

KEYS TO THE JAIL

How New Orleans Can Sustain Jail Reforms through Better Governance

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THE PROBLEM

The New Orleans jail has been under federal court oversight or federal investigation for more than 50 years to address chronic problems, including violence, poor sanitation, readily available contraband, understaffing and inadequate training.

- The court has linked the lack of progress to the division of roles and responsibilities for the jail, or its governance structure.
- While the City of New Orleans must provide most of the funding, the Orleans Parish Sheriff runs the jail. Over the decades, the City has blamed the jail's deficiencies on mismanagement, while the Sheriff has cited inadequate funding. The resulting power struggles have impeded cooperative problem solving.
- However, recent progress on implementing jail reforms and the election of a new Sheriff, who has prioritized compliance with court mandates and a possible agreement with the City to resolve areas of past conflict, provide an opportunity to improve and sustain the jail's performance.
- BGR's report is intended to help the Sheriff and the City develop a stronger relationship to achieve that goal.

WHY IT MATTERS

Ending the half-century of failure to sustain constitutional conditions at the Orleans Parish jail is critical to:

- Ensure the safety and security of people in custody, most of whom are awaiting trial and have not been convicted.
- Avoid wasting public resources that could go toward the community's many unmet needs. The jail is the third largest expenditure in the City's budget behind the police and fire departments.

WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT

[BGR's research shows](#) that the jail governance structure in New Orleans diverges sharply from national norms as well as recommended practices. Key deficiencies include insufficient collaboration, strategic planning, transparency and accountability. To remedy these flaws and help sustain constitutional jail operations, [BGR recommends](#) that the City and Sheriff develop a multi-year agreement to:

1. Establish an ongoing strategic planning process in which they collaborate on the budget, facilities, employee compensation and training, and other jail needs.
2. Improve fiscal transparency and accountability, both to ensure adequate City funding for the jail and careful tracking of how the Sheriff uses it.
3. Strengthen the appointment process for the top jail administrator by defining the job's responsibilities and qualifications and by enabling City and public input on the candidates.
4. Create an independent local entity to oversee jail performance to ensure ongoing monitoring of jail conditions and treatment of people in custody after federal court oversight ends.

Subsequently, the Legislature should establish the reforms in State law to ensure they will endure beyond the term of any agreement and the tenures of individual sheriffs, mayors and City Council members. State lawmakers also should require reforms in any key areas where the City and Sheriff either do not reach agreement or lack the power to make permanent changes, such as establishing local external oversight of the jail.