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BGR Finds Sheriff, City Must Improve Governance to Support Jail Reforms

The Bureau of Governmental Research (BGR) released a report today that urges the Orleans Parish Sheriff and the City of New Orleans to forge a multi-year agreement to improve their collaboration, strategic planning, administration and accountability for the parish's adult jail. The report highlights how a more cooperative relationship between the Sheriff and the City is essential to end more than 50 years of federal oversight of the jail and sustain recent performance gains.

The BGR report, entitled [*Keys to the Jail: How New Orleans Can Sustain Jail Reforms through Better Governance*](#), finds that the jail's chronic problems are linked to the division of roles and responsibilities between the Sheriff and the City, also called the jail's governance structure. While the City of New Orleans must provide most of the jail's funding, it has no control over how the Orleans Parish Sheriff runs the jail. Conversely, the Sheriff's ability to improve jail conditions is limited by the City's control of the purse strings. Over the decades, the two entities have tended to blame one another for the jail's deficiencies, impeding cooperative problem solving.

The jail has been under federal oversight or investigation since 1970 and is currently subject to a consent decree, or lawsuit settlement agreement, that a federal court approved in 2013. The consent decree mandates more than 170 reforms to address numerous problems, including violence, poor sanitation, readily available contraband, understaffing and inadequate training. The court has at various times linked the deficiencies to the City's historical underfunding of the jail and ineffective management by the Sheriff's Office. However, progress in recent years 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.

Improving jail conditions is essential to (1) ensure the safety and security of people in custody, most of whom are awaiting trial and have not been convicted, and (2) avoid wasting public resources that could go toward the

community's many unmet needs. The City's annual jail funding totals about \$60 million, making it the City's third largest expenditure behind the police and fire departments.

Sustaining improvements at jail will take not just motivated, visionary leaders, but also a stronger governance structure to support effective decision-making. BGR's research shows that the jail governance structure in New Orleans – particularly the strict separation between the City and Sheriff – 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 achieve and sustain constitutional jail operations, BGR recommends that the City and Sheriff develop a binding, multi-year agreement to:

- **Establish an ongoing strategic planning process** in which the City and Sheriff collaborate on the budget, facilities, employee compensation and training, and other jail needs.
- **Improve fiscal transparency and accountability**, both to ensure adequate City funding for the jail and careful tracking of how the Sheriff uses it.
- **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.
- **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.

BGR further recommends that the Louisiana Legislature, which has substantial control over the jail's governance structure, establish the reforms in State law so 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.

“The jail's problems have persisted for decades, but we may be in the best position in generations to achieve and sustain improvements in jail conditions,” BGR President and CEO Becky Mowbray said. “Making good on this opportunity is critical for those in custody, their families and taxpayers.”

[Visit BGR's website to read more about this report.](#)

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BGR is a private, nonprofit, independent research organization. Since its founding in 1932, it has been dedicated to informed public policy-making and the effective use of public resources in the Greater New Orleans area. For more information, call (504) 525-4152 or visit BGR's website, www.bgr.org.