



## It takes a village to reform the criminal justice system

By: Brian Hicks – Charleston Post & Courier - Sep 1, 2017

The idea is simple.

You put a student from Burke High and another from Porter-Gaud at a table with a social worker, a public defender, a police officer and somebody from a local church.

What do you get?

The Episcopal Forum of South Carolina hopes to get a few good ideas for remaking the state's criminal justice system.

The group is hosting a conference at Trident Tech on **November 18\*** called "Transforming our Criminal Justice System: Engaging our Community," which is exactly what it sounds like: People talking about new ways to end mass incarcerations and curb recidivism.

"The Episcopal Church has always seen a very proactive social justice agenda as part of its mission," says Lynn Pagliaro, vice president of the Forum. "Our goal is to increase awareness in the community of this problem and show them there are good things happening in South Carolina."

So they plan to have politicians, professors, pastors and the folks who run various local rehabilitation programs talk with anyone willing to help out or offer solutions.

As Pagliaro says, you can't build the support to change the system until people know what the problem is. And too many people don't know.

### **Ticket or a rap sheet?**

This is part of the problem, as summed up by the Charleston County Criminal Justice Coordinating Council:

In the first six months of this year, 8,883 people were booked in the county jail. More than 1,000 of those people had been booked three or four times in the previous two years. Nearly 400 of them had been busted more than five times in the same period.

So, yeah, they are a problem — a target group that programs such as the Turning Leaf Project and LowCountry Rise deal with on a daily basis. The question is, does the system create some

of these repeat offenders?

Between January and the end of June, the jail saw nearly 2,700 bookings for people charged with a single, stupid crime — trespassing, public intoxication, misdemeanor shoplifting or simple possession of marijuana.

Those are the most common reasons people get arrested, and they are the sorts of charges that, in many cases, should probably result in tickets — not jail time. People get a record and all of a sudden they have a hard time getting a job, or lose the one they had while they are locked up. A pattern starts.

**The Criminal Justice Coordinating Council — a co-sponsor of this conference** — is working on a program to help officers identify low-risk reoffenders so they can be ticketed, not booked. Keep 'em out of the jail, out of the system. Keep the police on the street.

That is a good idea, just the sort of thing the Episcopal Forum is looking forward to tackling.

### **Awareness is key**

Charleston has seen the faith community take an even more active role in social justice and civil rights issues in recent years.

That is a decidedly good thing — the more people tuned in, the better. And the churches reach a lot of people.

So anyone who is interested in learning more or attending the conference can find all the information they need at [episcopalforum.com](http://episcopalforum.com).

It might surprise people some. Fact is, this is not about absolving anyone of personal responsibility or turning criminals into victims, In truth, organizations such as Fresh Start Prison Ministry and Turning Leaf are all about forcing recidivists to face the problems they cause.

But, as Pagliaro says, there are also real issues with justice being administered evenly. And we have to find better ways of dealing with addiction and recognizing mental illness. The only way to fix those problems is through building public awareness.

“If the awareness is not there, the people don’t support the legislation and then nothing gets done,” Pagliaro says.

He’s absolutely right. As former Charleston Police Chief Greg Mullen said, we are not going to arrest our way out of this.

Reach Brian Hicks at [bhicks@postandcourier.com](mailto:bhicks@postandcourier.com).

*\* New date due to Hurricane Irma*