



Handcuffs and a roll of cash.

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Philadelphia exploring reforms to 'outmoded' bail system

Congress weighs national reform as city seeks alternative models

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Prompted by national concerns over the efficiency and equity of the U.S. criminal justice system, Philadelphia has joined several American cities to consider reforming a bail system that crowds jails and leaves many nonviolent and first-time offenders stuck awaiting trial behind bars.

In Philadelphia, the nation's fifth-largest city, three-quarters of the more than 7,800 men and women in jail are currently awaiting trial, according to The Associated Press. Hundreds of them would be free if the city developed an alternative to the lengthy bail system that takes an average of six months to move cases to trial. At \$120 per day to house inmates in Philadelphia's jail system, the cost to the city would exceed \$126 million for those awaiting trial.



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Philadelphia's mayor-elect Jim Kenney has pledged support for goals established by criminal justice advocates to cut the city's jail population by a third over the next three years, reducing the burden on a system that has been at or over capacity for at least 15 years.

The issue, which affects city's nationwide, is encapsulated by the story of Kareem Chappelle, who was arrested in Philadelphia with less than two grams of crack in June 2013. Chappelle, 26, spent a few days in jail before being released ahead of his trial, but when he forgot his court date, a bench warrant issued and he turned himself in the day before Thanksgiving.

Chappelle, unable to pay \$600 for bail, spent the entire holiday season behind bars and away from his girlfriend and sons. In the meantime, he lost his home, his car and his job.

How Chappelle's story ultimately ended, however, could also point the way toward a more equitable and cost-effective system. Without any prior arrests, Chappelle became eligible for The Choice is Yours, a probation-like rehabilitation program that allows offenders to avoid further punishment if they can hold a steady job and keep from breaking the law.

Backed by Philadelphia DA Seth Williams and several organizations including the Lenfest Foundation and the Pennsylvania Prison Society, The Choice is Yours aims to bolster public safety and reduce recidivism.

"We're trying to do as much as we can to reduce the pretrial wait," said District Attorney Seth Williams, whose office is lowering severity of many charges, lowering bail for lesser crimes and focusing less on low-level cases. "My greatest concern is that the right people are in prison for the right reasons."

As Philadelphia seeks new models for its bail system, the city will compete for one of 10 grants from the MacArthur Foundation, which plans to distribute \$75 million as part of a five-year initiative to cut down America's incarcerated population (earlier this year, the city received \$150,000 from the MacArthur Foundation to study ways to achieve this goal).

Specifically, Philadelphia wants to create a computer model that can analyze the prison population and evaluate each defendant's flight risk when considering placement in expanded diversion programs or supervised release options such as electronic monitoring. These reforms would eliminate some of the pressure defendants face as a result of cash bail as the primary model.

Already, the city has introduced specialty courts for mental health and veterans issues, while recently implemented video court appearances have expedited a glutted process.

On Thursday, President Obama met with members of Congress to overcome an impasse on the Sentencing Reform and Corrections Act of 2015, a justice reform bill that has united many politicians across party lines but has yet to reach the Senate for a vote, according to The Hill.


The bill, which would adjust certain mandatory minimum sentences for particular crimes, will most likely come to a vote early next year. Some fear, however, that further delay will push the issue into the crossfire of the 2016 presidential race, politicizing the bill and potentially preventing it from reaching a vote before President Obama leaves the White House.



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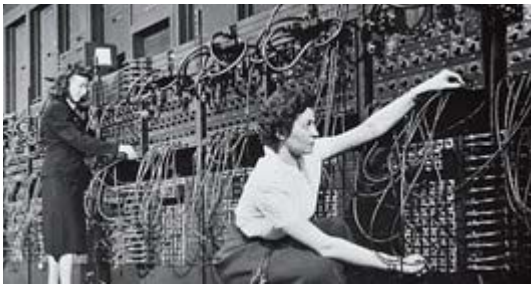
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