



**Okaloosa County Public Safety Coordinating Council**

**Committee Meeting Minutes**

**Meeting: October 2020 12:00 PM**

**Courthouse Annex Extension, Fort Walton Beach/  
Zoom**

**Public Safety Coordinating Council Members**

Present	Name	Agency
x	Graham Fountain	Board of County Commissioners
x	C. Eric Esmond	Chief Corrections Officer
x	Judge Gontarek	Circuit Judge
x	Judge Grinsted	County Judge
x	Jay Jones (Jeremy Miller)	Okaloosa County Sheriff's Office Designee
x	April Madden	Assistant State Attorney
x	Charles Russell	Assistant Public Defender
	Robert Kemp	Circuit Administrator, Florida Department of Corrections, Probation and Parole Services
x	Kelli Huckabee	Pretrial Services
	Tina Ferland	Judicial Corrections Services, County Probation Provider

**Other Attendees:**

April McDaniel, Captain, Department of Corrections  
 Desiree Hartwig, Department of Corrections  
 Dennis Knighten, Department of Corrections  
 Susan Priddy, Corizon Health Services, Department of Corrections  
 Larry McFarland, Bridgeway Center, Inc.  
 John Anderson, Okaloosa Clerk of Court Office  
 Craig Coffey, Deputy County Administrator  
 Valerie Broxson, Clerk of Court Administration  
 Janice George, Big Bend/Department of Children and Families  
 Paul Mixon, County Commissioner

Meeting opened at 12:04 pm.

**Meeting conducted via Zoom.**

**Welcome:**

Chief Esmond and Commissioner Fountain opened the meeting. The COVID-19 pandemic was briefly addressed and both parties indicated that two prior meetings were missed due to such, albeit they were grateful for everyone's attendance via ZOOM today.

**Minutes/Commissioner Report**

1. a. The minutes were approved as sent.

b. Commissioner Fountain introduced Paul Mixon, who will be replacing him as a commissioner, as well as attendee for the Public Safety Coordinating Council meeting. Commissioner Fountain also introduced Ms. Madden, State Attorney for Circuit One.

## **2. Old Business**

- a. Spring Break was briefly discussed by Chief Esmond, as this is typically a peak time for misdemeanor arrests; in 2019, there were 597 arrests and no repeat offenders. Data was not offered for 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic affected tourists which spring break arrests would historically be attributed. Arrest rates were actually lower during the spring break period due to the pandemic.
- b. Chief Esmond briefly discussed judgement and sentencing packets. He indicated that Lt. Roper, as booking supervisor, has been facilitating transfers to prison as quickly as possible with the newly imposed restrictions due to the pandemic. Commissioner Fountain inquired as to when these transfers would be back to a normal schedule, Chief Esmond indicated that the jail is only able to send six male inmates to prison at a time, and each locality is only allotted so many transfers dates per month. He reported that the department is able to add to the list if slots from other counties are not full, nine male inmates were transferred this week. Commissioner Fountain suggested outreach to Tallahassee, if needed to encourage return to normal operations. Chief Esmond pointed out medical staff have been diligent in ensuring that our inmates medically qualify for transfers so as to lessen the risks for Covid-19 transmission to prison inmates.
- c. Chief Esmond and Susan Priddy reported on the department mental health staff expansions. They indicated the new mental health RN position, currently filled by Courtney Bowden, has been very helpful. Tricia Fagan, LCSW, has been doing very well in her role. A second mental health position was added. Receiving the National Commission on Correctional Health Care Mental Health accreditation has allowed an increase in mental health assessments and discharge planning. The program has helped identify problems quicker with less issues falling through the cracks.
- d. Another expansion in the medical department will eventually incorporate a NARCAN exchange program as well as assisting with reentry plans and providing tools for those inmates with upcoming releases, to include referrals for those inmates linking them with services in the community.
- e. Chief Esmond briefly mentioned that the Reentry and Programs Coordinators have been working on implementing new programs for the inmates, but that these updates would be provided later in the meeting by Mr. Knighten.
- f. Judge Gontarek indicated that the video court appearances have been very beneficial. He expressed a desire for more video rooms with poly-coms at the jail since managing each judicial docket with only one room can be challenging. He expressed a desire to continue this process, even after the pandemic, to cut down on court transports. Commissioner Fountain indicated

that the pandemic has taught us we may be able to continue some of these processes for efficiency and preservation of staff. Mr. Coffey stated that they would consider creating more space at the jail to accommodate these desires. Chief Esmond echoed these desires and plans. Judge Stone expressed the efficiency of holding video court is beneficial yet can present challenges for jail staff when dockets changes quickly.

### **3. Jail Report**

- a. Chief Esmond presented the statistics report and opened it for questions. Commissioner Fountain asked how the population changed between March 2020 and October 2020. The measures in place, such as lower arrests and lower bonds, reduced the population, but agencies have returned to normal operations, so the jail population has risen to over 700. Defendants released on bond when they normally may not have been or were being provided notices to appear rather than being brought to jail during March through August. The judiciary worked to keep the population down and release as many to the community without compromising safety. Many have been booked back into custody on either Failure to Appear or Orders Revoking Bond.

### **4. Pretrial Services Report**

- a. Ms. Huckabee reported that Pretrial had a rise in population during the initial onset of the pandemic with their numbers for March and April, 400 and 300, respectively. During that time, they looked at individuals in jail to see if they could be let out in some way leading to the rise in numbers. GPS rates have been increasing and are currently at about 40 cases. The mental health caseload is at the highest level ever recorded.
- b. Commissioner Fountain inquired about the cost of GPS monitoring. Mr. Coffey indicated that the cost is about \$8/day, which covers the device and the monitoring service. The devices are leased currently, but there was some discussion on the possibility of pre-purchasing these devices in the future.
- c. Ms. Huckabee commented on the newly implemented diversion program. There are currently 25 people in the program and they have had 9 people graduate to this point. The state attorney defines the criteria and approves people for the program and they have been very supportive in allowing people in the program with hope to expand the criteria in order to allow more individuals into the program. Mr. McFarland mentioned discussions about reducing charges for some felony offenders if they successfully complete the program, but these individuals are not eligible for the program under the current criteria. Ms. Madden indicated that they are going to begin screening some felony offenders who would otherwise be eligible for the program in hopes of increasing the number of participants. Pretrial hopes to analyze the participants who have completed the program in order to obtain some insight on what types of people remain successful. However, the program is still in its infancy and there is presently not enough data to understand the full scope and impacts of the program on the community. Commissioner Fountain was in favor of maintaining good data on the program to assist in determining future funding needs. The program has had some failures, as some people were not a good fit for the program; however, the overall big picture is a good one, even

given the challenges the pandemic has presented. Positive feedback from the clientele has been received with some participants staying off the streets, reuniting with family, and maintaining proper medication management. Mr. Coffey advised that the program is fully funded through December of 2021 and will continue to evolve. The program is looking into options on how to support graduates following graduation with programs which could include transitional housing because sending them back into the community without housing presents concerns for recidivism. Additional discussion included time frames of the program because some individuals may need more than 90 days to successfully complete the program and there have been suggestions of adding 30 more days if necessary.

## **5. New Business**

- a. The impacts of the pandemic on the judiciary were discussed. Judge Gontarek indicated judges are anxious to resume jury trials, however, the Supreme Court has implemented directives which base the resumption of trials on the number of current COVID-19 cases in the district. The County's positive test rates have been too high to allow for trials to resume. Commissioner Fountain expressed frustration regarding the directives and pointed out the county is doing more testing, which naturally is going to reflect more positive cases, though the actual numbers of positive cases may be less than or equal to what they were at the onset of the pandemic when less testing was occurring. He expressed concern over the fairness to the defendants and the judiciary will be overloaded once trials eventually resume. Commissioner Fountain expressed a need for an alternate measure other than positive case numbers. He indicated his ability to reach out to Tallahassee in order to express the need to expedite the process to reintroduce jury trials.
- b. Chief Esmond reported on the expanded court dockets. The poly-com is now being used for regular dockets rather than only first appearance. The process has been a team effort between the department and judiciary. He expressed gratitude to everyone involved for being so amenable to the changes that have occurred as a result of the pandemic. He expressed concerns regarding the expansion of video court since additional poly-coms and video rooms will require additional department staff due to an increase in inmate movement and inmate supervision in locations waiting on court proceedings as safety cannot be compromised while held in those areas.
- c. Chief Esmond and Mr. Knighten discussed the jail's ongoing program efforts aimed at assisting with population reduction. Mr. Knighten indicated that the Reentry and Programs Coordinators have not been able to conduct classes and programs to their full extent due to precautions related to the pandemic. The ServSafe Manager program has enrolled 33 inmates in the program with 19 completing the class and 14 obtained certification.
- d. The EPA 608 Program which trains inmates in HVAC systems has enrolled 48 in the program with many passing some, if not all levels of the certification. Inmates have been offered jobs upon release as a result of completing the course.

- e. Religious and GED services have resumed on a limited basis. Commissioner Fountain inquired as to a welding program. Chief Esmond advised that programs such as this are difficult to implement due the amount of time necessary to complete the program coupled with the transiency of our inmate population as well as lack of available space at the jail presents problems getting it operational. Chief Esmond outlined the need for more space as well as additional staff if the jail is to implement additional programs such as this, whether on or off site.
- f. Chief Esmond indicated that the OSHA 10 program should begin soon, since the department has a certified instructor. There were discussions regarding a farm at property being considered for purchase by the county as a potential site for new programs.
- g. Commissioner Fountain inquired as to the preference of the frequency of PSCC meetings. Chief Esmond and Judge Gontarek both supported the continuation of quarterly meetings. The proposed schedule of meetings for 2021 (January 28, April 29, July 29, October 28) was approved. A determination will be made at a later date if the meetings are at the courthouse or via Zoom.
- h. Commissioner Fountain initiated discussions concerning the need for a decision on how to expand the jail stating the county cannot afford to build an entirely new facility. Discussions have been made suggesting tearing down a pod and building a new one until each were updated holding more inmates and alleviate some staffing issues, however, there are many infrastructure challenges in regards to that plan, especially where sewage and plumbing are concerned. Mr. Coffey indicated that the current facility is very old and it could become very expensive to maintain upkeep and repairs on the building. He shared thoughts it may be more economical to build an entirely new jail. Having a work camp was discussed which could be located at the additional property close to the prison where the minimum security inmates could be transferred.
- i. Ms. Madden indicated that she will not lose site of the eastern counties and will appoint someone to appear at the PSCC meetings on her behalf if she is unable to attend. Mr. Miller thanked Commissioner Fountain for his service and will be presenting him with a challenge coin. Chief Esmond echoed these sentiments. Ms. Broxson thanked Chief Esmond for the continued cooperation with video court operations.
- j. Mr. Anderson indicated that the judiciary has been inquiring as to why there has been an increase in failure to appear for court. The Clerk's office has a procedure in place to notify individuals of their court dates and an email program for notifications has been added since they believe it is the most effective way to communicate the updated docket to defendants, however, the attorneys have concerns their clients are not receiving a true and legal notification. Mr. Russell stated that he believes the Clerk's office is doing what they can to notify individuals under these unprecedented circumstances and indicated they simply do not have good contact information for their

clients. The Clerk's office believes the increase is a result of both poor notification as well as people using the pandemic as an excuse not to appear.

Meeting ended at 1:25 pm.