



**million**  
ONE JAIL AT A TIME.  
*story*

## REFORM TOOLKIT

S2 E9

# Where Texting Brings People to Court

A PODCAST BY

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MacArthur  
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# WHO

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**The Palm Beach County  
Criminal Justice Commission**

# WHO

**“I don't call us overcrowded. I call us overpopulated in the sense that we don't have too many people in there for the physical plant, but we have people in there that should not be in there.”**

-Bert Winkler of the Criminal Justice Commission

The [Palm Beach County Criminal Justice Commission](#) was [established in 1988](#) to study and coordinate law enforcement and crime prevention efforts in the county.

It is made up of [21 public sector members from local, state, and federal criminal justice and governmental agencies as well as 11 business leaders, and 1 clergy member.](#)

In 2017, the [MacArthur Safety and Justice Challenge awarded the commission a \\$2 million grant](#) to reduce the county's jail population by 17% over two years. If achieved, that would mean over 360 people fewer people would be in jail each day than before.

*Bert Winkler. Photo by Andrea Sarcos.*



# WHAT

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**A text message reminder for  
court dates**

# WHAT

**“The courts, the lawyers, everyone involved don't want to be inconvenienced. But more importantly, we just want that person to show up for the appointment and take care of business, whatever that business may be.”**

-Bert Winkler of the Criminal Justice Commission

As part of their comprehensive plan to reduce the county's jail population, the commission helped launch a text message-based court reminder system in 2018. The service reminds public defender clients of their court dates with the goal of reducing “failure to appear” arrests.

[In 2016, 14% of people in Palm Beach County Jail were there simply because they missed a court date. Florida law allow judges to issue arrest warrants](#) for those defendants they believe willfully missed their court date, but in practice many of these defendants simply forgot or were not able to appear because of family or work obligations.

The service is funded by the [MacArthur Foundation](#) grant and a donation from the [Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Organization](#).

*Dan Eisinger, the Chief of the Felony Division at the Palm Beach County Public Defender's office, stands in front of the Palm County courthouse. His office was instrumental in implementing the text message service. Photo by Andrea Sarcos.*



# WHERE



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**Palm Beach County, Florida**

# WHERE

In 2016, over 3,500 people were admitted to the Palm Beach County Jail for failing to appear in court. All but two of those cases had underlying charges of non-violent felonies or low-level charges.

- Criminal Justice Commission [report](#)

Located in southern Florida, Palm Beach County has an incarceration rate [nearly 60% below the national average](#). The county [attributes its relatively low incarceration rate to](#) significant investments in reducing system inefficiencies and targeting support for populations that are disproportionately represented in the jail population.

While African Americans make up just 19% of the county population, they represent [half of the jail population](#) in Palm Beach. African Americans also [stay in jail on average almost twice as long](#) as whites do.

Palm Beach joins [more than a dozen states](#) in implementing a text message court reminder system. Research in New York City found that text message reminders [can reduce failures to appear by 26%](#).

*Palm Beach County Courthouse. Photo by Andrea Sarcos.*





# WHEN

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**2018 - Present**



# WHEN

**“We thought this was, candidly, it's almost like low hanging fruit. It's something that we could address in a practical way, um, fairly quickly.”**

**-Bert Winkler of the Criminal Justice Commission**

The county launched its text message court reminder system for the clients of public defenders in late 2018. The system is currently in a one-year trial period, but Winkler says that they plan to expand the system to individuals who receive Notices to Appear who are not appointed lawyers until later in the process.

The county also plans on using text messages to remind individuals who need to report to probation and Pretrial Services of their appointments in order to reduce the number of technical violations.

In the short time the text message court reminder system has been in place, the percentage of arrest warrants issues for failing to appear has dropped by more than half.

*Staff person at the Palm Beach County Clerk's office, which administers the text message service. Photo by Andrea Sarcos.*



# WHY

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**The Case of  
Raven Gamboa**



# WHY

**“No one's perfect. Everyone makes mistakes and if someone's being provoked every day, especially with hormonal pregnancy, you know, you're gonna explode one day.”**

**- Raven Gamboa**



When Raven Gamboa was pregnant in 2018, she got into an argument with her neighbor.

Things had already been tense between them. The year before, her neighbor had accused her of throwing liquid on her video doorbell. Raven was charged with criminal mischief for that incident and ultimately took a plea deal.

Then in November 2018, Raven says that her neighbor started harassing her while she was walking her dog. Raven snapped and threw her cup of ice water on her. The police are called and Raven is charged with simple battery, a misdemeanor in Palm Beach County.

*Raven Gamboa. Photo by Andrea Sarcos.*

# HOW

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**Raven receives reminders of  
her court date by text**

# HOW

**“I had court before when my license was suspended and I missed that day and I actually had a warrant out for my arrest. So I thought this was very helpful. I was like, yeah, I actually do need that sir.”**

**-Raven Gamboa**



At Raven's first court date, a court official asks her if she wants to receive text message reminders from the Palm Beach County Courthouse. Raven immediately saw the value of the service: She had missed a court date for a prior case after misplacing the piece of paper with the court information on it, and there had been a warrant out for her arrest.

This time, Raven signed up to be one of the first people to receive text reminders.

Raven took a plea deal for the charge. But she had to attend court a dozen times in the four months between the time she was arrested and when she completed the terms of her plea deal. Thanks to the text messages, she was able to remember the court dates in addition to balancing her many prenatal appointments, work and family obligations.

*Raven Gamboa looking at her phone. Photo by Andrea Sarcos.*

# RESOURCES

To get started developing a reform project like text-based Court Reminder System in Palm Beach County, check out:

- [“Preventing Failures to Appeal in Court” by the University of Chicago Crime Lab](#)
- [“Increasing Court-Appearance Rates and Other Benefits of Live-Caller Telephone Court-Date Reminders” in Court Review](#)
- [“Use of Court Date Reminder Notices to Improve Court Appearance Rates” by the Pretrial Justice Center for Courts](#)
- Companies [Uptrust](#), [AST](#), and [eCourtDate](#)

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