

As Board Chair, John Wetzel Committed to CSG Justice Center's Data-Driven Progress



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Pennsylvania Corrections Secretary John Wetzel, who is widely recognized as a thought leader in corrections, will serve as the 2017 chair of The Council of State Governments' Justice Center Executive Committee, a board he has been committed to since his state's Justice Reinvestment initiative launched in 2012.

“We actually shut down the construction of a new prison on the faith that Justice Reinvestment would deliver a population reduction in a system that was growing by 1,500 inmates a year,” Wetzel said. “So, my faith in the Justice Center paid off.”

Wetzel, appointed Pennsylvania corrections secretary in January 2011 and reappointed in January 2015, presided over the first prison population reduction in Pennsylvania in more than four decades. In addition, he oversaw the restructuring of both the community corrections and mental health systems and the re-engineering of internal processes to yield a more efficient program delivery.

Justice Reinvestment is a data-driven approach many states are using to improve public safety, reduce corrections spending, and reinvest savings in strategies that decrease crime and recidivism rates. Shortly after Pennsylvania launched its program, Wetzel was invited to a CSG Justice Center board meeting.

Wetzel said he “was just blown away by the caliber of people around the table and the depth of conversation. And I've been hooked ever since.”

With nearly 30 years of experience in corrections, Wetzel has held positions including corrections officer, treatment counselor, warden and training academy director. As warden of the Franklin County Jail in Pennsylvania for nine years, beginning in January 2002, Wetzel was credited with leading an effort that resulted in the transformation of their correctional system. Under his leadership, Franklin County saw a 20 percent reduction in its jail population while the crime rate declined.

Before he became chair, Wetzel served as vice chair of the CSG Justice Center Executive Committee.

“When state leaders engage with us, the opportunity to have smart, wide-ranging discussions on criminal justice in a meaningful way is really exhilarating,” Wetzel said. “And to see the discussions at the board level translate down to the excellent staff of the Justice Center, to really good, strong outcomes that make America safer and better—I mean, who wouldn't want to have that experience?”

One of the biggest justice-related challenges facing state leaders today is result of a “24-hour news environment where everyone wants outcomes immediately,” Wetzel said.

“The reality is good public policy, especially in criminal justice, is based on data—data that's analyzed, data that tells a story and that really builds consensus,” he said. “What I'm describing doesn't lend itself to overnight answers.”

The CSG Justice Center is currently working on Justice Reinvestment-related policy changes in six states: Arkansas, Georgia, Massachusetts, Montana, North Dakota and Pennsylvania. And the Justice Center continues to implement policy changes in past Justice Reinvestment states such as Alabama and Nebraska.

“Re-entry was once an afterthought, dismissed in order to focus on protecting the safety of the public,” Wetzel said. “Now, corrections leaders and elected officials understand it's an integral part of preserving public safety. But beyond that understanding, there's far more we need to do to ensure that when someone leaves prison or jail, they don't come back. That will continue to be a foundational part of our work this year.”

Wetzel said he's confident the CSG Justice Center can continue to find solutions and make progress.

“We have a forum to use data to have real discussions on real-world problems,” he said. “That leads to real-world solutions.”

2017 EVENT HIGHLIGHTS



Stepping Up: The California Summit

Jan. 18–19 | Sacramento, California

Stepping Up: The California Summit convened a broad cross-section of county leaders, state officials, and representatives from state and national organizations to share challenges, best practices, and advance their plans for measuring and reducing the number of people with mental illnesses in California jails. Stepping Up is a national initiative launched by The Council of State Governments Justice Center, the National Association of Counties, and the American Psychiatric Association Foundation.



Multi-State School Discipline Convening

Jan. 26 | New York City

Hosted by the CSG Justice Center, education leaders and champions from California, Connecticut, Illinois, North Carolina and Tennessee met to review key strategies and lessons learned from their efforts to reduce suspensions and expulsions; identify other key measures of success of school discipline initiatives related to school climate and student outcomes; and determine strategies for states to ensure that school discipline initiatives result in better learning environments and improved student outcomes.

Young Adults in the Justice System: Reducing Recidivism and Supporting the Successful Transition to Adulthood

Feb. 27 | Cambridge, Massachusetts

Researchers focused on young adults from various fields (e.g., behavioral health, education, and child welfare) will present on the most recent research about what works to improve outcomes for this population. Policymakers and system leaders from states considering reforms that impact young adults—Connecticut, Illinois, Massachusetts and Vermont—will discuss how this research can be applied to young adults in the criminal justice system.

PUBLICATIONS & RESOURCES



A Five-Level Risk and Needs System: Maximizing Assessment Results in Corrections through the Development of a Common Language

Released: January 2017

Reducing the Number of People with Mental Illnesses in Jail: Six Questions County Leaders Need to Ask

Released: January 2017

Critical Connections: Getting People Leaving Prison and Jail the Mental Health Care and Substance Use Treatment They Need

Released: January 2017

Mentoring as a Component of Reentry: Practical Considerations from the Field

Expected release: February 2017

Cognitive Behavioral Interventions: A Comprehensive Curriculum for People in the Criminal Justice System

Expected release: February 2017

Hiring People with Criminal Records: A Toolkit for Engaging Employers and the Business Community

Expected release: February 2017

Strengthening Correctional Culture: Eight Ways Corrections Leaders Can Support Their Staff to Reduce Recidivism

Expected release: April 2017

Demonstrating Impact: Measuring Program Performance

Expected release: April 2017

The Multi-State School Discipline Convening Report

Expected release: June 2017

The National Clean Slate Clearinghouse

Expected launch of full site: August 2017

INITIATIVES



Justice Reinvestment is a data-driven approach to helping states reduce corrections and related criminal justice spending and reinvest a portion of savings in strategies that can help reduce recidivism and increase public safety.

Stepping Up is a national initiative to help advance counties' efforts to reduce the prevalence of adults with mental illnesses in local jails. Since its launch in 2015 by The CSG Justice Center, the National Association of Counties, and the American Psychiatric Association Foundation, more than 300 counties have signed on to the Stepping Up initiative.

The County Justice and Behavioral Health Systems Improvement Project uses qualitative and quantitative research to improve outcomes for people with mental illnesses in county justice systems throughout the country.

The Reentry and Employment Project is focused on uniting business leaders, policymakers, and practitioners from the corrections and workforce development fields to improve reentry and employment outcomes for people returning to their communities after incarceration.

The Statewide Juvenile Justice Improvement Initiative is a program that provides intensive technical assistance to states and local jurisdictions to develop system-wide plans to reduce recidivism and improve other outcomes for youth in the justice system.

The School Discipline Project is an ongoing effort to help policymakers and education leaders reduce suspensions and expulsions while improving learning environments, school safety and student outcomes.

Technical Assistance—The CSG Justice Center provides ongoing training and technical assistance through the National Reentry Resource Center to state and local juvenile justice systems that receive grant funding through the Second Chance Act and the Justice and Mental Health Collaboration Program, as well as to the broader field.

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