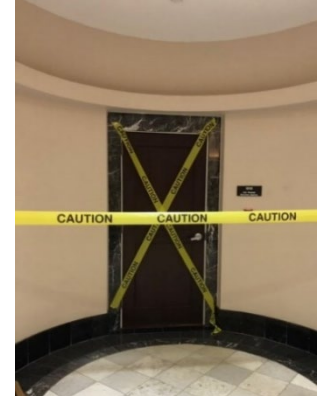


PRETRIAL SERVICES DURING THE PANDEMIC

On March 12, 2020, the Newark office of the Pretrial Services Agency was closed and cordoned off with caution tape after a staff member tested positive for COVID-19. This was an ominous start to an unprecedented year in our court and our Agency. At the outset of the pandemic, our office quickly adjusted daily operations. We reduced our courthouse presence and minimized field operations to only the most essential duties. What was thought to be a two-week “pause” eventually turned into daily remote operations across the District. We were fortunate to have an existing telework policy and the necessary technology in place that enabled all staff to work from home.



The pandemic significantly impacted courthouse operations across our system. Nationally, new pretrial case activations decreased 53 percent during calendar year 2020, while New Jersey activations dropped only 11 percent, far below the national average. With the exception of border districts, New Jersey had the second highest criminal case activation rate in the nation.

Pretrial Services officers continued to fulfill their law enforcement responsibilities to manage the influx of new cases. These responsibilities included conducting bail investigations remotely, oftentimes speaking to defendants via arresting agents’ cell phones from their cars or office. Over the past year, 67 percent of defendants were released on bail at the time of arrest or at some point thereafter while pending further prosecution. Comparatively, the national release average was 49 percent. Despite the increased rate of release, re-arrest and failure to appear rates remained minimally impacted.



Our community supervision never wavered, and officers continued to put themselves, and their families, at risk in order to get the job done and meet the Agency’s mission. Given the fact bail hearings and release orders were handled virtually, officers were required to physically install location monitoring equipment on defendants on the steps of the county jails at the time of release. In order to monitor compliance with release conditions and the safety of the community, officers continued to conduct in-person field work and virtual community contacts with our higher risk population. Inpatient drug and alcohol treatment continued, and outpatient treatment was held via telemedicine, all while an increase in drug and alcohol use occurred. The use of location monitoring also increased, with over 500 defendants being subject to some form of location monitoring as a condition of release.

Our Pretrial Opportunity Court (POP) successfully continued and sessions were held via video conferencing. Twice per month for the past year, participants continued to receive intensive supervision and treatment in this judge-involved Alternative to Incarceration (ATI) program. Ten participants graduated from POP and four more were sentenced to non-custodial terms of supervision.

In addition to the stress and isolation caused by the pandemic, staff members had to establish boundaries between work and home life. Schools closed and parents/caregivers quickly incorporated home instruction into their daily schedules, all while balancing their professional responsibilities. Unfortunately, advising

staff of positive COVID-19 test results, exposure among staff members, and implementing quarantine rules slowly became the norm for senior management.

A focus on staff wellness has remained a top priority. Our Wellness Committee worked diligently to provide information on ways to combat stress and isolation, and senior management shared national wellness resources. Organized opportunities for staff to interact virtually included unit and staff meetings, one-on-one meetings with the chief and deputy chief, and virtual social events such as coffee breaks, social hours, and monthly wellness challenges. Our Critical Incident Stress Management Team provided information regarding normal responses to stress and trauma, as well as ways to help best manage these emotions. Our office collaborated with the U.S. Probation Office in establishing Wellness Wednesdays where staff members share fun and informative ways to manage work and home life via email. Staff members were encouraged to have their family members join four virtual swearing-in ceremonies for recently hired officers, in addition to a very special Virtual Take Your Child and Pet to Work Day held in April 2020.

In reflecting on the unprecedented events of the last year, we believe the pandemic created opportunities for our staff members to support one another, which enabled Pretrial Services to continue to provide critical services to the court, to the defendants we supervise, and to the community. Teamwork remains an essential component of the successful completion of our mission, especially now, as we slowly begin to transition back to the new normal. We have learned from our experiences and celebrate the many achievements that occurred, all despite the multiple challenges we faced as an organization and as individuals, both professionally and personally.

