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Report shows remarkable drop in Milwaukee County detainees

Enhanced attention by policymakers needed to determine meaning and sustainability

MILWAUKEE, Wisconsin – *Friday, June 17, 2011* – A steep drop in the number of Milwaukee County adults and juveniles held in county and state detention facilities – documented by the Milwaukee-based Public Policy Forum in a Research Brief released today – suggests a pressing need for policymakers to determine why the trend is occurring, how it is impacting public safety, and whether it should be sustained.

“The number of individuals detained by the county in its corrections facilities, and supported with county dollars in state facilities, has dropped 16% in the past two years,” says Forum President Rob Henken. “This is yielding millions of dollars of savings, begging the question of whether county officials should be considering strategies to maintain or even accelerate this trend.”

The Forum report documents the decline in average daily populations at Milwaukee County’s two adult detention facilities and its juvenile detention facility, as well as in the number of Milwaukee County delinquent youth housed in state correctional institutions. It also identifies the financial impacts associated with the declining populations, examines data trends for key indicators in other parts of the justice system, and discusses possible causes for the decline.

Among the report's key findings:

- The average number of adults and juveniles in detention each day was 2,892 in 2010, by far the lowest total in the past five years, and 16% lower than the average number of 3,448 daily detainees in 2008.
- On the juvenile detention side, the average daily population (ADP) of Milwaukee County youth housed in state juvenile corrections institutions was 170, or 35% lower than the average of 263 just two years earlier. In addition, the ADP in the county's own juvenile detention facility decreased 17% in that period (from 106 to 88), and the monthly average of active cases in the juvenile system plummeted 39% (from 2,971 to 1,823).
- On the adult side, the total number of individuals under detention and/or the supervision of the Milwaukee County Sheriff declined by 455 between 2007 and 2010, a 14% decrease.
- The reductions in detainee populations have been major contributors to substantial property tax levy reductions in the budgets of both the county's Delinquency and Court Services Division (DCSD) and Office of the Sheriff. At DCSD, property tax levy expenditures decreased from \$19.8 million to \$12.8 million between 2008 and 2010, while property tax expenditures on adult detention in the Sheriff's budget decreased from \$101 million to \$97 million during the same period.

The Research Brief explains that there are several competing points of view among law enforcement officials and others as to why the steep declines in detainee populations are occurring and whether they are desirable from a public safety perspective. Because of these competing views and a lack of available data to determine who is correct, the report recommends a series of actions by elected and justice system officials to step up data collection efforts and solicit informed discussion.

“While we cannot be certain why detention populations are declining, we do know that the fiscal benefits to Milwaukee County are real,” says Henken. “Given the county’s significant financial challenges, it is imperative for county and law enforcement leaders to seek answers and consider how and whether recent trends might be sustained.”

The full report can be accessed at the Forum’s web site, www.publicpolicyforum.org. The report was made possible with grant funding from the Helen Bader Foundation.

Milwaukee-based Public Policy Forum, established in 1913 as a local government watchdog, is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to enhancing the effectiveness of government and the development of southeastern Wisconsin through objective research of public policy issues.

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