



**CHICAGO
BEYOND**➔

Evidence for More Urgent, Humane, and Inclusive Corrections Reform

ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF CHICAGO BEYOND'S
HOLISTIC SAFETY INITIATIVE

 **Openfields**



**A REPORT TO CHICAGO BEYOND
SEPTEMBER 2025**

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Strategic Recommendations for Implementing Holistic Safety

Executive Summary

The Problem

Violence in jails and prisons is widespread, and it impacts people and communities across the country. Both people incarcerated and correctional officers are exposed to violence – and experience the effects of it – at elevated rates. According to a recent study, correctional staff experience violence at a rate that is 36 times higher than all other workers.¹ Another found that 35% of incarcerated men had been the victim of violence in the past six months.² In addition to those directly in the system, the families of people incarcerated and those of correctional officers (who may be the same families) bear the impacts of mothers, fathers, spouses, siblings, and children with exposure to trauma. We all interact with these individuals in every area of life, and the impact of that exposure to trauma shows up in our interactions with them, whether a family member struggling with addiction or a stranger struggling to deal with the stresses of the evening commute. One of the most effective ways to reduce these harms is to reduce the violence in jails and prisons that lies at their roots.

While this violence is often presented without context as an unavoidable aspect of incarceration, the truth is that it is the result of a complicated set of embedded attitudes, unquestioned practices, and resource decisions that are not fixed. In their 2022 publication *Do I Have a Right to Feel Safe?*, Chicago Beyond presents evidence of the broad harms to people and communities – measured in elevated rates of post-traumatic stress disorder, suicide, and shorter life spans – caused by violence in jails and prisons. They also present a compelling case that the root causes of the problem are:

1. An approach to corrections that sees control and isolation as necessary for safety, and
2. An unwillingness to involve those actually living and working in jails and prisons in the efforts to improve conditions within them.

¹ Konda S, Tiesman H, Reichard A, Hartley D. U.S. Correctional Officers Killed or Injured on the Job. *Correct Today*. 2013 Nov-Dec;75(5):122-123.

² Wolff N, Shi J, Siegel JA. Patterns of victimization among male and female inmates: evidence of an enduring legacy. *Violence Vict*. 2009;24(4):469-84.

A Path Forward

In response to these challenges, Chicago Beyond developed the [Holistic Safety](#) framework (detailed in their publication *Do I Have the Right to Feel Safe? A Vision for Holistic Safety in Corrections*), a call to correctional administrators to work collaboratively with people incarcerated, correctional staff, their families, and reform advocates in a shared process to identify problems that negatively impact their wellness, recognize the relationship between their own wellness and that of others in the system, and collaboratively develop solutions to improve the wellness of everyone involved. Chicago Beyond hypothesizes that by engaging these groups together, interpersonal relationships in jails and prisons will be improved, policies and practices will be reformed, and acts of violence and harm inside and outside of the facility will be reduced.

Over the past two years, Chicago Beyond has worked to spread the ideas and practices of Holistic Safety through their Holistic Safety Initiative. Through the Initiative, they have engaged hundreds of corrections leaders, current and formerly incarcerated people, and reform advocates in a variety of formats and settings.

Chicago Beyond asked Openfields to conduct an assessment of the Holistic Safety Initiative early in its implementation, and to document how it was working, identify where it was not,

and collect early evidence of impact. This report presents the results of that assessment.

It focuses most closely on a set of eight long-term partnerships between Chicago Beyond and correctional systems around the country that included:

1. Arizona Department of Corrections, Rehabilitation and Reentry
2. Connecticut Department of Corrections
3. Cook County Sheriff's Office
4. Hawai'i Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation
5. Illinois Department of Corrections
6. Nebraska Department of Correctional Services
7. San Francisco Sheriff's Office
8. Vermont Department of Corrections

To conduct the assessment, Openfields conducted several dozen interviews with corrections administrators in these systems and justice reform leaders, attended Chicago Beyond's National Justice Convening in October 2024, and reviewed dozens of documents produced by Chicago Beyond alongside publicly available documents from its correctional system partners. Overall, this assessment of the Holistic Safety framework in practice finds evidence that the approach has several unique elements that show real promise for creating change.

What elements of the Holistic Safety framework make it effective?

- By connecting the wellbeing of correctional staff and people incarcerated, the Holistic Safety framework **transcends zero-sum mindsets** that assume gains for one group can only come with losses for the other.
- Chicago Beyond is able to quickly **achieve early wins**, which have already improved the wellbeing of people incarcerated and staff, by using a collaborative approach that centers **trust and relationships**.
- Because Holistic Safety offers a values-based framework and accountable change management process rather than a slate of policy prescriptions, **unrealized potential for change is unlocked** among stakeholders who gain agency to pursue and implement the changes they see as possible.

Because the Holistic Safety Initiative is only four years old, and has developed iteratively over that time, it is relatively early for a formal evaluation. Nevertheless, we found evidence of real changes that have improved the wellbeing of people incarcerated and correctional staff including:

- **Elevating voices** of frontline staff and people incarcerated through ongoing engagement on how to improve wellness and safety
- **More humane visitation policies** including more contact visits and the removal of unnecessary barriers in visitation rooms
- **Expanded and improved recreation opportunities**
- **Improvements in policies around restrictive housing** that ensure it is not used unnecessarily
- **Increased support for staff wellness** through the creation of new positions, empowering new committees, and greater connections to resources
- **Reduced isolation** between staff and people incarcerated.

Key takeaways

Though this analysis took place early in the implementation of the Holistic Safety Initiative, we found evidence to support the effectiveness of the program and approach. We conclude the report with a set of [recommendations](#).

- **For administrators looking to implement Holistic Safety**, there must be a willingness to bring frontline corrections staff and people incarcerated together to develop strategies to improve the wellness of both groups that they themselves can lead.
- **Leaders** – particularly at the state level – can support these efforts by providing resources to implement change and organizational support that creates space for risk-taking and innovation.
- **For Chicago Beyond**, one key recommendation is to consider how to balance ownership of the Holistic Safety brand with the goal of widespread adoption and the evolution it will bring to the framework.

In summary, this analysis finds that the Holistic Safety framework has begun to create positive change by directly addressing entrenched ways of working in corrections, centering trust and humanity, and creating space for new ideas about how to improve the safety and wellbeing of those living and working in jails and prisons.

Introduction

Incarceration impacts people and communities across the country. Nearly two million people are currently held in America's jails and prisons.³ Another 350,000 correctional officers work in them.⁴ Half of the adults in the United States have had an immediate family member incarcerated.⁵ Within jails and prisons, acts of violence and exposure to trauma are exceedingly common, with one study showing that correctional staff experience violence at a rate that is 36 times higher than all other workers.⁶ Another found that 35% of incarcerated men had been the victim of violence in the past six months.⁷

Though this violence grabs the headlines, it is often presented without context. This creates a sense that it is unavoidable, and that it simply flows naturally from jails and prisons and the people within them. But context matters, and there are deeply embedded structures and mindsets that create and reinforce cycles of violence in jails and prisons. Jails and prisons are chronically understaffed and overpopulated, exposing staff and people incarcerated to unnecessary stress and danger. More deeply, embedded within America's jail and prison system – its cultures, policies, administration, training, staff members, and incarcerated population – is an us-versus-them mentality that often plays out with violent consequences. As researchers, we've heard the argument directly in this study, that any gain for people incarcerated can only come at a cost – in time, effort, and reduced safety – for correctional officers.

As Chicago Beyond outlined in their 2022 report *Do I Have a Right to Feel Safe?*, America's jails and prisons create a duality of harm for both people incarcerated and correctional officers. While they may see themselves as opposing teams, the two groups bear remarkably similar scars from their time in the correctional system: both are exposed to violence (as witness and victim), both experience elevated rates of post-traumatic stress disorder, both have higher rates of suicide, and both groups ultimately have shorter life spans.^{8,9,10}

In addition to those directly in the system, the families of people incarcerated and those of correctional officers (who may be the same families) bear the impacts of mothers, fathers, spouses, siblings, and children with exposure to trauma. We interact with these individuals in every area of life, and the impact that exposure to trauma has on them shows up in our interactions with them.

This report presents an early impact analysis of the principles and practices of Chicago Beyond's [Holistic Safety](#) framework, a model for correctional administrators to increase safety within jails and prisons. It provides a robust analysis of a program early in its development and a transparent consideration of a new idea and approach to rehabilitation.

3 <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2025.html>

4 <https://www.bls.gov/oes/2023/may/oes333012.htm#nat>

5 <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2023/10/24/ten-statistics/>

6 Konda S, Tiesman H, Reichard A, Hartley D. U.S. Correctional Officers Killed or Injured on the Job. *Correct Today*. 2013 Nov-Dec;75(5):122-123.

7 Wolff N, Shi J, Siegel JA. Patterns of victimization among male and female inmates: evidence of an enduring legacy. *Violence Vict*. 2009;24(4):469-84.

8 *Do I Have a Right to Feel Safe?*, 2nd ed. 2024. Chicago Beyond

9 Schultz and Ricciardeli *Health & Justice* (2025) 13:4 <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40352-024-00308-2>

10 <https://www.vera.org/reimagining-prison-web-report/examining-prisons-today/the-prison-experience-for-corrections-staff>



PHOTO: CHICAGO BEYOND

Finding a Path Forward

Chicago Beyond's Holistic Safety framework aims to provide a model to increase safety within jails and prisons. It acknowledges trauma as the root cause of violence, and it emphasizes healing as a key strategy to improve safety. It emphasizes the importance of decision makers such as governors, legislators, local government leaders, correctional administrators, and prison and jail reform advocates collaborating with staff and people incarcerated within jails and prisons to co-develop effective strategies for healing.

So how could such a change in American prisons and jails actually happen? Leaders throughout our study sense that there is a way to move beyond past approaches toward something more hopeful. As a leader who has spent their career in corrections and corrections reform put in one of our recent interviews, "*Chicago Beyond is the most positive disrupter to the correctional reform work that I have seen...*". And as a corrections system administrator stated:

"[Holistic Safety] is having a big impact, because it's helping administrators reconceptualize. The system is set up to not let admin 'fix' the system. [Holistic Safety] helps administrators think outside the box."

Chicago beyond asked Openfields to conduct an assessment of the Holistic Safety Initiative early in its implementation, and to document how it was working, identify where it was not, and collect early evidence of impact. This report presents the results of that assessment. It offers some early evidence that progress can be made when more voices are included, when trust and connections are built, and when those closest to the issues are given agency to lead change. At the same time, it identifies areas where the approach will need to evolve in order to meet the complexities and demands of reforming deeply embedded beliefs and practices.

The report does not present definitive quantitative measures of effectiveness because such data take years to produce, if correctional systems are willing to share them at all. But qualitative data – especially early in the life of a program – can also be valuable evidence about how programs work and whether they hold the promise of long-term impact. Such is the case with this review of Holistic Safety.

ORGANIZATION OF THE REPORT

This report presents the results of an initial review of the Holistic Safety framework and its corresponding initiative and is organized as follows.

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- **SECTION 1** outlines the main elements of the initiative and describes their evolution.
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- **SECTION 2** and **SECTION 3** take a closer look at one element of the initiative, an ongoing partnership with five state correctional systems. They document how Holistic Safety is working on the ground and present early signs of impact.
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- **SECTION 4** takes a wider view to look at how other elements of the initiative are reaching and impacting the broader field of justice reform.
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- **SECTION 5** offers some initial reflections and considerations for different audiences looking to learn more or begin to implement principles of Holistic Safety in their own work.
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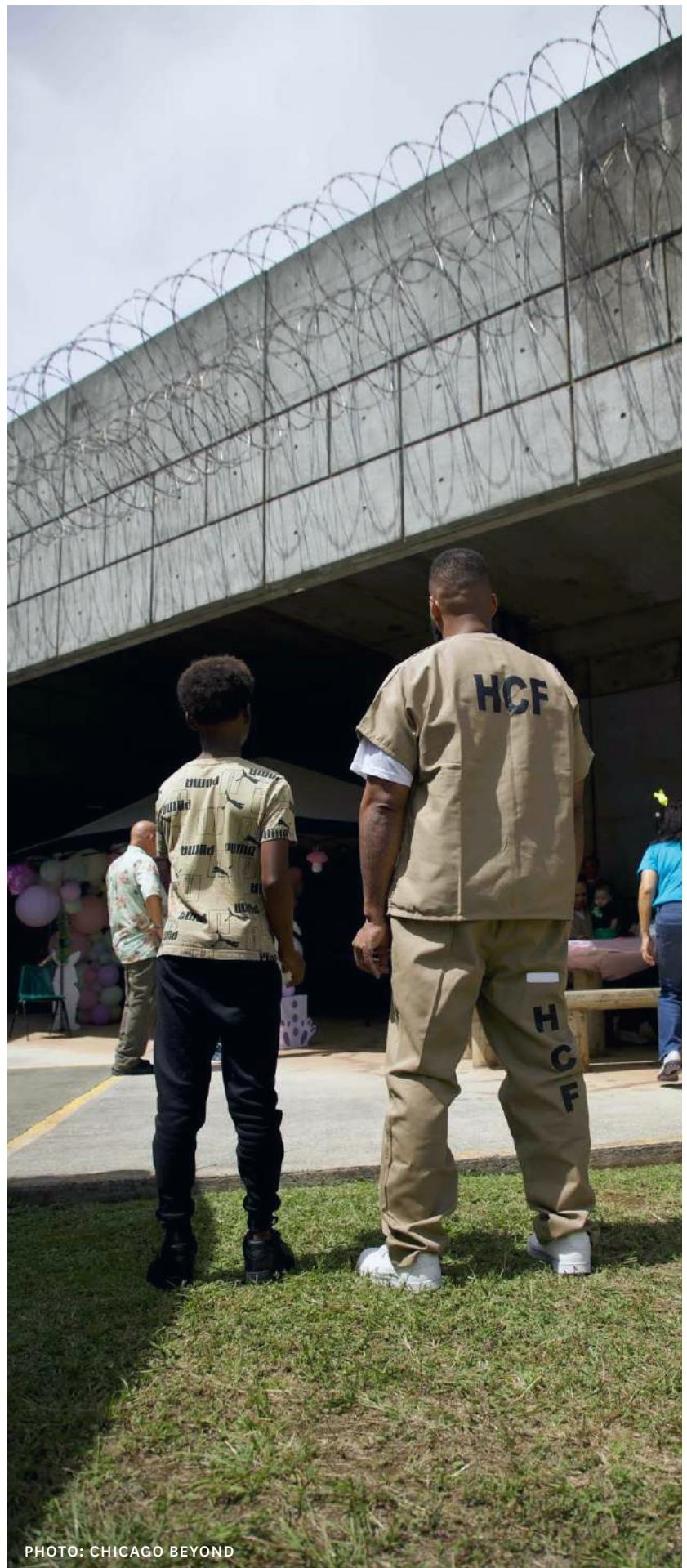


PHOTO: CHICAGO BEYOND

SECTION 1

The Holistic Safety Initiative

Developing the Holistic Safety Framework

The Holistic Safety framework was developed over four years and is informed by extensive personal and professional experience in jails and prisons as well as research on the impacts of exposure to trauma. Collectively, the team that developed the framework has decades of experience working in corrections environments as jail and prison administrators and civilian corrections staff. In addition, they solicited additional feedback on the framework from more than 100 people across the country who had been directly impacted by jails and prisons including people formerly incarcerated, correctional staff, and correctional administrators.

At its heart, the Holistic Safety framework contains a set of insights into the harms in jails and prisons and a process for addressing those harms.

→ **FIRST INSIGHT:** Correctional systems expose people incarcerated and correctional officers to trauma that negatively impacts them individually and that this exposure leads to further harm for themselves and others, especially when those affected are not provided resources and support. These further harms play out within jails and prisons but also in the families and communities of correctional officers and people incarcerated.

→ **SECOND INSIGHT:** These cycles of trauma are supported and reinforced by a culture that dehumanizes people incarcerated, correctional officers, and administrators and isolates them from each other and their families.

→ **THIRD INSIGHT:** Much of the necessary expertise and ideas for how to improve conditions within jails and prisons is held by correctional officers, people incarcerated, and others directly impacted, but it often goes untapped and unrealized due to the same dehumanizing culture.

This problem, and a proposed path forward, were laid out in the first edition of *Do I Have a Right to Feel Safe?* in 2022. Both a report on the problem and a guidebook for how to improve the wellbeing of those impacted by correctional systems, *Do I Have a Right to Feel Safe?* is a call to correctional administrators to work collaboratively with people incarcerated, correctional staff, and their families in a shared process to identify problems that negatively impact their wellness, recognize the relationship between their own wellness and that of others in the system, and collaboratively develop solutions to improve the wellness of everyone involved. By engaging these groups together, Chicago Beyond hypothesizes, conditions in jails and prisons will be improved and acts of violence and harm inside and outside of the facility will be reduced.

Though wellness initiatives are not uncommon, the Holistic Safety framework is uniquely bold in the corrections space in the ways that it centers collaboration and communication between groups that are usually separated by extreme power imbalances and hierarchies. In September 2024, *Do I Have a Right to Feel Safe? 2nd ed.* was published, updating it with case studies from a series of projects deploying the Holistic Safety framework and an extensive set of policy recommendations for corrections administrators and policy makers.

We encourage anyone interested in this work to read *Do I Have a Right to Feel Safe?* as it includes a fuller explanation of the Holistic Safety framework, but in summary the Holistic Safety framework calls for collaboration between key stakeholders in corrections and offers five core tenets that provide a foundation to co-design and implement solutions that promote safety and wellness.

Putting Ideas into Practice: The Holistic Safety Initiative

The **Holistic Safety Initiative** (HSI) is the collective term that describes the multiple programmatic and advocacy activities carried out to educate others about the Holistic Safety framework and to support the implementation of it within correctional systems. In each of the activities, Chicago Beyond provides support at varying levels to administrators in the following ways:

- + Educating stakeholders on the impact of jail and prison policy on the health of staff, people incarcerated, families and communities.
- + Leading stakeholders in a new way of engaging with each other that emphasizes collaboration over hierarchy.
- + Helping stakeholders to identify policies and practices that contribute to poor wellness and safety outcomes

using Chicago Beyond's Holistic Safety Inventory, a tool used to assess correctional policies and practices that contribute to physical isolation, emotional isolation for people incarcerated, emotional isolation for staff, and interpersonal isolation for staff and people incarcerated.

- + Supporting stakeholders as they revise policies and practices to promote healing for all stakeholders.

As addressed in this report, HSI includes the following programs, workshops, and convenings conducted by Chicago Beyond between January 2023 and February 2025:

- + **Holistic Safety Action Alliance** — a 1-year (2023-2024) partnership and peer-learning engagement with 2 major sheriff's departments and one state prison system
- + **Holistic Safety Workshop Series** – a 1-year (2024-present) partnership with 5 state correctional systems from around the country
- + **Holistic Safety Workshop at the American Jail Association (AJA) Jail Executive Institute** – Chicago Beyond was invited to present on Holistic Safety during AJA's Jail Executive Institute, a partnership between AJA and University of Nebraska at Omaha School of Criminology and Criminal Justice
- + **Publication of the second edition of *Do I Have a Right to Feel Safe?*** – a publication presenting Chicago Beyond's overall framework for Holistic Safety, insights from its pilot visitation program with Cook County Jail, related partner work, and a series of policy recommendations for correctional administrators
- + Chicago Beyond's first **National Justice Convening** - a summit with a diverse group of over 140 leaders across 27 states, including formerly incarcerated individuals, correctional staff and union leaders, and correctional administrators
- + Virtual, monthly meetings of the **Holistic Safety Action Network** – an emergent community of practice, with practitioners, funders, policy makers, formerly and currently incarcerated individuals working together to better understand and implement Holistic Safety.

HOLISTIC SAFETY CORE TENETS

- 1. CONNECTEDNESS:** The concept that we are all intrinsically bound as human beings and we are served best when our ties are positive and strong.
- 2. HEALTH:** The physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing we need to thrive, not just be injury-free.
- 3. PERSONAL AGENCY:** Our capacity to determine our own future, from making day-to-day choices to identifying and accessing the resources we need.
- 4. TRUST:** Our earned — not blind — belief in people to not only fulfill their responsibilities but to also act in a manner beneficial to themselves and others.
- 5. VALUE:** The idea that we must respect and invest in our shared humanity and individual strengths.

From Do I Have a Right to Feel Safe? 2ed. (September 2024)

The next three sections of the report include the results from a more detailed analysis of these programs of the HSI.



SECTION 2

Holistic Safety in Practice

Holistic Safety in Practice

A review of Chicago Beyond’s partnership with eight correctional systems through the Holistic Safety Action Alliance and the Holistic Safety Workshop Series

Since developing the Holistic Safety framework, Chicago Beyond has initiated multiple programs and partnerships to see it implemented in correctional systems. This section of the report presents the results of a review of two of those programs: the Holistic Safety Action Alliance and the Holistic Safety Workshop Series. Over the past two years, Chicago Beyond has partnered with eight correctional systems around the country to implement

holistic safety. This includes the three partnerships of the Holistic Safety Action Alliance in 2023 – during which processes were developed and ideas refined – and the five partnerships that made up the Holistic Safety Workshop Series in 2024. These partners are collectively responsible for over 91,000 people incarcerated and over 36,000 correctional staff (Table 1).

Table 1 – Approximate number of staff and people incarcerated in all eight correctional systems that participated in the Holistic Safety Action Alliance and the Holistic Safety Workshop Series¹¹

SYSTEM TYPE PARTNERSHIP	YEAR PARTNERSHIP BEGAN	PEOPLE INCARCERATED	CORRECTIONAL STAFF	TOTAL
Cook County Sheriff’s Office	2023	5,334	3,500	8,834
Illinois Department of Corrections	2023	28,178	10,500	38,678
San Francisco Sheriff’s Office	2023	1,286	1000	2,286
Arizona Department of Corrections, Rehabilitation and Reentry	2024	35,551	9,569	45,120
Connecticut Department of Corrections	2024	11,093	6,000	17,093
Hawai’i Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation	2024	2,802	1,101	3,903
Nebraska Department of Correctional Services	2024	5,800	2,733	8,533
Vermont Department of Corrections	2024	1,471	962	2,433
Total		91,515	35,365	126,880

11 The numbers here represent the number of people held in state correctional facilities on a specific day in early 2025. Due to admissions and releases, the number of people held in facilities in a given year will be greater, especially for sheriff’s departments. Counts of correctional staff are generally the total number of employees of the state department, but specific reporting differs by jurisdiction. For a list of sources, see the appendix at the end of the report.

The Action Alliance and the Workshop Series are some of the most intensive collaborations within the HSI. Both involved long-term interaction and support with correctional administrators, staff, and incarcerated people. In both, Chicago Beyond’s team – including their National Advisory Council — served as thought partners, guiding administrators and their teams through an intentional process, often along with incarcerated individuals, to implement the ideas of holistic safety. The National Advisory Council is a group of criminal justice reform experts from across the country who have worked in or been incarcerated in US jails and prisons. Chicago Beyond convened the council to provide thought partnership and guidance to its own staff and to correctional partners during the implementation of the Holistic Safety framework.

Though the 2024 work was more solidified, as a result of having been informed by the lessons and refinements developed in 2023, both sets of partnerships involved specific core elements. The Chicago Beyond team first led administrators through the Holistic Safety Inventory, a tool developed by Chicago Beyond to assess the status of the facility and identify opportunities for improvement. The team then provided support and guidance to administrators on conducting focus groups with their staff and people incarcerated to understand their perspectives on their own wellness and safety. With insight from the Holistic Safety Inventory and feedback from the focus groups, the Chicago Beyond team developed a report for administrators that detailed organizational strengths and opportunities to improve wellness for staff and people incarcerated by reducing four areas of isolation: physical isolation of people incarcerated, emotional isolation of people incarcerated, emotional isolation of staff, and interpersonal isolation between staff and people incarcerated. After discussing the report with administrators, the Chicago Beyond team assisted

them in the development of an implementation plan that outlined goals, strategies and monthly milestones aimed at improving each area of isolation. Chicago Beyond then facilitated monthly progress calls with administrators to acknowledge and celebrate achievements, identify barriers encountered, and generate potential solutions and next steps.

To add one additional layer of complexity, in two of the five partnerships in 2024, Chicago Beyond partnered with two correctional facilities as well as with state-level leaders. This was intended to explore the relative advantages and disadvantages of working purely with system leaders versus working with a combination of system leaders and facility leaders. While it is too early to determine which approach is preferable, we did identify some differences between the two approaches.

For the purpose of this report, we use the term “system” to refer to an entire organization such as a state department of corrections and the term “facility” to refer to a specific physical site such as a jail or prison.

This section draws upon interviews with 22 correctional administrators representing all three system partners from 2023, all five systems from 2024 including all four individual facilities, and one administrator from a partnership that did not quite get off the ground. It also draws lightly from the notes and artifacts collected by the Chicago Beyond team during their engagement with the five systems in 2024.

Though this work is still relatively new (especially the 2024 Workshop Series), we were able to document initial evidence of how the program is working and what emerging challenges need to be addressed.

ELEMENT 1

MOVING FROM ZERO-SUM MINDSETS TO MUTUAL BENEFITS

By connecting the health and wellbeing of correctional staff and people incarcerated, Holistic Safety provides a reform framework that transcends zero-sum mindsets. The challenge of this broader, more holistic approach is finding ways to implement it alongside other reform efforts.

Correctional reform efforts often falter because they are seen as a zero-sum game where gains for incarcerated people mean losses for staff, who already work under difficult conditions.¹² The Holistic Safety framework breaks this cycle by connecting the wellbeing of both groups. This offers corrections administrators a framework that addresses staff recruitment, retention, and satisfaction while also improving life for people incarcerated inside facilities. At the same time, it increases the appeal of Holistic Safety to both frontline staff and people incarcerated.

Yet translating this broader vision into practice presents its own challenges, especially in under-resourced systems already stretched thin. When resources are thin, system-wide approaches may feel too ambitious compared with programs to address the needs of individual groups.

Some of Chicago Beyond’s system partners found it particularly challenging to address the physical isolation of incarcerated people because increased out-of-cell time would put too much strain on already understaffed facilities. Those same staff shortages made it difficult to engage the staff themselves because engagement takes time that may not always feel available.

“...we’re already stretched, personnel-wise. Out-of-cell time puts additional pressure on [staff].”

HS PARTNER ADMINISTRATOR

“I think our staff recognize the benefit to that [out-of-cell time], but I think the biggest concern that our staff face is feeling unsafe in those environments...”

HS PARTNER ADMINISTRATOR

In some systems, Holistic Safety practices had to compete with other ongoing reform initiatives. In a world where most reform efforts address a single stakeholder group, a future version of the Holistic Safety framework might need to explicitly address how it can be adopted alongside other reform efforts.

I was super concerned with spreading ourselves too thin with all the other initiatives that were happening.”

HS PARTNER ADMINISTRATOR

Despite these challenges, addressing the wellness of both staff and people incarcerated is central to the program, and on balance seems more a strength than a weakness.

¹² <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2024/01/10/prison-correctional-officer-shortage-overtime-data>

ELEMENT 2

TRUST DRIVES
EARLY WINS

Chicago Beyond's collaborative approach centers trust and relationships, which drives early wins, but sustained impact requires commitment and support from all parties involved.

Virtually every system partner noted that the Chicago Beyond team conducted themselves differently from other reform advocates with whom they had worked. Correctional administrators felt that the Chicago Beyond team saw them as people with expertise and potential rather than as obstacles to be overcome or as a means to implement a policy change. This approach quickly built rapport and trust between Chicago Beyond and corrections administrators. More than one person noted that this was no small feat in a world that many described as extremely guarded and suspicious of outsiders.

"When Nneka checked in with me personally, she asked me how I was doing and what I was doing for my own self-care. Made it feel like she really cared about us."

HS PARTNER ADMINISTRATOR

In presenting themselves as collaborators, the Chicago Beyond team drew on their extensive experience working in corrections without acting as if they had the answers to every challenge. Administrators described how during site visits the Chicago Beyond team would walk through a facility and point out positive aspects along with those that could be improved. Even when the Chicago Beyond team pointed out things that needed changing, administrators noted that the team would ask questions as often as they doled out advice. More than one described how this approach put them at ease and encouraged them to share their own thoughts about what could be improved in the facility.

This people-first, trust building approach is a critical ingredient in the program that contributed directly and indirectly to some early wins that improved conditions in facilities, including improving visitation spaces by removing unneeded barriers and allowing people incarcerated to wear their own clothes during recreation. The most direct connection was that by collaboratively identifying opportunities for improvement, administrators felt empowered rather than prodded to make changes. Several administrators noted that Chicago Beyond's involvement enabled them to identify and address these issues early in the partnership.

"[Even] the things that [were] negative they had a way of turning that around in a non-judgmental way to make us think, 'Hey, we can work on that. There's a need to do that.'"

HS PARTNER ADMINISTRATOR

"Chicago Beyond is like a consultant partner who helps us stay grounded and focused. They help us see the progress in our work. Corrections is like putting out fires, you always get pulled in various directions so it can be difficult to accomplish any goals. Chicago Beyond helped us by ensuring we stayed on track and objectives were being met."

HS PARTNER ADMINISTRATOR

The Chicago Beyond approach also led to some early wins via listening sessions. Though such sessions are a key feature in the Holistic Safety process, not all partners were immediately comfortable holding them. The Chicago Beyond team was able to encourage, and at times convince, partners to conduct these sessions because of the trust they had built. According to administrators, this uncomfortable effort resulted in the Holistic Safety Initiative yielding results more quickly than comparable programs. Partners emphasized how quickly Chicago Beyond helped implement key initiatives that had been on their radar but on which they had struggled to make progress.

“The most important part of [...] the focus groups [was] forcing us [into] some uncomfortable positions, to allow [people incarcerated to] speak their mind and basically critique us and sit there and listen to it. And also letting our lower rank [staff] critique us and give ideas [...] and then actually getting some good ideas out of it and implementing them.”

HS PARTNER ADMINISTRATOR

Though the Chicago Beyond team was able to build trust with all of the administrators, not every administrator felt fully empowered at the outset. As noted above, in 2024 Chicago Beyond engaged systems through state-level administrators in all states and through facility administrators in two of them. Several facility administrators expressed their initial sense that the partnership with Chicago Beyond was an obligation imposed by state administrators rather than a true partnership. For a few, this undermined their initial buy-in to the work.

“It was kind of one of those voluntold situations... [System leadership] talked about the initiative and then basically congratulated us... on participating.”

HS PARTNER ADMINISTRATOR

Beyond feeling that they did not choose to engage with Chicago Beyond, several facility-level administrators expressed feeling a lack of support in the initial phases of the work. Individually, they expressed some initial unfamiliarity with the Holistic Safety framework that made it difficult for them to explain the program and get stakeholders in their facilities motivated to participate in the process. In some cases, facility administrators’ lack of familiarity with the program may have contributed to distrust of the program on the part of listening session participants.

“Because we talk about Chicago Beyond, [staff and people incarcerated are asking] what is it? Who is it? What are they about? [...] I think that would go a long way if [Chicago Beyond] did a brief introduction to go over what they’re about, to hear it from them, instead of hearing it from us.”

HS PARTNER ADMINISTRATOR

It seems that because of the nature of correctional system hierarchies, facility-level work may require additional relationship building and program support at the front end.

Looking to the future of these still-new partnerships, it will be important to have consistent and meaningful support from all stakeholders in order to be successful. Partners at the facility level named two reasons that such support may not be forthcoming which would severely reduce the long-term impact of the Holistic Safety Initiative.

Both risks stemmed from potentially insufficient support from state-level administrators that might jeopardize facility-level partnerships.

First, partners noted that in some cases state-level support for the Holistic Safety Initiative rested with a single individual, leaving the fate of the program susceptible to individual career choices and wider political winds.

“One concern I have is that one of our deputy directors who was championing this [is] no longer with us... and she was really, you know, 100 in on this. So I hope in her absence we still can move this forward.”

HS PARTNER ADMINISTRATOR

Second, some facility partners noted that even though state administrators had told them to partner with Chicago Beyond and adopt the Holistic Safety framework, there would not be any state funding to address problems identified in the process. Not every issue requires funding, but there are certainly some that do. In some cases, administrators worked with correctional officers’ unions to fund projects, but in others progress simply stalled. State budget deficits can present real challenges, but some staff shared stories of relatively small projects (under \$100,000) for which there was no support.

“...we’ve had so many projects where we start working and then all of a sudden it’s like, nope, scratch it... So that’s more of where my reservation came from. [...] Not necessarily working with Chicago Beyond, [but] ‘is our department going to really support us in this journey, and will we be able to follow it through?’”

HS PARTNER ADMINISTRATOR

In some cases, this lack of state support was reported to be undermining the ongoing Holistic Safety listening sessions because participants felt like they had been asked to share their views and then told that the issues they raised could not be addressed. Because the HSI leans on these listening sessions to establish relationships and to surface areas for improvement, the fate of the program is closely linked with that of the listening sessions.

“Both focus groups are skeptical. I think we’re very close to losing the interest of the [people incarcerated] focus group because they’re calling, for lack of better terms, bullshit on what we’re telling them... So, you know, it only takes one person to start that, and then it goes, you know, they forgot all things we’ve done up to this point.”

HS PARTNER ADMINISTRATOR

Trust can be built, but it can also erode, and erosion is not uncommon if expectations are raised and then go unmet. Given the importance of trust to the program, there is a real need for consistent support from system leaders in order to sustain momentum and impact.

ELEMENT 3

AN OPEN PROCESS THAT UNLOCKS POTENTIAL AND AGENCY

More than just a slate of policy innovations, Holistic Safety offers a framework and process that generates new insights, identifies opportunities to improve conditions for all, and unlocks the unrealized potential for reform within current stakeholders.

Seen through the lens of these engagements with correctional systems, Holistic Safety is more than a set of policy prescriptions. It is a process that unlocks the untapped potential of correctional staff and people incarcerated to drive improvements from within. This differentiates it from reform frameworks with similar goals such as dynamic security¹³ and trauma-informed approaches to corrections¹⁴ that impart specific operational models and policy recommendations.

As a framework and process, Holistic Safety provides space and time for correctional administrators, frontline staff, and people incarcerated to address harms in correctional systems by identifying things that they want to change. For frontline staff and people incarcerated, this takes place within focus groups and listening sessions described above. For correctional administrators, it provides a process for change that allows them to have an active role in improving conditions.

Partners described how the elements of the process like the Holistic Safety Inventory, the listening sessions, and the implementation plan provided a space for them to focus on improving conditions, something that they could not often do because so much of their job consisted of responding to the latest emergency.

“In corrections...we’re always putting out fires. We’re always reacting...The planning stuff is usually just planning for when the bad things happen.”

HS PARTNER ADMINISTRATOR

Partners also described how the implementation plan and monthly progress calls with the Chicago Beyond team provided an external framework of accountability that maintained momentum and provided ongoing guidance. They described the calls as a chance to refocus on the work and to engage in more reflective discussions with the Chicago Beyond team. They contrasted the hierarchical accountability that pervades correctional systems with the accountability provided by the Chicago Beyond team that was less about oversight than about providing a collaborative, supportive process that helped them manage the day-to-day crises inherent in correctional environments.

“Chicago Beyond partnered with us...you had this like consultant type partner who helped to keep you grounded in the work, focused on the path ahead and was able to track the progress that you do.”

HS PARTNER ADMINISTRATOR

¹³ https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/UNODC_Handbook_on_Dynamic_Security_and_Prison_Intelligence.pdf

¹⁴ <https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/trauma-informed-approaches-correctional-settings>

“I personally think it’s been helpful to have these check-ins where we kind of touch base on where we’re at, what progress we’ve made, what the challenges are right now, why we haven’t been able to work on something. Because it still keeps it on our forefront and doesn’t just let it drop completely.”

HS PARTNER ADMINISTRATOR

Because Holistic Safety is a framework and process grounded in collaboration, it is intended to empower those within the system to identify opportunities for change. Where it provides policy recommendations, they serve as suggestions to decision-makers on what those opportunities for change could look like. Some of those opportunities are new to stakeholders, but others may have been previously known and acted upon. In this way, the Holistic Safety process not only generates new insights, but it also gave momentum to related efforts by providing formal processes and accountability.

“...Even before Chicago Beyond came along, the department was gearing more towards this approach... it wasn’t something completely new and out of the ordinary... it’s been a slow build up for the past couple years, with a change in direction by the department, in the way we do things.”

HS PARTNER ADMINISTRATOR

“We’re not the kind of leadership that sits behind a desk and never gets out there. So, we talk to these guys all the time anyway... it just brought our day-to-day conversations with both the [people incarcerated] and the staff to a little more formal setting.”

HS PARTNER ADMINISTRATOR



PHOTO: HIDCR



PHOTO: CHICAGO BEYOND

Section 2 Conclusion

This initial review of the Holistic Safety Action Alliance and the Holistic Safety Workshop Series identifies three main themes for how the program creates impact. Though the themes were developed directly from an analysis of interview transcripts, it is notable that they resonate closely with the core tenets of Holistic Safety reviewed in Section 1. Our analysis showed that Holistic Safety provides a consistent framework for addressing the health and wellbeing of people incarcerated and correctional staff at the same time (Relevant Core Tenets: Health and Connectedness). It has also shown that close partnership between the Chicago Beyond team and

correctional system administrators are created through trust, credibility, and a collaborative approach (Relevant Core Tenets: Connectedness and Trust). Finally, it has documented how these partnerships have unlocked existing potential for reform within systems by empowering people to share their own ideas and expertise (Relevant Core Tenets: Personal Agency and Value). Though the emerging picture was largely positive, the analysis surfaced some challenges, most notably the difficulties resulting from the ambitiousness of the program and the need for consistent support from state leaders.

SECTION 3

Early Impacts of the Holistic Safety Workshop Series

Early Impacts of the Holistic Safety Workshop Series

In addition to serving as a model for how jails and prisons can center relationships and trust to drive change in correctional systems, the Holistic Safety Workshop Series has already led to meaningful changes across the correctional systems that partnered with Chicago Beyond.

At this relatively early stage in the work, many initiatives have only recently begun to implement changes. Still, we saw evidence of a wide range of impacts, including:

- 1. Elevating voices of frontline staff and people incarcerated**
- 2. More humane visitation policies**
- 3. Expanded and improved recreation**
- 4. Reduction in restrictive housing**
- 5. Increased support for staff wellness**
- 6. Reduced isolation between staff and people incarcerated**

This section of the report describes those changes. It focuses on the five state-level correctional systems, as well as four facilities (two each in two states) that Chicago Beyond partnered with in 2024 and for which there is more extensive documentation of early impact. The conclusions in the section are primarily based upon a review of progress reports, program updates, and status checks that were generated by Chicago Beyond and the correctional systems. Additional information came from conversations with Chicago Beyond staff and data from interviews conducted by Openfields with system and facility administrators.

As a result of Chicago Beyond's engagement with the state systems, we have seen evidence of the following changes.

IMPACT 1

ELEVATING VOICES OF FRONTLINE STAFF AND PEOPLE INCARCERATED

5 of 5 systems are including the voices of people incarcerated and of frontline staff in internal reform efforts

Focus groups – led by correctional administrators – with people incarcerated and frontline staff were a critical element during the planning phase of the Holistic Safety Workshop process. As they have worked to implement their strategic plans, four of the systems have instituted some form of an ongoing process to engage and collaborate meaningfully on wellness and safety issues with staff, people incarcerated, or both.

WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT

The Holistic Safety framework sees people incarcerated and correctional staff as individuals with insight and expertise that can improve conditions in correctional systems. The framework also recognizes the exclusion of these groups from meaningful interaction as part of a broader pattern of dehumanization that perpetuates harm.

The fact that most of these systems were continuing to listen to those voices, and to formalize the practice, is an indication that correctional leaders are recognizing the value that comes from meaningful engagement with people incarcerated and correctional staff. It also shows that the ideas of both groups are contributing to reform efforts.

FINDINGS

LISTENING TO THE VOICES OF PEOPLE INCARCERATED

In four systems, listening sessions with people incarcerated are either ongoing or the process of listening is being codified, or both. In one system, state leadership asked the leaders of facilities that had engaged in listening to present about the process to a statewide group of facility leaders, and work to formalize the approach is ongoing. Though the specifics differ, it is fair to say that across the four systems, leaders have committed to codifying listening and engagement with people incarcerated into policy.

LISTENING TO THE VOICES OF FRONT-LINE CORRECTIONAL STAFF

In five systems, engagement efforts with staff are continuing. In one facility, the staff focus groups have been fully integrated into staff routines, which has made staff feel, as Chicago Beyond team has noted, “...that they are being heard, and they are seeing some results.”



PHOTO: HIDCR

IMPACT 2

MORE HUMANE VISITATION POLICIES

4 of 5 correctional systems are changing visitation policies to allow for increased contact between incarcerated people and their families

For people incarcerated and their families, in-person visits are a lifeline that provides emotional connection and support. When opportunities for visitation are limited or when visitation is only allowed with physical barriers separating people, people incarcerated and their families are further isolated from each other. Four systems have changed their policies to increase the contact between people incarcerated and their families or to make broader improvements to the visitation experience.

WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT

As noted in *Do I Have a Right to Feel Safe?*, some of the harm that people incarcerated and their families experience comes from the physical and emotional isolation of incarceration. Increasing the frequency of visits, allowing physical contact in them, and allowing contact in a less oppressive space than a jail or prison can all contribute to decreasing these individuals' physical and emotional isolation. Allowing people incarcerated to interact with their families also allows staff to see them as full individuals and not simply as "inmates."

FINDINGS

INCREASING CONTACT VISITATION

Facilities in two state systems are taking steps to increase opportunities for contact visitation.

- + One facility that had not allowed contact visitation for many years held an Easter family day for incarcerated fathers and their children in April of 2025. Leaders at the facility are also developing

plans to allow for more incentive-based contact visitation.

- + Another facility issued a directive for an incentive-based visitation program, designed with significant feedback and collaboration with people incarcerated, in which qualifying individuals can apply for an additional visitation opportunity.
- + A third facility partnered with outside organizations to host two family days since its initial engagement with Chicago Beyond.
- + Administrators at a fourth facility are actively advocating for pre-trial individuals to be allowed contact visits with loved ones, a practice that is currently prohibited.

At the system level, one state has given wardens greater discretion to reinstate contact visitation. This move will hopefully empower wardens at other facilities around the state to make improvements as well.

IMPROVED VISITATION EXPERIENCE

Four state systems have made improvements to their visitation experience to make it less impersonal for people incarcerated and their families.

- + In one state system, COVID barriers have been removed from visitation rooms at all facilities.
- + In another, the administration has incorporated principles of customer service into its training sequence for visitation officers.
- + Chicago Beyond staff have reported general enhancements to family visits and/or family visitation areas at multiple facilities in one state system and at a single facility in another.

IMPACT 3

EXPANDED AND IMPROVED RECREATION

2 of 5 systems are improving recreation for people incarcerated

To reduce physical isolation, systems are enhancing recreational opportunities by expanding the options and quality of sports, clubs, and outdoor activities. There are initial signs that these changes are leading to increased out-of-cell time and improved overall conditions for incarcerated individuals.

WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT

Improved recreation opportunities incentivize out-of-cell time and thus reduce the physical isolation of people incarcerated. There is also some evidence that providing recreation increases safety by allowing people incarcerated to release tension and express themselves physically, emotionally, and verbally.¹⁵

FINDINGS

EXPANDED AND IMPROVED RECREATION

All four facilities within two systems that participated in the workshop series have improved their recreational offerings.

One facility expanded its intramural sports to include football, created two new clubs for chess and dominos, and incorporated ADA opportunities into their recreation offerings.

- + In the same state, another facility has installed new gym equipment and ended the practice of requiring full uniforms during hours out, a suggestion from the people incarcerated there because of temperature and hygienic concerns that was initially opposed by staff. This implementation illustrates how facility improvements can extend beyond physical and program development by allowing people incarcerated to engage in recreation in slightly less dehumanizing conditions.
- + A facility in a different state has increased outdoor recreation and activities for all populations, including restrictive housing. They report having expanded opportunities for people in custody to engage in more enjoyable and meaningful recreational activities, which has led to increased time outside of cells.
- + The other facility in the same state has also introduced new recreational activities – including some tailored to local cultures – that have led to increased out-of-cell time.



PHOTO: CHICAGO BEYOND

¹⁵ See pg. 44-46 in Alexander, Michael Ryan, “Correctional Recreation: An Overview” (2017). Integrated Studies. 2. <https://digitalcommons.murraystate.edu/bis437/2> for discussion of this research.

IMPACT 4

REDUCTION IN RESTRICTIVE HOUSING

2 of 5 systems have begun to make improvements to restrictive housing policies that should decrease the social and physical isolation of people incarcerated

Restrictive housing provides correctional facilities with a place to house people incarcerated who have had disciplinary issues or who present a danger to other people. While necessary in certain circumstances, when restrictive housing prioritizes punishment over rehabilitation, it can increase the physical and emotional isolation of people incarcerated. The Holistic Safety framework challenges systems to improve conditions in restrictive housing by, at a minimum:

- + Reviewing restrictive housing policies to determine whether there is an overreliance on it for less serious violations,
- + Safely increasing out-of-cell time,
- + Providing programming focused on pro-social behavior, and
- + Allowing for regular, positive socialization opportunities.

Correctional systems are showing early alignment on policy reforms to reduce the physical isolation of individuals in restrictive housing. Some of these changes are still in the planning stage because formal changes to these policies require considerable time and effort and consideration of legitimate safety and security issues. They often require numerous formal approvals, and they can be met with resistance when meaningful collaboration with frontline staff and other disciplines like medical and mental health providers is not done.

WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT

When people incarcerated are placed in restrictive housing, they are more physically and emotionally isolated. When correctional systems prioritize isolation and control, they create policies that bring more people into restrictive housing and make it harder for those in it to return to the general population. Reforming restrictive housing policies can reduce the number of people held in isolation and make it easier for those in it to get out safely.

FINDINGS

CHANGES TO RESTRICTIVE HOUSING POLICIES

One state has piloted changes to the housing classification system. System leaders report that these changes have created fewer restrictions for individuals in restrictive housing. In the long term, this could decrease physical isolation, though additional information is needed to assess their full impact. As part of piloting the changes, the department solicited feedback from incarcerated individuals about policies to incentivize leaving restrictive housing and incorporated that feedback into new proposed incentives and classification rules.

Another state has drafted new policy to create and codify clear and consistent guidance to gradually and safely increase out-of-cell time for restrictive housing by updating and implementing policy changes that reinforce a more rehabilitative approach. Progress is being made on these reforms, with staff already implementing less punitive measures for smoking and medication misuse, and further modifications are planned. The upcoming draft revision to the relevant policy will be a key milestone in ensuring that restrictive housing policies continue to evolve to reflect these priorities.

IMPACT 5

INCREASED SUPPORT FOR STAFF WELLNESS

4 of 5 systems are providing greater support for staff wellness across a range of programs

Correctional systems are investing time and money to provide a wide range of wellness supports to correctional staff. These range from the creation of new positions focused on wellness to improved information about available resources to additional trainings for staff.

WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT

Because correctional staff are exposed to so much stress and trauma in the course of their work, they are often in need of wellness supports and training to better understand and address their own trauma and that of others. Unfortunately, in many correctional systems, effective wellness programs and training are either unavailable or viewed with suspicion or skepticism by staff. Without proper support, correctional staff can develop unhealthy coping mechanisms, including hyper-vigilance, a deeply entrenched us-versus-them mentality, and counterproductive approaches to handling conflicts and stressors that actually compromise safety. Conversely, when provided with quality wellness resources and training, correctional staff develop greater resilience and are better equipped to handle the difficulties inherent in their jobs (and the ripple effects of these into their personal lives).

This improved resilience and skill-building can directly translate to more professional and humane treatment of incarcerated individuals. By investing in staff wellness and training in trauma, correctional systems create a positive cycle: staff better manage the difficulties and frustrations of working in volatile settings, which naturally leads to more constructive interactions with others, particularly people incarcerated. The connection is straightforward — when staff wellness improves, their capacity for humane treatment of people incarcerated increases accordingly.

FINDINGS

CREATING AND EMPOWERING WELLNESS COMMITTEES AND INVESTING IN NEW POSITIONS

Administrators have created and empowered staff wellness committees (or hired wellness staff) within their systems to lead wellness initiatives.

- + One state system decided to create the position of Wellness Administrator to manage staff wellness initiatives within the system. According to administrators, the decision came as a result of Chicago Beyond's engagement.
- + Other state systems have established wellness committees, inviting staff from various roles to join together and guide their wellness efforts. By trusting these committees to staff, administrators are acting on their commitment to wellness and are giving agency to staff members, ensuring that any wellness initiatives are designed and led by staff.
- + One facility's wellness committee, responding to ideas raised in their focus groups, held a Wellness Fair, bringing in outside groups (community-based organizations, advocacy groups, etc.) to showcase health and wellbeing resources available to staff.
- + At another, the wellness committee was tasked with leading staff focus groups and, taking insights from these, designated three areas to prioritize for staff wellness. To address one priority, wellness breaks during shifts, the committee created a wellness brochure which offers wellness practices that staff can employ with limited time. Both cases indicate a shift in how administrators are communicating with their staff around wellness.
- + At another facility, the wellness committee was selected with the intention of including a diversity of skillsets, seniority, backgrounds, and even

their level of enthusiasm for wellness initiatives. This committee was tasked with conducting focus groups and, in one such group, heard female staff identify a “culture of misogyny” in the facility. As a result, the wellness committee is working with facility leadership to address the issue, including the participation of a member of the committee who acknowledged in the focus group their role in perpetuating the problem. While work is just beginning on the issue, facility leadership have identified this as a target for improvement.

DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT

Some facilities have turned to digital media to address the emotional wellness of staff. Two facilities have each added a section to their website where they have linked wellness resources for staff to use. Further, one has used its website to share profiles of staff as a way to build morale and have encouraged their facilities to share more positive news to their Facebook pages.

TRAINING AND EDUCATION FOR STAFF

While many systems have previously or are currently considering learning opportunities for staff, two facilities have employed trainings to improve staff wellness. At one, staff received an in-person training on trauma-informed conflict resolution. According to facility leaders, this training was extremely well received by staff, giving them the tools to handle high-stress situations and de-escalate to avoid harmful interactions.

A second system is investing in their leadership, sending the warden from each facility to a peer learning program through the North American Association of Wardens and Superintendents and sending deputy wardens to the national US Deputy Warden Association Conference. While these specific trainings are only available to facility leadership, they are actively searching for ways to extend these opportunities to more junior and frontline staff.

Finally, administrators in one state have provided new materials on family wellness to trainees at the state’s correctional academy.



IMPACT 6

REDUCED ISOLATION BETWEEN STAFF AND PEOPLE INCARCERATED

3 of 5 systems are reducing the interpersonal isolation of staff and people incarcerated through ongoing joint focus groups and policies to reduce stigmatizing language

In order to reduce the dehumanization and interpersonal isolation that frequently characterizes interactions between correctional staff and people incarcerated, systems are holding or planning to hold joint focus groups where correctional staff and people incarcerated can hear one another speak and share experiences and ideas. Another system is working to eliminate the use of dehumanizing language.

WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT

Decreasing the interpersonal isolation of staff and people incarcerated is at the heart of Holistic Safety. By helping these groups to recognize each other's humanity, correctional systems are lessening one of the drivers of violence in correctional systems.

FINDINGS

HOLDING JOINT FOCUS GROUPS WITH PEOPLE INCARCERATED AND CORRECTIONAL STAFF

To address the “us-versus-them” mentality that is so pervasive in corrections and to reinforce the shared humanity of people incarcerated and staff, all five systems have indicated their intention to hold joint listening sessions comprised of both groups. At the time of writing, only two facilities in one state have held one of these sessions.

REDUCING THE USE OF DEHUMANIZING LANGUAGE

Another way that systems are reducing interpersonal isolation between staff and people incarcerated is by identifying and shifting away from the stigmatizing language that is used routinely by many staff and people incarcerated throughout the correctional system. Over several months, the administrators in one state system have developed a list of terms that are no longer industry-accepted as well as a list of alternatives that are less dehumanizing. Examples include replacing “feeding time” for people incarcerated with “meal service” and replacing “Guppie” (a derogatory term for a new correctional officer) with “new officer.” The ultimate goal of the effort is to reduce dehumanization throughout the system by using language that centers the humanity of everyone.



PHOTO: HIDCR



Section 3 Conclusion

The impacts described in this section represent early but meaningful progress – changes that emerged only months into the program. Additional efforts are underway and expected to show impact in the coming months. Still, many of these impacts support the principles and processes of the Holistic Safety framework. We saw that when the voices of groups that are historically shut out of decisions are included in reform efforts, some problems can be identified and addressed. We also saw evidence that engaging those directly impacted by the system in the system could lead to impacts that directly address the core issues of Holistic Safety laid out in *Do I Have a Right to Feel Safe?*, including:

- + reduced the physical isolation of people incarcerated through changes to restrictive housing and improved recreational opportunities;
- + reduced the emotional isolation for people incarcerated and their families through more humane visitation;
- + reduced the emotional isolation of staff through better job experiences and stronger wellness supports;
- + reduced interpersonal isolation and divides between staff and people incarcerated through joint focus groups and shifts away from stigmatizing language.

While the long-term impacts on the people and communities involved remain to be seen, these early changes offer hope that trauma and harm need not define the experiences of correctional staff and people incarcerated.

SECTION 4

Seeds of Systems Change: Holistic Safety in the Wider Field

Seeds of Systems Change: Holistic Safety in the Wider Field

With the publication of the second edition of *Do I Have a Right to Feel Safe?*, Chicago Beyond stated its long-held intention to lead a “new national effort to transform correctional practices.” The idea has always been to spread the principles and practices of Holistic Safety throughout the system, shifting not just the immediate lived reality of incarcerated people and correctional officers, but also the deeper culture and mental models, power dynamics and relationships, and the institutional policies, procedures, and funding streams that shape the system.¹⁶

Though its partnerships with correctional systems are the most intensive means of achieving its goals, Chicago Beyond has also worked to spread the ideas of Holistic Safety through publications, conferences, and media, and has begun to convene a national group of reform leaders committed to learning about, collaborating, and implementing those ideas in practice. As a result of these efforts, there are signs that the ideas of Holistic Safety are resonating and at times impacting the wider field.

In addition to the Holistic Safety Initiative, Chicago Beyond makes rapid-response and multi-year philanthropic investments to a range of justice and correctional reform organizations that reflect the values of Chicago Beyond, and in many cases the principles of Holistic Safety. While we are certain there are synergies between their philanthropic and direct program investments, we do not evaluate the impact of their justice-based philanthropy in this analysis.

The following figure lays out the full picture of these efforts to spread the ideas of Holistic Safety.

¹⁶ In many of its presentations, Chicago Beyond references the systems change model outlined in [The Water of Systems Change](#) (FSG, June 2018)



Building a Broader Community of Practice Around Holistic Safety

In late 2024, Chicago Beyond facilitated three additional efforts to expand the adoption of Holistic Safety among wider audiences in corrections reform and the broader field of criminal justice reform.

HOLISTIC SAFETY WORKSHOP AT AJA JAIL EXECUTIVE INSTITUTE

First, in September 2024, Chicago Beyond designed and facilitated a workshop with the American Jail Association. Over two hours, the team presented a concise primer on Holistic Safety to over 50 jail administrators from around the country. One attendee, a warden in one of the largest jails in the country, described the session – particularly the material about how trauma impacts staff and the families of people incarcerated – as one of the most interesting he had seen in his decades in the field.

NATIONAL JUSTICE CONVENING

The second, far larger, instance was Chicago Beyond's first National Justice Convening. On October 21-22, 2024,

Chicago Beyond brought together 147 justice reform advocates, people formerly incarcerated, correctional leaders, and researchers to Chicago for the first ever National Justice Convening. Over the course of two days, participants from 26 states and the District of Columbia gathered to learn about Holistic Safety, share stories of success and challenges from their own work, connect with each other, and (re)commit to bringing Holistic Safety principles and practices to their individual and collective efforts to change correctional systems. The correctional systems in attendance were collectively responsible for over 390,000 people incarcerated (almost 21% of the United States total) and 141,000 corrections staff.

In keeping with Holistic Safety's dual focus on people incarcerated and corrections staff, the convening included significant representation from each group. Around 20% of attendees identified as formerly incarcerated, 35% identified as corrections administrators, and 16% identified as corrections staff. As one attendee noted, just the act of convening such a group was fairly unique in the world of justice reform.

“I’ve never been to a conference like that where [so many] of the folks in the room were not from corrections. You know, they were formerly incarcerated people from all walks of life. And I thought that was probably the most impactful part of [it].”

STATE-LEVEL CORRECTIONAL ADMINISTRATOR

In reflecting on the event, attendees were clearly energized by the potential of bringing correctional staff and people incarcerated together to address harms in correctional systems. The most commonly identified interest for future convenings, identified by 78% of respondents was “Collaborative engagement between people incarcerated, staff and administrators.”

One notable session at the convening was the data walk where four long-term partners of Chicago Beyond shared their own stories of implementing Holistic Safety principles in their work. Two of these partners shared preliminary data on the impact of those efforts. While the data are not yet ready for widespread publication, the data showed positive changes in the wellbeing of people incarcerated and staff. At the same time, the fact that these partners were willing to share some of their internal data with a semi-public audience indicates the level of trust and collaborations that Chicago Beyond has been able to establish in the notoriously guarded world of corrections.

Coming out of the convening, attendees expressed enthusiasm for future opportunities to connect with others engaged in the work. One justice system partner who attended the convening noted that one of the main values that Chicago Beyond brings to this work is their ability to connect people around the country.

“To be able to see and connect with people that have done the work already so that I can reach out to them and say ‘Hey, I really like that program I saw. Can you share how you guys got that up and running?’”

CORRECTIONAL ADMINISTRATOR

HOLISTIC SAFETY ACTION NETWORK

To continue to support collaboration and information-sharing within the justice reform community, and to expand the impact of the Holistic Safety Initiative, Chicago Beyond launched the Holistic Safety Action Network (HSAN) in November 2024. Over its first two national virtual meetings, the HSAN attracted over 100 participants from around the country. These efforts build on the momentum started at the National Justice Convening. During these calls, more recent justice system partners have begun to share their own reflection on the value of Holistic Safety. Even more important, Chicago Beyond has – through its partnerships with correctional facilities – been able to include the voices of multiple people currently incarcerated in these calls, allowing them to collaborate in real time on holistic safety and prison reform.

Signs that Holistic Safety ideas are spreading

In addition to these more recent events, the publication of the first and second editions of *Do I Have a Right to Feel Safe?* (in 2022 and 2024, respectively) helped spread the ideas of Holistic Safety to a wider audience. The Chicago Beyond team has been invited to speak to audiences around the country, most notably appearing alongside staff from the NYU Law School's Brennan Center for Justice at a panel at The Atlantic Festival on "Pretrial Detention and the State of America's Jails" in September 2024.

As a result of these efforts, Holistic Safety is being cited by leading people and publications in the field. The most high-profile example was the recent public recommendation by New York Governor Kathy Hochul to partner with Chicago Beyond "to conduct a safety gap analysis within several facilities with the goal of deploying fresh, expert eyes within corrections facilities to identify improvements and develop best practices" as one of her immediate responses to the death of Robert Brooks, an incarcerated individual, at the hands of correctional officers.¹⁷

Other notable citations in the field that indicate growing credibility and adoption of Holistic Safety include:

- 🔗 *Do I Have a Right to Feel Safe?* was recently cited in the *Journal of Correctional Health Care* "A Collaborative Stakeholder Approach for Reducing the Use of Custodial Restraints in Hospitalized Patients" (February 14, 2025), with the authors noting that Holistic Safety

"...gives agency to all relevant parties, respects and values their input, and builds collective trust with the common goal of promoting patient well-being and ensuring public safety."

¹⁷ [Governor Hochul Visits Marcy Correctional Facility Demanding Answers Following Death of Robert Brooks and Announces Immediate Corrective Actions](#) (New York State, Governor website, December 30, 2024)

- 🔗 The recent John Howard Association report "[Lockdowns, Overtime, and Unmet Needs: Why we must solve the current prison staffing crisis](#)" (2024) named Holistic Safety as a correctional reform recommendation, noting

"[Holistic Safety] advocates for correctional practices that are based in human dignity. It roots correctional culture change in the acknowledgement of intrinsic human worth, the importance of personal relationships, and respect for a person's capacity for growth and change."

- 🔗 Holistic Safety has also been cited multiple times in *Correctional News*.





Section 4 Conclusion

The significant engagement with these varied and broader efforts to spread the word about Holistic Safety suggests that a significant part of the corrections field sees value in the approach. Furthermore, in keeping with the collaborative

spirit of the approach, Chicago Beyond has begun to build a nationwide community of practice that includes staff and people incarcerated oriented around implementing Holistic Safety.

SECTION 5

Strategic Recommendations for Implementing Holistic Safety

Strategic Recommendations for Implementing Holistic Safety

Though the Holistic Safety Initiative is only a few years old, the early lessons in this report inform a set of recommendations for reform leaders and correctional administrators using Holistic Safety principles and processes to adopt a more humanizing, effective approach to safety.

FOR GOVERNORS, STATE LEGISLATORS, AND STATE-LEVEL CORRECTIONAL ADMINISTRATORS

- Learn about the principles and practices of Holistic Safety.
- Ensure that the principles and practices of Holistic Safety are integrated into the design and management of correctional systems.
- Acknowledge that much of the expertise necessary to identify solutions and implement changes exists within correctional facilities and not in state Capitols or executive offices. Actively engage correctional staff and people currently and formerly incarcerated in policy making in the design implementation of practices to improve safety.
- Ensure that financial resources are available to support the reform efforts that come from staff and people incarcerated within the system.
- Provide sustained support to jail and prison administrators implementing Holistic Safety by championing their work within the system and (for state correctional administrators) by checking in with facility administrators to troubleshoot problems, align resources, and offer encouragement.

FOR JAIL AND PRISON ADMINISTRATORS

- Create and promote processes that will allow frontline correctional staff and people incarcerated to shape and lead initiatives. Allowing and encouraging these two groups to work collaboratively will create opportunities for them to see humanity in each other and thereby lessen violence.
- Prioritize regular listening sessions where the executive team talks with staff and people incarcerated about their wellness to identify ways the department is and is not adequately meeting the needs of both groups and opportunities for improvements.
- As you work to collaborate with staff and people incarcerated, it may be useful to begin by engaging each group separately before bringing everyone to the table together.
- Ensure facility leaders have adequate support from the executive team to implement the wellness reforms that are identified by staff and people incarcerated.

FOR CHICAGO BEYOND

In its first few years of implementation, Chicago Beyond's Holistic Safety Initiative has produced evidence that it is possible to challenge the isolating culture in America's prisons and jails. As we consider how to offer recommendations to Chicago Beyond based on what we have learned, we want to offer some observations of our own about the Holistic Safety Initiative.

➤ **The Holistic Safety Initiative team is led by leaders with lived experience of correctional systems and extensive professional experience in corrections reform, mental health, law enforcement and project management.**

We believe the team's direct lived experience and professional credentials are critical for accelerating trust with partners.

➤ **Chicago Beyond is able to provide external credibility that creates space for innovation and risk-taking for partners who engage in the work from the top levels of state leadership down to the facility level.**

Reform efforts involve considerable political, social, financial, and professional risk that can, at times, stifle innovation and creativity. Chicago Beyond helps mitigate the risks that reform leaders take on by providing external credibility that stems from the following:

- + The extensive experience of the Holistic Safety team
- + The wider network of visibly committed partners participating in related projects and convenings alongside Chicago Beyond
- + The media visibility of Chicago Beyond
- + The Holistic Safety Initiative is independently funded and comes at no cost to partners.

➤ **Chicago Beyond is currently building Holistic Safety as both a set of principles and practices and as a larger national movement.**

The Holistic Safety Initiative, and *Do I Have a Right to Feel Safe* in particular, lay out an explicit program for reform. As Chicago Beyond continues to spread its message, it may be difficult to both build a large tent and exercise tight control over those ideas. There are other groups working along similar lines and with similar goals, and there may be some advantage to engaging with them, but that may raise questions about how the Holistic Safety Initiative fits within the larger corrections reform movement.

➤ **Chicago Beyond enters into corrections reform as an operating foundation, independently funding the Holistic Safety Initiative.**

This approach increases the risk tolerance of all parties and empowers the team and partners to focus on trust-building first, which we have documented as a critical factor for the program's success. It also limits our ability to assess the "market-value" of the service to corrections departments or other funders and donors.

To this last point, Chicago Beyond models investing what Rob Reich describes as *risk capital*:¹⁸

"[Foundations] can also stimulate innovation. Here the idea is that foundations serve as democratic society's 'risk capital', a potent discovery mechanism for experimentation in social policy with uncertain results over a long time horizon."

18 Rob Reich, *Just Giving: Why Philanthropy Is Failing Democracy and How It Can Do Better* (Princeton University Press, 2019), pg. 159.

At this stage, we do see Holistic Safety as a “potent discovery mechanism” that allows for innovation and risk-taking in corrections reform. The independent nature of Chicago Beyond’s funding provides a unique environment that allows a more holistic vision and a more empathetic, relational approach to the work to emerge. Without this support we believe the Initiative – like other programs we have observed – would be pressured into more formulaic, time-bound and transactional engagements, and would likely be less effective.

If listening, trust, and inclusivity are what is needed to decrease isolation and harm within America’s correctional facilities, *and* if it takes openness, and a willingness to fail, and time to develop trust, then there is little reason to think that the system will change in its current state. The culture inside the prisons and jails, and the wider system of public and private funding outside the prison walls, do not make make space or provide support for innovation and risk-taking.

Holistic Safety in practice and delivery opens up a different way to work. And this would be our final point – you can have the funding and the experience and the framework, but the leaders of the program must be able to effectively *live out the values* that serve as the foundation for the entire effort.

Throughout our assessment, leaders on the ground in facilities to leaders of national reform organizations, have consistently noted that the presence, integrity, intentionality, openness, and empathy of the Chicago Beyond team is remarkable and serves as the first, and perhaps primary, point of faith for each administrator, corrections officer, or incarcerated person:

“Things can be different in the future because I am being treated differently right now.”

The Holistic Safety Initiative has not been operating long enough yet for us to say whether the changes we have observed in prisons, jails, and state systems are sustainable. Will the planned policies get passed? Will the programs continue when leadership changes? Will the next traumatic crime incident in these systems, or in our communities, take the systems back to their previous lockdown mentality? Will the wider corrections movement embrace a more inclusive voice?

At the same time, the best short-term efforts at culture change and humanization may be necessary but not sufficient to reform corrections. State correctional systems currently struggle to hire adequate staff, and we saw evidence that these shortfalls prevented some initiatives and that the good intentions and enthusiasm of state leaders was not always matched with substantive financial support. Trust building takes time, and the creative solutions that emerge from trusting collaborations sometimes require real resources to implement. Correctional systems and political leaders that fail to provide this support may quickly smother the budding collaborations and cultural shifts that Chicago Beyond is starting to sow.



PHOTO: CHICAGO BEYOND

Appendix:

Sources for data in Table 1

Arizona Department of Corrections, Rehabilitation and Reentry

People incarcerated: https://corrections.az.gov/sites/default/files/documents/reports/MonthlyDataReport/ADCRR_MDR%20-%20January%202025_FINAL.pdf

Correctional staff: <https://www.azilbc.gov/26baseline/adc.pdf>

Connecticut Department of Corrections

People incarcerated: <https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/opm/cjppd-main/cjppd/cjresearch/monthlyindicators/2025-monthly-indicator-reports/monthly-indicators-report---june-2025.pdf>

Correctional staff: <https://portal.ct.gov/doc/org/human-resources-unit>

Cook County Sheriff's Office

People incarcerated: https://cookcountysheriffil.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/CCSO_BIU_CommunicationsCCDOC_v1_2025_01_31.pdf

Correctional staff: https://ecommons.luc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1003&context=criminaljustice_facpubs

Hawai'i Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation

People incarcerated: <https://dcr.hawaii.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Pop-Reports-Weekly-2025-01-27.pdf>

Correctional staff: <https://www.civilbeat.org/2025/01/report-hawaii-prison-guards-face-unsustainable-working-conditions/>

Illinois Department of Corrections

People incarcerated: <https://idoc.illinois.gov/content/dam/soi/en/web/idoc/reportsandstatistics/documents/quarterlyreports/IDOC-Quarterly-Report-January-2025.pdf>

Correctional staff: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5beab48285ede1f7e8102102/t/6716a720b96ce751025fc916/1729537824795/JHA+Lockdowns%2C+Overtime%2C+and+Unmet+Needs+Oct+2024.pdf>

Nebraska Department of Correctional Services

People incarcerated: https://nebraskalegislature.gov/FloorDocs/108/PDF/Agencies/Inspector_General_of_the_Nebraska_Correctional_System/600_20240912-130303.pdf

Correctional staff: https://corrections.nebraska.gov/sites/default/files/FY%2025%20Q3%20QDS_o.pdf

San Francisco Sheriff's Office

People incarcerated: <https://sfsheriff.com/services/jail-services/current-and-historical-jail-data/current-jail-data-and-trends?>

Correctional staff: <https://sfsheriff.com/>

Vermont Department of Corrections

People incarcerated: <https://doc.vermont.gov/sites/correct/files/documents/January%202025%20Population%20Reports.pdf>

Correctional staff: <https://doc.vermont.gov/research-and-data/staff-data/staff-dashboard>

