

NOW

BGR's Spotlight on Local Government Issues

Jailbreak Should Spur Sheriff and City to Tackle Jail's Needs

Public outrage over the brazen escape of 10 men from the Orleans Parish jail is a clarion call for the Orleans Parish Sheriff's Office and the City of New Orleans to squarely face chronic problems plaguing the jail. These include high staff turnover and vacancy rates, a jail population well above the allowed capacity, and facility problems, such as malfunctioning locks, that create security risks.¹ Also, the Sheriff's Office has struggled to comply with federal court-ordered reforms, including effective supervision of detainees.² The May 16 escape shows that the failure to fix these problems not only jeopardizes the safety of jail staff and detainees, but it puts the entire community at risk. Authorities warned the public to consider the escapees armed and dangerous as several face charges for violent crimes, including murder. As of mid-day May 19, seven of the men remained at large.

State officials have initiated investigations to examine factors that enabled the escape, including security breakdowns, weaknesses in the jail's security apparatus and inadequate staffing levels. The New Orleans City Council plans to meet Tuesday (May 20) to begin its own inquiry into the incident, including the Sheriff's Office delay in discovering the escape and notifying other law enforcement agencies and the public.³ These probes are essential to address this massive security failure. But it is also important for the Sheriff's Office and the City to come to the table and map out a joint strategy for a safe, secure and high-performing jail.

Cooperation is critical because of their shared responsibility for the jail, which BGR analyzed in a 2022 report called [Keys to the Jail](#). The City must provide most of the jail's funding under state law, but it has no control over how the Sheriff runs the jail. Conversely, the Sheriff's ability to improve jail conditions can be limited by the City's control of the purse strings. Over the decades,

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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. Ultimately, the public bears the consequences of an under-performing jail, which has been subject to federal oversight for more than 50 years.⁴

These historical disagreements are already surfacing in comments by various public officials about what went wrong. Was the escape the result of a lack of funding from the City to adequately staff the jail and fix known security defects in the jail's structure? Or was it due to poor management by the Sheriff's Office that left a jail pod unsupervised and failed to detect the jailbreak for more than seven hours?

But if the conversation ends with another round of finger-pointing, it is a disservice to the public. [Keys to the Jail](#) makes a series of recommendations on how to resolve the recurring disagreements over City funding and Sheriff's Office accountability for its use of those funds and the jail's performance. Several recommendations presented below speak directly to the pressing need for long-range, cooperative planning and budgeting processes that can help reset the jail on a path to better performance, while keeping everyone safer. Click [here](#) for the full set of recommendations.

To ensure the jail’s operating and capital needs are carefully understood and addressed over time, the City and Sheriff should agree to:

- **Develop a multi-year strategic plan for the New Orleans jail.** The City and Sheriff should undertake a collaborative planning process, with input from other actors in the justice system and the public. This should include determining and funding adequate staffing levels and making necessary repairs to malfunctioning locks, inoperable cameras, and other security problems with the jail facility. The planning process should also include annual reviews of performance against the goals and objectives of the plan, in coordination with developing the annual budget for the jail. In addition, the City, Sheriff and other justice system actors should collaborate on common issues, such as sharing information and resources, planning for future jail population and facility needs, and improving outcomes for both detainees and the public. Having a joint strategy could improve trust and cooperation and the effective use of public resources allocated to the jail.
- **Establish a standard process and documentation for developing and approving the jail’s annual operating and capital budgets.** The new process should coordinate with the City’s annual budgeting process. The budget should clearly define the City’s funding obligations and how the

Sheriff can use the funds so the public can hold both parties accountable. The budgets also should include jail funding sources not provided by the City to present a complete financial picture. These sources include the property tax recently renewed by Orleans Parish voters.⁵ Having a full picture of available resources and the Sheriff’s spending priorities for staffing, maintenance and other key issues is essential to achieving the goals of any multi-year strategic plan.

- **Develop a compensation strategy for jail deputies and other employees.** The City and Sheriff should accompany the strategy with a jail staffing plan, updated annually; periodic independent studies of compensation levels; and a budget for appropriate continuing education and training for employees to ensure a stable and professional jail workforce. The City and Sheriff should periodically evaluate the compensation strategy to determine whether it is achieving its goals of adequate staffing at the jail. BGR’s report on the May 3, 2025, tax renewal found that low pay, recruitment challenges and turnover in jail security positions have been long-running problems. The Sheriff’s Office has said it needs more than 200 additional employees to run its main facilities at optimum levels.⁶ This does not include the extra staff needed when the “Phase III” medical and mental health wing is completed next year.

KEY NUMBERS TO KNOW ABOUT THE ORLEANS PARISH JAIL

42%

Rate of substantial compliance with reforms mandated by the federal court, as measured by its most recent monitors’ report, which covered performance through March 2024.

211

The number of additional jail employees that the Sheriff’s Office says are needed to run the jail optimally, which represents a 28% vacancy rate.

\$91
million

The 2025 operating budget for the Orleans Parish jail, of which the City of New Orleans allocates \$71.8 million (79%).

261

The population of the jail in excess of the City Council’s 1,250-person cap at the beginning of 2025. The total population at that time was 1,511 persons in custody.

For more detail on these figures, see BGR, [On the Ballot: Orleans Parish Sheriff’s Office Tax Renewal](#), May 3, 2025, pp. 8, 10, 11 and 12.

To improve transparency and accountability for the City's adequate funding of the jail and the Sheriff's efficient and effective use of taxpayer dollars, the City and Sheriff should agree to:

- **Develop a standard, transparent process for the City administration to review the Sheriff's annual budget proposal.** Too often, the Sheriff's Office asks for a City budget increase with limited supporting data or analysis. Then, the City typically approves a lower amount with little explanation why. The two entities should establish a more transparent process in which the Sheriff's Office submits a funding request backed by data, such as a staffing study. The City administration should review the Sheriff's proposal in the context of the strategic plan for the jail. The process should conclude with the administration's report to the City Council explaining the rationale for any changes from the Sheriff's original budget request. Citizens could then assess the City's funding level and hold the mayor and councilmembers accountable for fulfilling their shared responsibilities.
- **Provide more meaningful data and accountability from the Sheriff's Office at the joint quarterly public meetings held by the City Council.** The Sheriff's Office should regularly report to the council on expenditures of its overall budget and its progress toward improving jail compliance, performance and outcomes.⁷ The Sheriff's Office

should document how it spends City funding, with details on budget variances, as well as contracts, operations, jail staffing, population and other cost drivers. The City Council should use its existing oversight powers, alongside those of the New Orleans Office of Inspector General, to probe any discrepancies with the budget.

Fixing the jail's problems will not be easy. The City's finances have tightened after a one-time infusion of nearly \$400 million in federal pandemic relief funding as BGR documented in a recent report entitled [After the Windfall](#).⁸ The day before the escape, City administrators announced that the City's 2025 budget is already on pace for a \$70 million shortfall, due in large part to overtime pay associated with another major security failure – the January 1 Bourbon Street terrorist attack.⁹

The financial situation would have been even more tenuous had voters not renewed by a two-vote margin a property tax that provides \$11.7 million of the jail's \$91.1 million budget this year. A BGR analysis concluded with a recommendation in support of the May 3 tax renewal. By the barest of margins, the public entrusted policymakers with the continued receipt of these funds. After the shocking jailbreak, it is incumbent on the Sheriff's Office and City to work to rebuild the public's trust by collaborating on a plan to make lasting progress on jail reforms that help ensure the safety and security of detainees, jail staff and the public.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Bureau of Governmental Research (BGR), [On the Ballot: Orleans Parish Sheriff's Office Tax Renewal, May 3, 2025](#), pp. 11-13, 15, and 19.
- 2 Ibid., pp. 9-10.
- 3 The council may also seek changes to Louisiana law to improve the notification process. Carroll, Metia, "[New Orleans City Council to address escaped inmates law](#)," WDSU, May 18, 2025. The City Council meeting information is available [here](#) on the council's website.
- 4 BGR, [Keys to the Jail: How New Orleans Can Sustain Jail Reforms through Better Governance](#), August 2022.
- 5 BGR, [On the Ballot](#).
- 6 Ibid., pp. 11-12.
- 7 BGR emphasized the need to include reporting on the property tax in its position in favor of the tax renewal proposition. Ibid., p. 3.
- 8 BGR, [After the Windfall: Strengthening the City of New Orleans' Financial Management Practices](#), April 2025.
- 9 City of New Orleans, [City Council Budget Committee Meeting: Reports for Period Ending March 31, 2025](#), p. 6, May 16, 2025.

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