

As Arnold Ventures' [Advancing Pretrial Policy and Research \(APPR\) National Research Partner](#), RTI International independently studies six [Research-Action Sites](#) that receive intensive technical assistance through APPR. In keeping with APPR's principles of pretrial justice, our research aims to understand how changes are made to pretrial systems; to understand the impacts of those changes; and to identify opportunities for more equitable, fair, and transparent practices for people involved with the pretrial system. To support our commitment to transparency, equity, and accountability, we have developed this series of APPR Research Briefs to share information about our research processes and findings.

Community Engagement in the APPR Research-Action Sites

APPR Research Brief, August 2022

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Levels of community engagement in the APPR initiative and its activities vary considerably across the Research-Action Sites. Understandings also vary as to what “community engagement” means and how community members should contribute to pretrial reform. RTI site liaisons regularly connect with representatives from the Research-Action Sites^a — primarily through monthly calls, periodic surveys, and [site visits](#)^b—to document ongoing APPR activities and stakeholder experiences and to learn about the local community. **This Research Brief highlights what we have learned so far about community engagement**, provides insight into what is working well, summarizes challenges reported by site stakeholders,^c and suggests strategies for jurisdictions that wish to engage their communities.

Research-Action Sites' Policy Teams

The Research-Action Sites have each identified a **policy team**, a working group of criminal legal system stakeholders who have committed to receiving training and technical assistance (TTA), ongoing data support, and rigorous evaluation toward improving their pretrial systems. As detailed on the [APPR website](#), that work is grounded in five essential principles, the first of which is “Establishing high-functioning collaborative teams that represent community and system stakeholders, who together agree on a vision for their system of pretrial justice and meaningfully engage with their colleagues, partners, and neighbors in the process of change.” APPR's TTA partners are providing intensive research and policy development support to six Research-Action Sites over 5 years. According to the APPR website, the TTA providers will work to facilitate the development and ongoing support of policy teams, “creating a table large enough for system stakeholders and community members to work together meaningfully and collaboratively.”

Policy teams vary in size, stakeholder type, leadership structure, and—most pertinent to this brief—level of community member involvement. For additional information on the number and types of stakeholders represented on each Research-Action Site, please see Exhibit 1 in [APPR Research-Action Site Partnerships](#), a brief that speaks to the value of strong partnerships and collaboration as an essential element of APPR.

Research-Action Sites (Cohort 1):

- Fulton County, GA
- Montgomery County, AL
- Pierce County, WA
- Thurston County, WA

Research-Action Sites (Cohort 2):

- Pulaski County, AR
- Ramsey County, MN

Jurisdictions participating in APPR are in two cohorts.

APPR accepted the first cohort of four Research-Action Sites in August 2019. Two additional sites were added in June 2020.

^a See sidebar for a list of the sites by cohort. Catawba County, NC, withdrew from participation as an APPR Research-Action Site. This brief reflects data collected from Research-Action Sites through spring 2021 and may include perspectives from Catawba County stakeholders.

^b In response to the COVID pandemic, RTI is conducting virtual site visits until it is advisable to resume in-person visits.

^c RTI is committed to protecting the confidentiality of all quantitative and qualitative data respondents. In this brief, we do not identify information or quotations provided by individual respondents by name, agency, or other identifying characteristics.

Defining Community Engagement

Engaging the community in criminal legal system policy development is complex and multifaceted; “engagement” means different things to different people. Some stakeholders describe community engagement as providing information from criminal legal system authorities to the community about upcoming initiatives or projects that could affect the community. Others believe that real engagement includes openly sharing updates on initiatives and getting feedback from the community on how the initiatives can be safely and sensitively launched—for example, to ensure that marginalized community members are not overlooked or harmed in the process, especially if they are affected by or involved in the criminal legal system. Still others believe that communities should be involved from the inception of an initiative like APPR so that they can have input on project planning and policy changes.

The [engaging community](#) section of the APPR website discusses meaningful collaboration and why community engagement matters: “Sustainable, equitable pretrial improvement requires real collaboration between public leaders and community members. True community engagement means that community members are partners in creating change to the pretrial system.” The website also offers a [public engagement handout](#) that highlights the types and value of public engagement. The sidebar lists some of the viewpoints represented on APPR policy teams.

Research-Action Sites and Their Community Members

In spring 2021, about half of the Research-Action Sites were actively engaging community members in criminal legal system policy development and reform efforts. These jurisdictions vary in terms of size, pre-existing pretrial efforts and resources, and history of engaging the community in criminal legal system reform initiatives.

During an RTI survey of Cohort 1 Research-Action Sites, administered in spring 2021, **almost 80% of respondents reported that meaningfully engaging the community is an extremely important or very important goal for their participation in APPR (Exhibit 1)**. All sites are in different places on their APPR activities timelines; some have not had the time to meaningfully engage community while they worked on other aspects of the project. The following sections highlight key features of each site’s approach to community engagement for APPR. To maintain the confidentiality of the sites in relation to their activities, these sites will be referred to as Research-Action Sites A–D.

Research-Action Site A: Committing to diverse community representation

At the time of this writing, Site A’s policy team, which began engaging the community early in the APPR project, included seven community members representing six organizations. This site believes in the value added by community members and has intentionally included at least one community member in most of its policy team workgroups.

In the beginning of APPR, the community members were affiliated primarily with nonprofit advocacy organizations or community-based service providers. These organization-affiliated community members understood that their lived experience in the criminal legal system was limited and that—although many of them lived in the neighborhoods they served—their voices were not necessarily representative of the community at large. One such community advocate said,

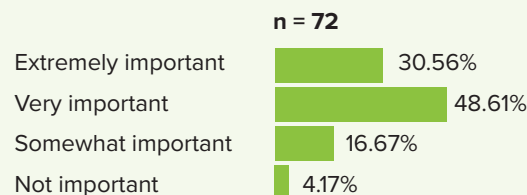
I was one of the people who said, I think this needs to be more inclusive. And I think that’s in part because I was uncomfortable with decisions being made about the [Site A] community without hearing from a wider range of voices. I tend to think that it may take more time when you have more people, but you need to get buy-in.... Say you implement the tool [PSA] and you haven’t actually gotten buy-in from community members and then suddenly community groups... start writing op-eds that this is dangerous. Better to have this buy-in and trust.

In recent months, the policy team began inviting individual members of the local community who are not affiliated with an organization. Site A has focused specifically on community members who are affected by the criminal legal system or otherwise personally invested in APPR’s objectives. Policy team members have shared that this pivot toward being more community oriented has made the policy development process more inclusive and will likely lead to greater buy-in among those most likely to be affected by the policy team’s decisions.

Which community members do some policy teams include?

- Individuals with lived criminal legal system experience (and their families)
- Survivors of crime
- Nonprofit and other community service providers
- Advocates
- Retired criminal legal system stakeholders
- Other concerned citizens

Exhibit 1. Research-Action Sites Stakeholder Responses to RTI Survey Question on the Importance of Engaging Community in APPR



Research-Action Site B: Leveraging innovative community engagement before APPR

The professional stakeholders on the policy team at Site B collaborated as a team on other criminal legal system initiatives before joining APPR. Thus, they already had experience engaging the community in policy development. Through a previous pretrial initiative, this site had a well-established working group of professional criminal legal system stakeholders and community members who were familiar with each other and experienced in meaningfully engaging with one another. As part of their collaboration, policy team members have developed a county-wide model of shared decision making between system leaders and community leaders that aims to solicit feedback from affected community members at every stage of policy development. As a result, this site needed less time for building rapport and establishing group norms than typical for this type of group and was able to begin working on APPR activities right away. Community members in this site are affiliated with professional and established community organizations and include members who openly identify as having lived experience in the criminal legal system. As one policy team member explained,

From the beginning we had some good voices at table. And they fluctuated with the politics of our locality, our county, and of the community... I just think we have a good group of people, and it's still growing, with more communities showing up at the table, which is what we care about. And community with lived experience—not just people who have the time to be there. People who have the experience of living it and being harmed.

Site B has also engaged a well-known and respected local researcher to facilitate honest, open communication among professional stakeholders, community members, and researchers and to review the [Public Safety Assessment \(PSA\)](#) validation results. Notably, the researcher has previously spoken out about racial and social justice issues in this community. Site B's process could offer new strategies for including community leaders and local researchers in leadership roles on policy teams, potentially even with a share in final decision making.

Research-Action Site C: Prioritizing the formation of a community engagement working group

Site C also engaged the community from the beginning of APPR. The site's main community champion is the director of a local organization that helps people grappling with substance abuse to become productive and thriving members of their community. This community member identifies as having lived experience in the criminal legal system and works with others who have also been affected by the system. Overall, stakeholders in Site C have expressed a need for more integration between community leaders like this champion and professional system actors.

Recently, Site C completed an assessment to measure the county's level of engagement with local community members. The assessment findings underscored the need to develop and maintain authentic partnerships with community organizations that were not represented on the policy team. As a result, a working group was developed to (1) increase the community's awareness of ongoing pretrial justice reform activities and (2) increase community engagement in APPR activities. The community outreach committee plans to engage faith-based community leaders, educators, and Black business owners. The committee comprises five individuals, one of whom is the main community champion, one a minister, and another a researcher at a local university. These individuals will leverage their connections in the community to advance the goals of APPR.

Research-Action Site D: Having a community member with lived experience has been meaningful

Site D began engaging the community in fall 2020. Policy team members always knew that community engagement was going to be a part of APPR, yet it took some time for them to determine how best to meaningfully engage the community.

This policy team leaned on the expertise of a few of its members with ties in the local community, who were eventually able to connect with an organization that provides supportive services and builds the capacity of individuals returning to the community after incarceration. The organization was founded and is run by individuals who had been incarcerated. Through this connection, someone from the organization joined the policy team, which other members have perceived as highly beneficial:

One of the things that's helpful is, we have a policy team member who comes from an organization that represents incarcerated individuals... When she speaks, it is impactful. Ideally, we would want more people in the room that can say, "This is the reality of what you're doing and what it means to my life."

RTI's [Racial and Community Justice Committee](#) interviewed RTI APPR Advisory Board member, [Dr. Grace Gámez](#), who offers advice for researchers on [Engaging and Interviewing Community Members](#).

Spotlight: One Community Member's Thoughts on Participating in APPR

Joining the APPR policy team with professional criminal legal stakeholders—such as judges, prosecutors, and court administrators—was daunting at first and something Jamie[§] was not sure she wanted to do. During their interview with RTI in spring 2021, Jamie revealed that she had been released from prison after serving a multiyear sentence. Soon thereafter, Jamie was employed by an agency that supports returning citizens with reentry services, such as employment support; life skills, such as financial literacy; and policy advocacy work that directly affects people involved in the criminal legal system.

Jamie's manager, who has also been open about having been incarcerated, was asked to join the site's APPR policy team as the first community member just a few months before Jamie was hired. After meeting Jamie, the manager thought that Jamie would have great insight and perspective after having been released from a lengthy prison sentence and encouraged Jamie to join the policy team right away. Jamie was hesitant but thought about what she might be able to add to the policy team and decided to give it a try. So far, the experience has been positive for Jamie and received well by policy team members.

Asked what advice she would give to a new jurisdiction joining APPR, Jamie said that it should be a priority to make sure all community members were represented, especially when talking about criminal legal policy reform. Jamie said, ***"A lot of people want to disregard people who have been incarcerated or have been arrested, but the thing is, the feedback from them is what's going to really help you become successful."*** Jamie believes that people affected by the criminal legal system can provide practical insight on issues like failure to appear for court. Jamie said that people fail to appear not because they don't want to go to court but because "they're making it too hard [to appear in court]!" For example, lack of reliable transportation or childcare can make appearing for in-person hearings difficult. Even virtual hearings can present barriers to people who have issues with Wi-Fi accessibility, older cell phones or other electronic devices, or limited technological know-how. Jamie also acknowledged that a lot of community members are intimidated to talk with judges and prosecutors, so it is important that people who are passionate about issues and feel empowered to speak up are on the policy team.

When asked what professional stakeholders can do to be more welcoming and inclusive so that community members feel comfortable participating in the policy team, Jamie suggested that stakeholders let community members know their input is valuable and will help others, no matter what their background. Jamie spoke fondly of a judge on the policy team who always checks in with Jamie to ensure she can get the floor if she has something to say. This gesture has greatly enhanced Jamie's experience on this policy team.

§ Name changed to maintain confidentiality.

"You can't
make laws
about us
without us."
—Jamie, APPR
Community
Member

Benefits of Engaging the Community

There are many benefits to engaging the community. As noted on the APPR website, those benefits include people working together to enact better policies; strengthening their community through a stronger civic life; and helping to build stronger communities through collaboration, greater equity, and stronger social networks. In the 2 years that the first cohort of Research-Action Sites has been active, RTI has seen each of these benefits play out in official engagement of community members on APPR policy teams. Although building consensus between professional system actors—like prosecutors or judges—and affected community members is not without its challenges, overall, stakeholders across backgrounds and lived experiences have expressed relief in working through those challenges up front.

In Site A, that up-front work took the form of opening meetings that were previously closed to community members to feedback—and possibly scrutiny—from people with lived experience. The policy team in Site B has begun to formalize community engagement, incorporating it into its mission statement and shared values, while also expanding the definition of community to include new groups like local evaluators. Sites C and D are likewise engaging people with lived experience as formal partners and strengthening the pipeline from being a person affected by the criminal legal system to being a valued policy team member with lived experience.

Another benefit to engaging community members is that professional stakeholders have opportunities to hear first-hand accounts about how existing policies have affected—and how proposed reforms might further affect—people involved in the criminal legal system and their communities. Open conversations with people with lived experience, asking questions and hearing their concerns, can have an impact on policy focus and other activities in a reform initiative such as APPR, resulting in changes that are more feasible to implement and sustain because they have buy-in from the public. Engaging the community can also be empowering for community members and can provide avenues for them to speak with professional stakeholders in ways that feel safe and productive. Importantly, working alongside criminal legal system professionals also can exact an emotional toll from community members, depending on their history with the system. The experience can, however, strengthen community members' sense of great agency and help reshape the narrative they have about criminal legal system professionals, which might encourage other community members to get involved.

Engaging the Community Can Be Challenging

Although there are many benefits of engaging the community, undertaking these efforts can feel daunting, and it might be hard to decide on first steps. For example, it can be difficult to know how to get started if a pretrial reform initiative such as APPR has garnered only partial support from professional stakeholders or if there is a lack of consensus on whether the community should be actively involved

in policy-making decisions. First steps might also be challenging if professional stakeholders value engaging the community but don't feel that they have the time and capacity to cultivate meaningful relationships. We heard from some people that they wanted to make sure their engagement plan was perfect, with “enough ducks in a row,” before beginning to formally engage the community. Although discussions with community members need to be approached thoughtfully, waiting to begin them until plans feel fully fleshed out risks truncating the impact that community members can have because they weren't able to weigh in at the start of a project.

Not having a history of collaboration between professional stakeholders and community members might make it difficult to identify people affected by the system and asking them to join a pretrial reform initiative. Initiating new connections may be particularly challenging when many interactions have been moved to video because of the COVID-19 pandemic. New partnerships rely heavily on developing rapport, and virtual encounters can be off-putting. One Research-Action Site stakeholder acknowledged COVID as a barrier and stated, **“When it's safe to engage in person, we [the policy team] will go out to [meet with the community].”** Again, waiting too long to engage community members can jeopardize their feelings of inclusion once they are brought on board. Reaching out to leaders of community-based organizations to introduce a project and ask for recommendations of people who might be interested in becoming involved can often yield fruitful new connections.

Many community members are advocates and individuals with lived experience. They may have encountered the professional stakeholders with whom they are being asked to collaborate in adversarial settings, such as courtrooms or probation departments, or they may have vocally advocated against the election of these key officials. Some policy teams are navigating the engagement of community members who are well known and trusted by the community but who have been outspoken critics of departments represented on the policy team (e.g., law enforcement). All of these issues require consideration—but it helps to remember that professional stakeholders frequently also have histories of conflict with each other and their opposing viewpoints can ultimately enrich discussion and lead to real change.

Sometimes professional stakeholders hesitate to include community members in pretrial reform efforts because doing so can hinder swift decision making. As one stakeholder commented, **“The more people you have involved, the longer it takes to get things done.”** This concern could also be raised about having too many professional stakeholders at the table. Changes to the criminal legal system will have a substantial impact on many community members, whose perspectives are as essential as those of professional stakeholder groups.

Finally, for many counties and jurisdictions across the United States, a polarized political landscape can be a barrier to engaging community. Finding ways to appeal to those with strong liberal and those with strong conservative views when inviting collaborative dialogue about criminal legal system reform requires planning, forethought, and well-facilitated meetings that keep communication channels respectful and productive.

Strategies to Engage Community Members

Meaningful community engagement takes time, commitment, and sensitivity but should be considered as an essential part of APPR and other criminal legal system reform efforts. Research-Action Sites are either using or considering these strategies as they plan to meaningfully engage members of their communities:

- Engage the community early and regularly.
- Confirm community member voting rights on the policy team before they agree to participate.
- Invite community members to join workgroups and subcommittees.
- Ensure that policy team meeting times (and locations when meeting in person) are accessible.
- Provide a stipend for individual community members not affiliated with an organization.
- Pair new community members with experienced policy team members to receive mentorship and support, if needed.
- Establish clear goals, plans, and timelines to avoid wasted time and ineffective work.
- Standardize language to ensure that common terms are used and are “people first” (e.g., “Person with a conviction” instead of “Convicted felon”).
- Encourage professional stakeholders to affirm community members and their contributions.
- Ask existing community members on the policy team to recommend others who might want to participate.
- Leverage community members' expertise and invite communication from all points of view, including from those who may challenge previous assumptions or envision radical change.

For additional information, we encourage readers to view the [engaging community](#) section of the APPR website.

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