

THE
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The Club held its final Young Leadership Forum on May 18th at The Chicago Club, hosting Cook County Sheriff Tom Dart for a breakfast discussion moderated by Young Leaders Committee Chair Toni Irving. Dr. Irving – who serves as executive director of Get IN Chicago, a private fund that invests in programs targeting acutely high risk youth – began the conversation by addressing an unexpected addition to the Cook County jail: a brick pizza oven.

“With this pizza program, one of the many different things we have come up with is we’re trying to teach skills we can give the detainees that they can transfer to the community,” said Sheriff Dart. “All along I wanted to do two things: detainees to learn the skill and then sell it to the public to make money to sustain the program, and also to humanize the detainees. People would be buying something that is cooked by individuals who are incarcerated, so it changed the mindset.”

The negative public perception of incarceration and the goal of being “tough on crime” popularized in the 70s and 80s has had a significant impact on the number of individuals entering the jails and for what reasons. According to Sheriff Dart, roughly 30 percent of the individuals in Cook County jails have been diagnosed with a serious mental illness, receiving some type of psychotropic medication. He explained a situation many individuals go through that eventually results in their incarceration:

“[People] are coming into my custody truly because they have an illness. They have lost their job because of their mental illness, they go on and off their meds, and their families struggle to help their loved ones until they can’t do it anymore and they call the police frequently. So the police come there they remove them from the house because of the domestic issue, and they are not allowed back in the house. So now they are homeless as well. So where do you go? Well they are going to find some place to sleep and something to eat. So most frequently people in our custody they are charged with criminal trespass of property, what does that mean? That means they were looking for a place to sleep, frequently busses. They are being brought in on retail theft, because they are stealing things to eat. Then we bring them to the one place in the planet every psychologist and psychiatrist will all say is the worst place to bring them, into the criminal justice system.”

Given a clear need for reform, Dr. Irving cited an additional obstacle to change as the lack of distinction between violent and nonviolent offenders. This most dramatically observed in the issue of cash bonds, which Sheriff Dart has advocated for eliminating. As he explained, when an individual is arrested, he or she will go in front of a judge that will

set a bond. This could be simply signing a piece of paper and a person can walk out the door, or the judge sets a dollar figure that must be paid before release. An individual has to pay a percentage of the dollar figure, and if they cannot pay that percentage, they remain in the county jail until the case is resolved.

"We have been struggling with the notion that the public thinks that seems logical because you set this dollar figure based on the dangerousness of the person," he said. "However, this is the most illogical thing in the world. You might as well have a roulette wheel in the court room in regards to what the dollar figure is. Every individual is different, their backgrounds are different. Ultimately, what we found out is that you are penalized for being poor, if you are poor you will sit in my place... not because you are violent or dangerous, but because you couldn't come up with \$100 or \$200 dollars."

Sheriff Dart mentioned that some legislation is being considered in Springfield, but the bills aren't gaining any traction. That, and the impending crack down on crime Attorney General Jeff Sessions has mentioned, creates road blocks to the kind of progress Sheriff Dart hopes to see.

"I thought we had crossed certain ridges that we wouldn't have to go backwards on, but now apparently we are going to rethink the notion of war on drugs, it was such a folly from the beginning, there is no evidence that it helped anything and quite the contrary, just loads of evidence about how it has devastated entire communities, and destroyed people," said Sheriff Dart. "With limited resources we have in law enforcement community and the judicial system, to be putting any in [the war on drugs] is just truly an act of insanity."

Despite working closely with the judiciary, Sheriff Dart emphasizes that "judges don't like me, and I don't like them." He holds many judges responsible for the extensive stays many people have in the county jails as they await a trial, some individuals waiting three to four years. Currently, four individuals in the county jail have been awaiting trial for nine to ten years.

"While these things are languishing in the system these people can't put their lives back together. The very thing all of us in this room all want them to do which is to leave a better person, to stay away from the criminal justice system, have a job, raise a family - we are putting more hurdles in front of that," he said.

After the discussion, Sheriff Dart took live questions from the audience. One member asked how addiction is addressed in custody. Although he gave details on a program they've been modifying over the last two years, he was open in admitting that the Sheriff's Office is looking for an alternative.

"I hate being so ridiculously stupid and just saying something different is good. I just don't want the same program. I am looking for something that is much different that connects them with more than just the treatment part of it, but looks at what they are going back to and the community and what we can do there to stabilize them," he said. "We don't

just want to work with them here and then dump them back into this place with no job, drugs are everywhere.”

When one members asked if Sheriff Dart had any additional aspirations for elected office, possibly on a larger scale, he shared his disinterest in a job that might infringe on his work-life balance.

“It’s normally 12 hour days, but the weekends are all mine and my kids. Some of these other jobs, I just don’t know if I can do that. If I can’t do it right, I do not need another title to feel good about myself,” he said. “I just don’t know how much more of me I want to give. It’s as simple as that.”