state facility and run by their policies.

What are numbers, demographics, and racial breakdowns of juveniles incarcerated in Winona County?

This data is available on the [project page on Engage Winona's website](#). The county does not maintain demographic data for individuals who receive juvenile dispositions or diversion. Juvenile arrests according to transport data does include race and gender.

What prevention or diversion programs are there and what is their impact? Which ones are managed by the county, DOC, or other authorities?

(Answer compiled from multiple statements)

The county will look into compiling this information into a single document for the public. The best place to start for now is on the [Winona County Criminal Justice Coordinating Council website](#), under the Our Work section.

How do we get a commitment from elected officials to divert funding for community support programs? How realistic is this?



Chris Meyer, Winona County Commissioner

I am happy to make a commitment to support community programs to the extent that it is possible. But as a county commissioner, I need to follow state rules. The state requires that the county provide a jail - that's something I'm going to do.

We administer required social services on behalf of the state of Minnesota, and we don't get fully reimbursed. We still have to spend some tax levy money on it. So if we go above and beyond, we have to find alternative ways to fund it - taxes, grants, other mechanisms.

I want to make sure the programs that we implement are effective, and I want to make sure they address the most important issues. For example, we know that when we spend \$1 on our treatment court program, we get \$10 to \$12 in savings in other places. It isn't just the right thing to do, it's the right thing to do financially.

Marie Kovcesi, Winona County Commissioner

I can also commit to funding and supporting the full continuum of care in our community, with emphasis on diversion and protection.

Since January, the county board has approved 13 contracts for programs for mental health and substance abuse with several different agencies in the community. That is just one picture of how wide we go into the community, and how we are always looking for options.

What are the key sources to bring in funding for community-based programs? Are there ways community members can help?

Karen Saness, Health and Human Services Director

We receive federal, state, and county funds that go toward programs within our community. Federal and state funds go toward required programs, and we often don't receive enough money to cover our costs - the county has to try and cover the difference.

Minnesota is at the bottom of money spent on children's services in the entire nation. And federally, we're dealing with the Family First Prevention and Services Act mandated programs. We don't know how some of it will be funded.

Through contracts, we allocate funds to community-based programs. One of the other ways we fund programs is through grants. Grants are tricky because they have an ending point, and then we have to go to the county board and ask for taxpayer dollars.



We are currently in our fourth year of a Systems of Care grant for wrap-around services administered through Hiawatha Valley Mental Health Center. We are looking at sustainability of that grant program.

Karin Sonneman, Winona County Attorney

Treatment Court is an example of a grant-funded community program. We had to really work hard to get sustained by not only collaborating with the county, but also the state of Minnesota judicial system. We also started what's called Friends of Treatment Court, a community group that supports Treatment Court.

What does Restorative Justice look like today? Are there opportunities to expand to work with adults?

Katie Illies, Restorative Justice Coordinator

We have a couple programs on pause during COVID. Our main focus is early intervention with truanancies and diversion. Checking up on kids, doing whatever we can to help. We are getting our mentoring program back up and running. We do a 13-week life skills course for high school students to receive credit toward graduation. We also hold listening circles with victims and offenders for offenders to be accountable and repair the harm they have caused. As for moving into working with adults, we're in the exploration phase.

Karin Sonneman, Winona County Attorney

We tried to expand to adults about eight years ago and didn't get a lot of community support. We are very open to having community involvement to sustain those programs and would look at this again.

Marie Kovecsi, Winona County Commissioner

About half of truancy referrals qualify for Restorative Justice, and according to the school district, 75-85% of youth who go through Restorative Justice are successful. We're discussing options to support and expand the program.

Why is Restorative Justice part of the system? Why is it being used for truancy?

Karin Sonneman, Winona County Attorney

It's a good question: Why is Restorative Justice in the Department of Corrections?



The Department of Corrections funds Restorative Justice positions. It's involved because it helps kids avoid ending up in their system. And because we have fought to fund these programs and haven't gotten community support taxpayer dollars.

Another reason is the county attorney's office handles juvenile delinquencies and truancies. By law, every county attorney's office is supposed to have a juvenile diversion program. It's something that I would do even if it wasn't in the law.

Juvenile law is not a criminal area. It's a civil area. Our truancy diversion program is something that helps kids avoid coming to court. It starts early, before we even get a truancy, before the seven truanancies that leads to being labeled truant.

Could youth groups, homes, or programs be managed by the community or a non-profit?

Karen Saness, Health and Human Services Director

We would prefer a private nonprofit that has background with licensing, that knows the regulations. Having a new or community-based organization try to put something in place is going to be very, very difficult, because the licensing and regulations for a facility that serves children are vast, wide, very complex.

As an example we are using the Southeast Crisis Center, which hired Nexus Family Healing to provide services. Nexus is part of Gerard Academy over in Austin at Von Wald, which is our sheltered care.

One of the issues is trying to staff facilities appropriately. It's hard to find and keep people, and with licensing regulations, there are staffing requirements.

The federal government is looking at something called a QRTP - Qualified Residential Treatment Program. A smaller, more-family-like situation for children to be able to go into treatment. They want these facilities to be less than six children in a home. It is something we can begin talking about and there is going to be funding available.

How is the county addressing out-of-home placement of children? Was there a significant increase?



Karen Saness, Health and Human Services Director

Many years ago, the state expanded screening guidelines - that's what brings children into the system. And there were very few prevention services created at the same time. So across the state we have seen a huge, huge spike in out-of-home placements.

To flip the system takes time - through government agencies, through the Legislature. Everything we do is in state statute. The only area where we have more flexibility at the local level is through child welfare services.

Why can't the money it would cost to build a jail or juvenile facility be used for community services or other programs?

(Answer compiled from multiple statements)

Money that comes from the state or federal government is almost always designated. If the county asked the Legislature for money for a facility, it would have to be spent on that and nothing else. The jail expense is similar - the county is mandated to spend money either on a facility, or contracting with a nearby county. We don't have a choice.

Chris Meyer, Winona County Commissioner

The question was something like "if we have millions of dollars for a juvenile detention facility, couldn't we use that for the various community supports?" There aren't millions of dollars. The money is taxpayer money - every year, when we do the budget, we levy money for social justice and mental health services. That's always in the picture, depending on the will of the board to increase the levy - what taxpayers pay each year.

Jeff Mueller, Winona County Deputy Sheriff

There is money being spent on housing juveniles. Whether you're spending money on a new facility, or on housing juveniles outside the county, there's a cost to doing that and there's a social cost to doing that. We're taking kids out of the community, away from family, away from resources, away from the community connection, which is a huge concern.

I know there's a lot that would say, "We never want the juveniles to be in the system to start with." There's something to be said for that and I appreciate that. But when the juveniles do come into the system, money is spent to house them. One of the things being looked at is how much money is being spent out of the county, and also trying to factor in the social cost of having them not in the community.



Are numbers tied to finances - meaning there's no motivation for keeping incarceration rates low? Does the jail or the juvenile center have a profit motive?

Ken Fritz, Winona County Administrator

There is not a profit motive. Incarcerations are expensive. There is a misconception that the juvenile discussion was somehow profit-motivated. On the contrary, the discussion included how to reduce the costs of required incarceration while keeping juveniles in the local area where support systems exist.

The intention behind why beds for children are needed in the jail is still unclear. Some members of the CJCC have explained that kids need a place to go when there is a CHIPS issue, unsafe housing issue, "parenting issue", etc. Is this the case?

Ken Fritz, Winona County Administrator

The thought of remodeling the old jail space or Annex to provide for the needs of juveniles came from discussions of how to repurpose the old jail. The old jail space is in no way part of the new jail. At this time its adaptive reuse is open for discussion.

The problem to be solved is keeping juveniles within the community. If a juvenile is ordered by the court into detention there is no place in Winona. Juveniles must be transported to remote facilities where they lose contact with their families and suffer other social disruption. It would be better if no juveniles ever had to be ordered into detention; however, until that day comes, there is a need to keep juveniles in the community.

What is the process and the timeline of the jail? What is the relationship between the city and county?

Ken Fritz, Winona County administrator

The county board has approved a new jail. The board authorized, a couple weeks ago, moving to construction drawings for the facility The next step is to use the drawings to provide the Board with a more firm cost, and then they would move forward with requesting bids for construction. We anticipate groundbreaking will probably occur in late summer.



As far as the city goes, (the Winona Police Department shares the building with the Winona County Sheriff's Office) they're still considering options. We're waiting for the city to decide if they want to continue being a tenant or want to move their location. We have a contract through 2024, so we have time.

How can community members & groups, nonprofits, others help with supporting or creating programs outside of the system?

Chris Meyer, Winona County Commissioner

These questions aren't simple, and they don't have black-and-white answers. There are federal regulations that keep the county from subsidizing anything medical assistance doesn't fully reimburse. So we don't have those services. What will it take to get that back? It's going to take involving our state Legislature, our federal delegation, and folks who are really knowledgeable of all the ins and outs and how it works. That doesn't mean that we can't put together folks to do that, but it does take support. And I hope to gather together and channel some of the energy of the folks that are concerned about this issue to partner with me to help lobby our legislators to figure out a plan.

The first step for me has always been trying to understand: what are the complexities? Who do we need to involve? It truly does have to be collaborative. A single individual, a single entity, or the county alone can't figure out what all the issues are. If we can come together, we have the possibility of moving forward on some of these issues.

Justin Green, Jail Advisory Committee Chair

If you want to get involved, the Jail and Jail Alternatives Committee of the Criminal Justice Coordinating Council meets the fourth Wednesday of every month at noon. We are planning programs that meet needs and gaps. Go to the [county website](#), the [CJCC website](#), or let Kalene Engel know at kalene@engellawoffice.com.

Karin Sonneman, Winona County Attorney

Juvenile delinquency is a public health problem. Frankly, criminal behavior and everything else is a public health problem. It's a problem of poverty, of housing, of food insecurity.

One of the things we can do as individuals is to join together from our various, different disciplines to support community organizations (like Front Porch Unity) that are really outside of what we do ... it is important to bring support to those kinds of groups. It's really supporting and trying to keep energized those kinds of efforts and working together.



Ken Fritz, Winona County Administrator

Sometimes we lose perspective on the size of the issue. When you look at Health and Human Services, we have so many different social programs and income maintenance programs we're mandated by the state to provide. Anything extra comes at the direct expense of the county. We are trying to find ways to supplement that - with the Treatment Court, different things like that.

In the past, the county has focused on our package of mandated services. We're talking about how Health and Human Services can reach out more to the community, work with partners, work with nonprofits to create a web for the entire community.

Karen Sanness, Health and Human Services Director

One of the great things we have is a partnership with the Winona Community HUB through Live Well Winona. They are truly prevention, early intervention, addressing social determinants of health within our communities. We are pushing this program forward and trying to grow it throughout Winona ... It has truly been a collaborative effort of community agencies coming together, and I would love to be a part of more of that to divert people from needing our mandated services.

We've heard references to SIM Mapping. What is that?

(Answer compiled from multiple statements)

The county and community partners recently participated in a Sequential Intercept Mapping (SIM) workshop - it analyzes how people encounter justice programs and the justice system, how they move through it, and where there are gaps. It was focused on adults; the county would like to do another focused on juvenile programs and services.

The workshop was completed in March. The next steps will be the county's Criminal Justice Coordinating Council analyzing the results and exploring next steps. The workshop was focused on programs and services, not facilities.

To learn more, you can [visit the Criminal Justice Coordinating Council website page on SIM mapping](#).

