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Consultants Present Criminal Justice System Findings and Recommendations to Justice Council, Advancing County's Strategic Priority

Lincoln, NE – August 8, 2025 – Today the Lancaster County-City of Lincoln Justice Council had the opportunity to discuss the key findings and recommendations of the criminal justice system and jail assessments with experienced consultants at HDR Architecture Inc. (“HDR”), Ethical Correctional Consulting, Inc. (“ECC”), and the University of Nebraska at Omaha School of Criminology and Criminal Justice (“UNO”). These assessments advance a long-term objective under the Lancaster County Board’s Community Well-Being and Safety strategic priority; specifically, to enhance diversion programs and alternatives to incarceration to decrease the jail population and reduce recidivism. Following the collection of feedback from system stakeholders, final reports will be presented to the Lancaster County Board on September 18, 2025.

In February 2024, the Lancaster County Board engaged HDR, ECC, and UNO to conduct criminal justice system and jail assessments in an effort to obtain recommendation and tools to better manage the capacity at the Lancaster County Department of Corrections (“Jail”) and reduce recidivism. The assessments evaluated current and historical trends related to the use of the Jail as part of the broader criminal justice system and sought to understand the rationale for the recent uptick in the Jail population as well as identify opportunities for the Jail to work with system stakeholders to explore solutions to safely reduce the custodial population. Additionally, the assessments examined the impacts of external trends upon the criminal justice system and forecasted the Jail’s future population, including outlining the impact of potential policy and system changes that may reduce population growth.

The consultants presented key findings, including that the Jail’s population growth is driven by inefficiencies in the pretrial process extending lengths of stay, particularly for individuals charged with felonies who are ultimately sentenced and transferred to NDCS. It was discovered that while admissions have remained stable, delays in court proceedings and a lack of alternatives to pretrial detention have exacerbated this issue. Moreover, it was explained that the physical infrastructure for mental health care at the Jail is limited, services struggle to meet the needs of those individuals experiencing severe mental illness, and there are opportunities to expand programming from community-based organizations.

Recommendations from the consultants included:

- Establish a day reporting center as an alternative to pretrial detention for clients with mental health and substance misuse needs.
- Expedite case processing in the courts to reduce pretrial detention and backlog through a multi-pronged approach.
- Continue with urgency the implementation of the Public Safety Assessment (PSA) pretrial risk tool to reduce pretrial detention.
- Enhance data collection by the Jail and Lancaster County Courts to enable future evaluation and identify case processing delays.

Since the conclusion of data collection in 2024, the Jail and other County agencies initiated several ambitious programs and efforts.

- The Jail conducted a training event, entitled, “How Being Trauma-Informed Improves Criminal Justice System Responses Train-the-Trainer,” for 20 participants on June 5 and 6, 2024. This trauma-informed training has been incorporated into the training academy for new Correctional Officers, along with Motivational Interviewing Training, an evidence-based practice that integrates person-centered principles with goal-focused strategies to increase positive behavioral outcomes.
- As part of the Stepping Up Initiative implementation, Lancaster County and Region 5 Systems partnered to develop the Community Outreach program, which helps connect individuals that request services at release for housing, treatment, food, clothing, and more, with community navigators from Wellbeing, Mental Health Association, CenterPointe, and Targeted Adult Service Coordination (TASC). As of July 2025, this program has served 191 individuals.
- The Jail added a Re-Entry and Rehabilitation Administrator and three (3) re-entry specialists to develop and administer re-entry programs and services at the Jail with an emphasis on decreasing the jail population, some of which include:

Opening Doors – Community reentry program through Center for People that focuses on job training, upskilling, and education.

Getting Ahead While Getting Out – Workshop through Food Bank of Lincoln that covers 11 different topics to help one’s success after incarceration, including My Life Upon Release, The Importance of Language, Theory of Change, Causes of Poverty, Hidden Rules of Economic Class, and more.

In2Work – A ServSafe Certification food service program conducted by Aramark.

Nurturing Fathers – Fatherhood Initiative with Lutheran Family Services which strives to re-engage fathers with their children and support the whole family in their efforts to overcome struggles and improve their lives.

WRAP – Wellness Recovery Action Plan with Lutheran Family Services Medical Assisted Treatment (MAT) program.

Peer Support – One-on-one peer support and host recovery group sessions with Wellbeing Initiative.

Prison Outreach Program – Nebraska Wesleyan University professors and students provide educational workshops following college curriculums.

Re-entry specialists have met with 489 individuals to develop re-entry plans focused on connecting individuals with housing, employment services, substance use, mental health, and healthcare providers during and after release. These services include collaborations with CenterPointe for a Care Coordinator to meet weekly with residents to connect them with the appropriate services they need, facilitating seamless transitions and ensuring access to ongoing care; Lutheran Family Services for substance abuse evaluations; and The Bridge and St. Monicas for aftercare substance abuse treatment services, including supportive housing.

- Lancaster County Community Corrections began implementation of the Public Safety Assessment (PSA), a data-driven tool used to make more informed pre-trial decisions; specifically, by using nine key factors to help estimate the likelihood that individuals will appear in court and remain arrest-free; encouraging the least restrictive supervision for justice-involved individuals.
- Lancaster County Crisis Center partnered with Region 5 on the Expanded Emergency Protective Custody Bed Pilot Project to improve access to care for individuals in Lancaster County and 15 other counties within Region 5. As part of the Pilot Project, Emergency Protective Custody beds will be expanded by diverting some individuals from the Lancaster County Crisis Center to Methodist Fremont Health or Mary Lanning Hospital.

The County Board extends its gratitude to the multi-disciplinary team of experienced and passionate consultants from HDR, ECC, and UNO, for their dedication and tireless effort throughout this year-long study to assist and guide Lancaster County in its strategic efforts to better manage the Jail capacity, safely divert justice-involved individuals from the Jail, and enhance both pretrial and reentry programming.

The County Board also thanks all of its local officials who play a key role in the criminal justice system, including a variety of elected and appointed officials in law enforcement, prosecution and defense, criminal justice agencies such as probation, diversion and release programming, detention, and community providers and organizations who played a vital role in these assessments by providing their expertise and input. The County Board greatly appreciates feedback from the residents and contracted providers at the Jail, and especially thanks Department of Corrections staff for their many hours of cooperation and input throughout this process.

Rick Vest, County Board Chair, stated, “I deeply appreciate the extensive work performed by UNO, HDR, and ECC. The thoughtful recommendations provide us a unique opportunity to improve efficiencies in case and system processing, and ultimately steady or reverse the trajectory of growth at the Jail. This meaningful work cannot be siloed to one agency, entity, or provider, rather it requires a coordinated effort by the entirety of our community’s health, social, and justice systems. I also want to commend every one who joined in this courageous effort to address one of the most challenging issues facing America.”

Brad Johnson, Lancaster County Department of Corrections Director, stated, “The Corrections team would like to express our gratitude to UNO, HDR, and ECC for their diligent work in conducting the assessments. We also want to thank the countless stakeholders who participated in this process. The Lancaster County Department of Corrections is committed to reviewing the recommendations provided and initiating implementation on those deemed appropriate for our department. We look forward to working with our many partners to improve our systems and this department.”

David Bostwick, AIA, HDR, stated, “It has been an honor to work with Lancaster County’s criminal justice stakeholders and community-based partners that provide services for individuals within the justice system. These groups and individuals provided us with invaluable data and insights into the functioning of the criminal justice system. The people who work in the system care deeply about creating positive outcomes for all that encounter it, and this can be seen by the initiatives that have already been implemented. We hope our research will further assist the County in reaching its goals of providing a safe and healthy community.”

Andrea Monteiro, ECC Founder and Principal Consultant, stated, “It has been a pleasure working with Lancaster County and engaging with over 150 jail residents, staff, and system stakeholders throughout the duration of this study. The valuable input of those that contributed not only assisted in identifying baseline jail operations but helped to present a future vision of corrections that aligns with the County’s commitment to criminal justice reform.”

Zachary Hamilton, Ph.D., Associate Director, Nebraska Center for Justice Research, UNO, stated, “Our research team would like to thank all the agencies and organizations that provided data needed to complete our scope of work. Specifically, we would like to acknowledge the individuals who shared their important insights, perspectives, and experiences. We also want to particularly thank the 123 residents who took the time to complete our Lancaster County ADF Survey.”

Established in 1859, Lancaster County is Nebraska's second most populated county. Home to the University of Nebraska – Lincoln, Lancaster County is a growing and dynamic community. In collaboration with the City of Lincoln, Lancaster County provides a variety of services for residents and has been nationally recognized for its cooperation and progressive attitude in service to residents. The mission of the Lancaster County Board is to provide innovative, sustainable governmental services for a healthy, safe, diverse, and vibrant community.

For more information about Lancaster County please visit the website at www.lancaster.ne.gov or call 402-441-7447.