Managing Risk in Jail Operations: Inmate Booking and Intake

by Cindy C. King, Director of Membership Services and Human Resources and Tom Cremonente, Senior Risk Control Consultant

THE AUGUST 2019 Risk Journal provided an overview of the risks inherent in managing jails. This article is the first in an in-depth series exploring the various aspects of jail operations to help members effectively manage these risks while protecting their communities.

A Growing Concern
MMRMA has ramped up training for member corrections staff in the past year, offering courses in supervision, proper inmate classification, and legal updates. This emphasis reflects a real need: MMRMA members, like their counterparts around the country, are experiencing an increase in jail incidents due to economic factors, jail overcrowding, and a rise in inmate mental illness, to name a few reasons.

Because MMRMA covers 80 percent of Michigan’s county jails, the uptick in jail claims is especially concerning.

Occurrences—including deaths by suicide or drug overdose, assaults by other inmates, and contraband entering jails—often lead to claims and lawsuits citing negligence or medical indifference. Fortunately, there are steps jail administrators can take to minimize these risks.

Start at Square One
Proper transfer of custody from law enforcement to the corrections facility is a critical first stage widely known as inmate booking and intake.

"Because individuals often arrive at jail at unpredictable times, with no background information and a variety of charges, the booking and intake process is especially important to determine risks that individuals might pose and needs they have in order to place them in the appropriate security level at the jail" (Solomon, et. al.).

"[i]f not handled properly, [intake] processes pose a greater risk of liability than any other aspect of jail operations" (Martin & Katsampes).

The booking process involves several steps:
1. Inmate identification
2. Securing of property
3. Classification
4. Medical screening

The process includes verifying that the jail has a legal commitment to house the individual and confirming the individual’s identity. Next, the individual’s property must be safely secured and an initial search conducted by corrections staff to look for weapons and other contraband. Police officers routinely perform searches of those they arrest; however, weapons or contraband may be missed.

Benefits of Body Scanners
Recently, a member county received grant funding through MMRMA’s Risk Avoidance Program (RAP) to offset part of their costs to purchase a body scanner. While not inexpensive, body scanners can detect weapons and other contraband hidden on a person or in body cavities—and can even incentivize inmates to voluntarily relinquish contraband. Body scanners provide high resolution images to determine exactly what an individual is trying to conceal.

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ANNUAL MEETING RECAP

Speakers Crack the Code on Leadership, Public Speaking, More

THE ANNUAL MEETING IS MMRMA’s chance to connect and reconnect with members and business partners as we share our activities and success stories.

This year’s meeting theme was MMRMA: Solving the Puzzle, reflecting our mission to help members address myriad risk management challenges. At the Saturday Annual Business Meeting, staff shared several examples from Fiscal Year 2019.

The event is also an opportunity to gain insights on leadership and development. We all face additional puzzles at work and in life. MMRMA brought experts to the stage to share their solutions to some of those common—yet uncommonly puzzling—challenges.

Transcendent Leadership
A star basketball player at Michigan State University, Greg Kelser and teammate Earvin “Magic” Johnson led the Spartans to a 1979 NCAA championship. Kelser later played for the Detroit Pistons; today, he is a seasoned broadcaster who has parlayed his love of the game into a second career off the court.

In the opening general session, Kelser credited his success on the air to wise words from his high school home economics teacher, who told him how important it was that he communicate clearly, both as a student and as an athlete.

This moment in his young life taught him that successful leaders are transcendent: they wield insights and influence above and beyond their official roles or titles.

Outlining several other key attributes of his life’s mentors, Kelser taught his audience how to crack the leadership code, illustrating how to be selfless, flexible, hard-working, and—yes—transcendent when we parent, lead, and interact with others.

Decoding Motivation
From Kelser’s success, it’s clear he knows how to harness the power of motivation. He kicked off Friday’s training by sharing essential pieces of the motivation puzzle:

Adaptability. Change is inevitable. Getting a new coach at MSU taught Kelser how to roll with changes. “Make it work and come up with a new plan,” he suggests.

Teamwork. Being on a team means doing your part. In team sports, as in other settings, we often want our chance to shine. When we can also appreciate the talents and contributions of others, our teams will truly thrive.

Embracing the Journey. A rental car GPS once told Kelser, in a soothing voice, “You have arrived.” He joked that he drove around the block and back, just to hear the message again. In seriousness, he pointed out that there is always more work to do as we journey through life. Find the joy in that, and motivation will never be hard to come by.

The Impact of Stories
Detroit area newscaster Roop Raj entertained and charmed as he told how storytelling is the “secret sauce” of public speaking.

Through lively anecdotes, he shared accessible advice: include vivid detail, avoid predictability, bridge the gap with your listeners to create “radical rapport,” and find your unique, compelling narrative. Raj connected with humor and illustrated the importance of authenticity, whether speaking to two people or 2 million.

Exploring Cyberspace
Rounding out the day’s training, Phyllis Lee introduced the Cyber Risk Assessment Tool from the Center for Internet Security. This series of steps and actions can help organizations protect their systems and employees.

On Saturday, the technology theme continued with Michael Teti of Digistream Investigations, who demonstrated methods for conducting investigations using social media and other online resources.

Everyone encounters puzzling people, audiences, and technology. We hope attendees came away from the Annual Meeting with a few solutions and a lot of lasting memories.
Lawson Brings Wealth of Experience to MMRMA Board

JEFF LAWSON DISCOVERED his calling as a college freshman in Pennsylvania. The son of an engineer—his father still works for a major aircraft engine manufacturer—Lawson planned to major in physics. Instead, he found himself drawn to the subject matter in the public administration courses assigned to him as electives.

"It just seemed like a natural fit for me," he recalls. After moving to South Haven with his family, he transferred to Western Michigan University, home to a noted public administration program.

Building a Career
Kalamazoo city officials visited Lawson's class, only reinforcing his interest. He earned a Bachelor's in Public Administration from Western with a minor in Geography, which included courses in land use planning and environmental management, and later went on to get a Master's in Public Administration at Central Michigan University.

After undergraduate school, Lawson accepted his first full-time job as a planner at Calhoun County, then worked as planning director for another county. He went on to serve as a city administrator and later as a village manager in the northern Lower Peninsula. Throughout his career, he gained extensive experience in everything from historic and archaeological preservation to budgeting, human resources, economic development, and information technology.

Valued Partnership
Appointed to his current role as Cheboygan County Administrator in 2011, it was at this longtime member that Lawson first became active in MMRMA. Long interested in risk management, he soon had a seat on the State Pool Committee. Six years later, he was appointed to fill the vacant Designated State Pool seat on the MMRMA Board of Directors.

The shared commitment and diverse knowledge of his fellow Board members impressed him from day one: "Their contributions help make the organization stronger." The chance to meet and work with staff and members from across Michigan also makes his Board service rewarding.

Lawson is excited about MMRMA's ongoing initiatives, including the upcoming website and member portal. He points out that smaller State Pool members, in particular, benefit from MMRMA's resources and the use of technology to deliver them. He is also happy the Board acted to create the Technology and Cyber Security Risk Control Advisory Committee to help members address the accompanying risks.

Variety and Service
Asked why he was drawn to something so different than his intended field of study, Lawson enumerates the many areas in which public administrators can make a difference. "In the public sector, things are always changing," and the one constant is service to the community and the State of Michigan.

In addition to the MMRMA Board, Lawson sits on Central Michigan University's Master of Public Administration Curriculum Board and is an International City/County Management Association Credentialed Manager (CM). "There is always more to learn," he says. With his extensive experience and participation, it's clear that, for Lawson, there is always more to contribute.

Rooted in Family
When he's not working, Lawson and his wife Rebecca enjoy spending time with their sons and their young grandson. "We live close enough to see him quite a bit," he says. "Being grandparents provides a different perspective on life."

With an eye on his grandson's future, Lawson also caught a glimpse into the past. Through genealogy research, he learned that public service is something of a tradition in his family. His grandmother's father was sheriff in southeastern Kentucky and another ancestor was an administrator in that state.

In a way, Jeff Lawson ended up in the family business after all.

Jeff Lawson is excited about MMRMA's technology-related initiatives and risk control activities, which will benefit the State Pool and the entire membership.

Water, water everywhere
Cheboygan County's 30 miles of Lake Huron coastline extend south from Mackinac City.

Burt, Black and Mullet lakes lure anglers for exceptional fishing.

Noteworthy are Ocqueoc Falls, the largest waterfall in the Lower Peninsula.

Public service is a tradition in the Lawson family, and Jeff is no exception.
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Medical screening comes next. Before being placed with other inmates, it’s important to determine if an individual has a mental illness, is suicidal, or may have an infectious disease or other medical conditions or injuries that warrant treatment. Screening also helps determine medication needs, such as insulin, and whether the person could suffer detoxification while incarcerated.

Proper Classification Is Crucial
During temporary placement in holding or pre-classification areas, it is suggested to segregate inmates based on risk and need. If a person will likely be detained for a substantial period of time, classification begins for placement into the inmate’s assigned housing unit.

This assessment takes into consideration medical needs, mental health, and type of crime. Generally, those committing lesser or non-violent crimes may be permitted more movement and interaction with others. Keeping violent inmates separated may reduce the risk of them physically harming non-violent inmates.

Jails should memorialize each of these processes by developing policy and procedure documents and training. These practices will help corrections officers perform complex processes in a uniform, thorough, and legally compliant way.

In this respect, county jails function as de facto debtors’ prisons.

Some courts and others suggest that tethering may be a better option for such non-violent offenders. Housing them with other inmates heightens risk, increases costs, and contributes to jail overcrowding. If jails are able to avoid intake of even one inmate in favor of tethering, it would help reduce risk.

MMRMA Team Can Help
The practices outlined here, if performed well, could all reduce the likelihood of an incident and the potential for a resulting claim or lawsuit. Appropriately managing these risks also maintains the safety of the general public, jail staff, and those who are incarcerated.

MMRMA offers member site visits to address specific concerns. Please visit mmrma.org or contact Membership Services about future corrections training opportunities and other assistance.