

The History of Criminal Justice Agency Collaboration in Alaska

The concept of cooperative criminal justice public policy planning is not new to the State of Alaska. For at least the past thirty-five years, criminal justice agencies have collaborated to varying degrees to carry out their missions. Their objectives have included protecting public safety, prosecuting criminal offenders, protecting constitutional and statutory rights of victims and offenders, resolving criminal cases, rehabilitating criminal offenders, cost containment, efficiencies in the system, and prevention of crime.

The first of this series of cooperative endeavors was the Criminal Justice Planning Agency (CJPA), established in the early 1970's to administer the flow of federal Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA) funds to the state. CJPA's membership included several executive branch agencies (the Department of Law, the Department of Health and Social Services and its Division of Corrections, the Public Defender Agency and the Department of Public Safety), as well as representatives from the judicial branch, the legislative branch and the public. In addition to approving grant applications and distributing and monitoring LEAA funds, the CJPA carried out criminal justice planning for the state and collected and analyzed data. With the demise of the federal LEAA program in the late 1970's, CJPA became a program of the Department of Law. It ended its work in about 1982. Its statistical analysis work was picked up by the University of Alaska Justice Center in Anchorage, which became the federally-funded Statistical Analysis Center.

For the remainder of the 1980's, ad hoc criminal justice coordination and planning were carried out by a series of "criminal justice working groups," typically initiated and staffed by the state's Attorneys General. The membership of the working groups varied but typically included, at a minimum, the Attorney General, the executive branch agencies, the Administrative Director of the Courts, a representative of the Alaska Association of Chiefs of Police, and a representative of the Alaska Judicial Council.

The criminal justice working groups carried out a variety of projects under the different administrations. At different times, members coordinated presentations to the legislative judiciary and finance committees to provide a better understanding of the fiscal and policy interdependence of the agencies and branches of government. The presentations emphasized the effects (often unexpected or unintended) of increases or decreases in agency budgets or programs on all of the other criminal justice agencies. Some working groups had staff assistance, drafted legislation, compiled data, or prepared joint position papers on legislation. Perhaps most importantly, the working groups provided a chance for the heads of agencies and the different governmental branches to regularly discuss and resolve problems that arose during each agency's routine work.

In 1990, the legislature established the Alaska Sentencing Commission to review the state's sanctioning system and to address issues of prison overcrowding. The Commission's fourteen members included representatives from all of the earlier criminal justice working group member agencies, as well as one justice and one judge representing the courts, one member of the Alaska House of Representatives and one member of the Alaska Senate, two victims' group representatives, and members with backgrounds in rehabilitation and academic work. Commission staff worked under the direction of the Alaska Judicial Council to compile and analyze data, conduct research into

approaches to sanctioning used by other states and jurisdictions, prepare position papers and reports, and draft recommendations about different aspects of the criminal justice system. The Commission issued three reports, making recommendations about sentencing structures, specific offenses, actions the state should take to meet the needs of different groups including ethnic and cultural minorities, and approaches the state could use to reduce the cost of criminal justice operations in the event of budget downturns. The Commission completed its work in 1992.

Following the end of the Sentencing Commission's work, former Governor Hickel created a new criminal justice working group that included all three branches of government, with the Chairs of the House and Senate Judiciary Committees representing the legislature, and the Administrative Director of the Courts representing the judicial branch. The Alaska Judicial Council assisted in the staffing and coordination of the work of this group which functioned through 1994. During the same period, two other criminal justice collaborative efforts involving inter-branch policy makers occurred. One focused on reducing prison overcrowding. The other centered on coordinating improvements in the state's criminal justice information systems. In part as a result of the second group's work, the legislature created a permanent Criminal Justice Information Systems Advisory Board, chaired by the Commissioner of Public Safety, that includes all of the core members of the earlier criminal justice working groups.

In 1997, policymakers representing all three branches of government as well as members of the community convened to form the Alaska Criminal Justice Assessment Commission (CJAC). The Commission used a collaborative process to recommend improvements to the criminal justice process that would alleviate prison overcrowding. The Judicial Council participated in that process, as well as staffing it. In May, 2000, the Commission issued recommendations including the formation of a successor organization to carry out its other recommendations. State agencies created the Criminal Justice Council (CJC) for this purpose. The group met periodically to resolve current issues and work toward implementing recommendations of the CJAC. The Judicial Council staffed the Criminal Justice Council, with its senior staff associate serving as the Council's director.

The Criminal Justice Council provided cost-effectiveness data for the legislature, worked with agencies, particularly the Department of Corrections, to reduce prison overcrowding, and coordinated policy with its various members. The Criminal Justice Council published interim and final reports on the progress on the recommendations of the Criminal Justice Assessment Commission. The Council also made new recommendations for the criminal justice system.

In 2007, the legislature provided funding to the Alaska Judicial Council to staff a criminal justice working group to collaborate on ways to improve Alaska's criminal justice system. The group is presently chaired by the Chief Justice of the Alaska Supreme Court and Alaska's Attorney General. The group has focused in two principal areas (1) identifying and monitoring cost-effective, evidence-based ways to prevent crime and reduce recidivism and (2) improving the efficiency of the criminal justice system.

For more than thirty-five years, the presence of an inter-branch cooperative working group in the criminal justice system has benefitted the state in several ways. Most importantly, agencies have had a regular opportunity to meet and resolve problems. Agencies have taken the time to

educate each other, the legislature, and, indirectly, the public, about the need for criminal justice agencies to work together in order for each one to achieve the constitutional objectives of protection of the public, consideration of victims, and reformation of offenders. These issues are best be addressed in the context of a cooperative working environment.