

Bail Reform Community Outreach Initiative Report
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Project Description & Community Scan

The Bail Reform Community Outreach Initiative (BRCOI) is a community-centered approach focused on introducing Lake County to the work of the Equity Team and the efforts being led by Lake County Sheriff's Department and the Lake County Pretrial system partners. By centering communities with personal experiences regarding Lake County's Pretrial system and by understanding the depth and breadth of communities and their needs, solutions will be explored to strengthen Lake County's Pretrial Criminal Justice system.

Purpose

BRCOI is intentional work beginning with the principles, values, and purpose to include communities most affected by Lake County's Criminal Justice System and those whose purpose it is to serve these communities. The purpose of BRCOI is (1) to engage community members who are most affected by the Lake County's Criminal Justice System to speak on their concerns, challenges, needs, and readiness to partner with Lake County Criminal Justice System; (2) to collect qualitative data to dignify the stories and lives represented by the quantitative data that has been collected by the Equity Team, and (3) to have meaningful conversation on Lake County Bail Reform, Pretrial issues, and community relations with the Lake County Criminal Justice system.

Values

BRCOI's values allowed for authentic conversation for communities most affected by the criminal justice system: 1) through transparency; 2) by acknowledging the different needs of differing communities; 3) in providing facilitation that has equity at its core; 4) in understanding the dynamics of an individual's interaction with the criminal justice system and the simultaneous effect it has on those around them; and 5) by exploring holistic solutions to emphasize the humanity of racial equity and criminal justice reform work.

Outcomes

BRCOI's intended outcomes:

- 1) To start an authentic, sustainable relationship between various communities directly or indirectly impacted with the Lake County Criminal Justice System
- 2) To document the experiences of those who have been most affected by the Lake County Criminal Justice System, the needs of the communities who have been most affected by the Lake County Criminal Justice System, and communities' recommendations for effective change within the Lake County Criminal Justice System in a public document;

- 3) To communicate information regarding the on-going CJCC (Criminal Justice Citizen's Council) and extend invitations for BRCOI participants to continue participating in Lake County Criminal Justice work via the council

Methodology/Strategy

The facilitators of BRCOI employed two different strategies in gathering qualitative data of community members directly and indirectly impacted by the Lake County Criminal Justice System: personal interviews and focus groups.

Focus Groups

Due to health precautions amidst a global pandemic, BRCOI facilitators conducted three (3) focus groups via Zoom technology and scheduled a number of personal interviews. The four focus groups had 8-10 participants based on four affinities - community connectors, community educators, community activism, and spiritual/religious affiliates. The focus groups consisted of 8-10 members and allowed for different participation/learning styles. BRCOI facilitators asked questions: 1) to understand directly and indirectly impacted communities' experiences with the Lake County Criminal Justice; 2) to receive recommendations for improving the Lake County Pretrial Criminal Justice System; and 3) to explore Lake County's community coordinated effort for criminal justice reform.

Also, during the BRCOI and Covid-19, the United States witnessed the murder of Ahmaud Arbury by White nationalists in Georgia and then the murder George Floyd by a Minneapolis Police Officer via live video footage. This started the 2020 Black Lives Matter (BLM) Movement across the nation and has continued. Lake County, Illinois experienced national headlines in the BLM movement when a 17 year-old white boy traveled to Kenosha, Wisconsin from Antioch, Illinois (Lake County), and shot two people resulting in their death while they were protesting the death of Jacob Blake due to an officer-involved shooting. Due to the close proximity of Kenosha, Wisconsin to Lake County and relationships Jacob Blake had in Lake County, this particular traumatic event had a compounding effect on Lake County BIPOC communities and advocates/activists. A fourth focus group was scheduled for the same week (8/28) this event occurred. The BRCOI took the liberty to postpone the focus group due to the sensitivity of the focus group topic - and allow space for the communities to grieve. That particular focus group was rescheduled for 9/23. However, BIPOC communities experienced another traumatic event that same day. The Kentucky Grand Jury announced they were charging 1 out of the 3 officers accused of shooting and killing Breonna Taylor, a Black woman who was killed while sleeping in her apartment by Louisville police. BRCOI facilitators decided it was not appropriate to hold this last focus group and canceled the event. The BRCOI facilitators held individual conversations with participants scheduled for the canceled fourth focus group to discuss equity work being done by the Lake County Criminal Justice System, extend the

invitation to the Criminal Justice Citizen’s Council, and allow for participants to share experiences and/or recommendations to include in the final report.

Interviews

Personal community interviews were conducted either by phone, zoom, and/or in-person. The interviews were an option for participants who did not feel comfortable sharing their experience via a focus group and/or did not have accessibility or comfortability with Zoom technology. The interviews lasted from 1-2 hours, and conversations were transcribed for best practices and recordkeeping. These notes were only for BRCOI facilitators to assure participants of their privacy and anonymity. BRCOI facilitators asked questions: 1) to understand directly and indirectly impacted communities’ experiences with the Lake County Criminal Justice; 2) to receive recommendations for improving the Lake County Pretrial Criminal Justice System; and 3) to explore Lake County’s community coordinated effort for criminal justice reform.

Topical Findings

The facilitators for BRCOI were able to gather interviews and information from various communities within Lake County with an emphasis on the communities and individuals who have been impacted by the Lake County Criminal Justice System. This data includes 57 participants who were interviewed or participated in a focus group. Please see charts for a breakdown of zip codes, races, and Directly/Indirectly impacted individuals represented.

Zip Codes	Representation
60015	2
60031	4
60035	2
60064	9
60085	21
60087	5
60099	14

Race or Ethnicity	Representation
Black/African American	37
Indigenous/Native American	1
Latinx/Hispanic	10
Multiracial and/or Multiethnic	3
White: Non-Latinx/Hispanic	6

Directly/Indirectly Impacted Individuals	Representation
Directly	17
Indirectly	22

The findings from the focus groups and personal community interviews were thematically divided into three categories: (1) Healing, (2) Education, and (3) Advocacy. The next sections will identify the needs of these three categories.

Healing

The BRCOI findings highlight the following: the generational trauma of racism against BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) communities resulting in (1) long-term interpersonal harm of BIPOC individuals and communities, (2) distrust of the Lake County Criminal Justice System, and (3) a continuous cycle of violence with little to no restoration for BIPOC individuals and communities.

System-Focused: The data collected concludes that communities most affected by the Lake County Criminal Justice System (LCCJS) do not have a positive relationship with law enforcement at the municipality and/or county level. There are multiple generations of BIPOC individuals and communities that have been impacted by the LCCJS and have unresolved trauma due to these experiences. These communities feel police only show up when something “bad” or “criminal” happens. Communities expressed the police are not there to keep them safe, and instead are there to catch them breaking the law and/or “doing wrong”. Also, participants (especially individuals who identified as Black) expressed they do not feel their culture is understood and/or valued by law enforcement and/or LCCJS representatives. This is felt through language, tones, and interactions with LCCJS representatives. It was also expressed that the current relationship between communities most impacted and law enforcement has negative effects for police too. Communities expressed they are less likely to cooperate with police and/or

LCCJS representatives to solve crimes out of fear of what the system will do. There is a code of silence that communities have adopted as protection.

Communities-Focused: The BRCOI concluded there are generations of directly impacted individuals who have trauma from their experience with the Lake County Criminal Justice System (LCCJS) that have not been resolved. Participants interviewed expressed the need for more efficient mental health and wellness programs specifically for individuals who have been impacted by LCCJS. They expressed they did not feel like LCCJS representatives cared about their situation and/or did not see them as a person with an individual story. Participants also expressed stories about feeling that their lawyer (public defender) was too busy to look at their case, the judge assigned to their case treated them like a negative stereotype, and no one throughout their process within the criminal justice system saw and/or believed in them.

The BRCOI concluded when an individual is impacted by the Lake County Criminal Justice System (LCCJS) entire families and communities are impacted too. Participants who identified as indirectly impacted shared a spectrum of feelings/effects they endured during their experience with the LCCJS. A number of participants felt stressed, alone, and hopeless while trying to support an impacted individual through the LCCJS. They expressed not knowing what to do for the individual they were supporting, who they could turn to for direction/answers, and/or where to go for understanding and support. For some of the participants, this experience caused major life changes including, but not limited to, debilitating debt and/or selling property to be able to afford bail and/or lawyer, moving to a new community, quitting their job to focus on the directly impacted individual's case, temporarily relocating children, depression, and dedicating their life's purpose to criminal justice reform. Participants shared there are long-term effects they still feel including disconnection and loneliness. They also expressed the need for more mental health and wellness programs including support groups for indirectly impacted individuals.

Education

System-Focused: The BRCOI concluded the need of education for Lake County Criminal Justice System Partners to: (1) better understand racial justice/racial equity work; (2) learn about the communities and the communities' cultures most affected by the Lake County Criminal Justice System through meaningful engagement; and (3) better understand navigation of the Lake County Criminal Justice System through the lens of individuals most affected by it.

The data collected concluded there is a disconnect between the BIPOC communities and the LCCJS. Currently, the LCCJS's ideologies and practices are expressed as harmful to BIPOC individuals and communities. This is felt through interactions with various departments and institutions including, but not limited to, municipality police departments and Lake County Sheriff's Department, Lake County Jail, Lake County Public Defender's Office, Lake County

State's Attorney's Office, Lake County Judicial members (19th Judicial Circuit Court), Lake County Adult Probation, and Lake County Courthouse.

The BRCOI concluded there is also a history of conversations, initiatives, and coalitions/task forces that have been led by different Lake County Criminal Justice Partners at various points of time on criminal justice reform initiatives that were not sustainable and/or did not create the impact communities expected given their investment of time and/or vulnerability. Thus, there is an overarching concern about the LCCJS resistance to change and hesitation to commit to equity work with LCCJS for fear of similar outcomes.

BRCOI also found that the current LCCJS is not designed with community needs and barriers in mind. The community expressed the coordination of the LCCJS is not community friendly. Communities expressed concerns including, but not limited to, lack of public transportation, little to no flexibility of court times, unexpected fees resulting in hardship, unaware of how to navigate within LCCJS buildings, unaware of what different departments within LCCJS do, and who within the LCCJS to call for assistance.

Community Focused: The BRCOI concluded there is a need for the Equity Initiative to invest in community education on (1) the step-by-step process of the Lake County Criminal Justice System (LCCJS), (2) the law and rights individuals have, (3) and the resources available to an individual and their support nucleus being affected by the Lake County Criminal Justice System (LCCJS).

The data collected from the BRCOI concluded that communities, especially young adults (18-30), do not fully understand the laws and therefore do not understand their own personal rights. Communities shared that it is common for education of the law to be taught by those who have been previously, directly impacted by the LCCJS. This can lead to a domino effect of misunderstanding and conflicting information which causes misinterpretations of the law and then confusion for individuals experiencing very specific situations. Also, individuals are learning about the law and navigation of the LCCJS once directly involved creating a reactive experience instead of one that could be preventative. Indirectly impacted individuals also expressed that information for navigating the LCCJS is not obvious or accessible to communities. The navigation experience has left participants feeling overwhelmed, stressed, and hopeless.

Advocacy

The BRCOI concluded communities most affected by the Lake County Criminal Justice System specifically BIPOC communities feel (1) undervalued by the Lake County Criminal Justice System, (2) ignored by the Lake County Criminal Justice System in vital moments, and (3) unbelievably in the potential to restore their lives and offer to resolve to those they have affected.

The data collected from the BRCOI concluded communities feel a “Us vs. Them ” mentality when interacting with the LCCJS. Participants shared they felt they were treated as criminals and/or ‘deemed’ guilty before their case was heard in court. This created feelings of isolation because individuals do not know who to turn to for assistance. An overwhelming majority of directly impacted individuals discussed the fear they experienced through the pre-trial process especially standing in front of a judge without any support. Some participants felt so discouraged and overwhelmed by their cases that they avoided their entire situation (i.e. missing a court hearing) only causing more negative consequences to compound. Directly impacted participants expressed they felt labeled and overshadowed by their crime and/or past criminal record, and their potential to be restored was not encouraged or accepted. Participants experienced these feelings especially when working with public defenders and in front of judges determining their bail. Directly impacted participants shared they did not feel their personal story was valued or that their case was uniformly handled. The need for LCCJS to handle cases through an individual approach was expressed overwhelmingly by directly and indirectly impacted participants.

Recommendations

After reviewing all of the community interviews and focus groups by communities most affected by the Lake County Criminal Justice System and those who serve these communities, the following are recommendations to the Equity Team: 1) to build authentic, sustainable relationships between various communities who have been directly or indirectly impacted by the Lake County Criminal Justice System and those who serve these communities; (2) to provide more access, resources, and opportunities to the communities most impact by the Lake County Criminal Justice System; and (3) to maintain engagement with communities in the CJCC (Criminal Justice Citizen’s Council) and Lake County Criminal Justice equity work.

Healing

Intentional Relationship Building with BIPOC Communities

LCCJS must explore an internal culture shift in order to develop and/or repair relationships with communities most impacted. With an emphasis on leading with compassion, valuing BIPOC lives, recognizing the strength of BIPOC communities, and tireless commitment to the work, suggestions received by BRCOI participants include:

- LCCJS participating more in communities most impacted by LCCJS including attending community events, local school district events, dining at local restaurants, and volunteering at community organizations.
- LCCJS hosting more events in the communities most impacted
- LCCJS sponsoring community events, and/or partnering with BIPOC communities to host events
- An LCCJS website page dedicated to completed, on-going, and planned equity work

- LCCJS establishing direct lines of communication with community leaders from BIPOC communities and grassroots community organizations led by BIPOC
- LCCJS hiring and/or investing in directly impacted individuals and/or grassroots organizations supporting directly and indirectly individuals

Generational Healing

- LCCJS assessing BIPOC individuals and communities through an asset-based model
- LCCJS Investing in safe spaces within directly impacted communities (investing in drop-in centers and/or partnering with grassroots community organizations)
- LCCJS providing support groups for individuals and families impacted by criminal justice system
- LCCJS providing coping/trauma informed therapy for children, families, and individuals impacted by the system
- A greater emphasis on mental health training for LCCJS representatives

Restoration/Restorative Justice Practices for LCCJS Representatives

- To focus on the ‘why’ and root causes when determining charges and bail
- To allow for more storytelling during court processes
- To ask defendants what an appropriate amount for bail is
- To disregard previous crimes from a certain “x” amount of time to determine future punishment
- To create a human-centered process by seeing individuals (one size does not fit all)
- By incorporating communities in court process
- To make court more accessible by continuing with Zoom and more flexible court hours
- By opting for mandatory case management instead of money bail
- To use text messaging, calling, and/or Facebook for communication with directly impacted individuals
- To partner with previously directly impacted folks to create more relative classes/curriculum than the Substance Abuse and Anger Management currently offered
- To regularly visit the Lake County Jail

Education

Continued Education for LCCJS Representatives

- Racial equity and racial justice education
- Mandatory mental health training for anyone within LCCJS interacting with the public

Community Outreach and Education Programs

- LCCJS investing in educational material on how the LCCJS works
- LCCJS investing in ‘Know your Rights’ educational material

- LCCJS partnering and training community activists/advocates as ‘justice ambassadors’ to teach educational material and programs
- LCCJS investing in continued education for community advocates to strengthen organizing skills

Resources & Navigation Assistance

- LCCJS investing in navigation maps and resource material on the LCCJS
- LCCJS providing resource and information packets for directly and indirectly individuals
- LCCJS investing in the creation of a resource map for individuals are being released from the Lake County jail

Advocacy

Community Compassion

- LCCJS making appropriate public responses to tragic events that affect BIPOC communities
- LCCJS publishing a Racial Equity Public Policy Agenda
- LCCJS valuing and showing visible support BIPOC individuals and communities

Accountability & Transparency

- LCCJS increasing lines of communication and transparency of efforts
- LCCJS local policy changes within the LCCJS such as not expediting cases, discontinuing any fees, not hiring or renewing for-profit vendors
- LCCJS providing transparent information on wrongful convictions, officer involved shootings, and/or deaths
- More information and awareness regarding LCCJS representatives especially judges’ commitment to racial equity and justice reform

Justice Programs

- LCCJS investing in Court advocate/mentor program for those directly impacted
- LCCJS investing in Community Court Watching Programs
- LCCJS investing in a Community Bail Bond Fund
- LCCJS providing incentives for good stewardship
- LCCJS hosting free expungement programs
- LCCJS offering incentives for pro-bono work for lawyers on behalf of BIPOC communities