

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.

APPR Research-Action Site Partnerships

APPR Research Brief, August 2022

by Elizabeth Tibaduiza, MA, and Venita Embry, MPH

Typically, system stakeholders such as jail administrators, prosecutors, defense counsel, and judicial officers are strongly focused on their own agencies' priorities and may conduct their work in "silos" that seek little collaborative interaction with other criminal legal system actors. Participating in APPR brings these professionals into new forms of communication. Strong partnerships and collaboration are crucial to ensuring that this complex initiative is developed soundly; is implemented well; and leads to the desired outcome of [fair, just, and effective pretrial practices](#). However, developing and sustaining partnerships in the context of an adversarial justice system requires thoughtful engagement, structure, communication, and management.

RTI site liaisons regularly connect with policy team members from the Research-Action Sites^a—primarily through monthly calls, periodic surveys, and [site visits](#)^b—to understand their local context and document their APPR experiences. This Research Brief is focused on the partnerships being built across the Research-Action Sites and provides an overview of the stakeholders involved, the partnership-building process, and partnership benefits and successes related to APPR participation. Challenges and potential strategies to address them are woven throughout.

Research-Action Sites' Policy Teams

One of the [essential elements for the Research-Action Sites](#) of the APPR project is establishing high-functioning collaborative teams, with the aim of creating processes for meaningful partnerships to develop and achieve a shared vision of pretrial justice. With assistance from its APPR TA team, each Research-Action Site is responsible for regularly convening a policy team with representation across its local criminal legal system and from the community. Representatives are expected from the judiciary, court administration, prosecution, defense, pretrial services (if applicable), law enforcement, jail/corrections, and communications. Other system professionals, community representatives, and victim services representatives are also encouraged to join. **Exhibit 1** shows the type and number of stakeholders who are part of the Research-Action Site policy teams and illustrates the variation in size and representation across the sites. Policy teams range in size from 12 to 37 members, and judicial stakeholders are the most represented. According to site stakeholders, any policy team size can have both advantages and disadvantages. A large team increases the likelihood that diverse perspectives are included in decision making; however, it can make it more challenging to reach consensus. Conversely, a small team may be able to work more efficiently but may be missing important voices.

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

This brief focuses on system stakeholders. Our Community Engagement in APPR Research-Action Sites brief can be downloaded at [Understanding the Local Context](#).

^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 Learn more about RTI's approach to [understanding local context](#) in the Research-Action Sites.

Exhibit 1. Who Is Represented on the Research-Action Site Policy Teams?

Stakeholder Type	Research-Action Sites						Total
	Montgomery County, AL	Pierce County, WA	Fulton County, GA	Pulaski County, AR	Ramsey County, MN	Thurston County, WA	
Judiciary	5	3	2	6	1	3	20
Law enforcement	6	4	1	1	1	4	17
Prosecution	4	1	3	2	3	1	14
Defense	2	1	4	2	1	1	11
Community	6		3		2		11
Local government	1	2		2	4	1	10
Jail/corrections	4	2		1	2	1	10
Pretrial services	*	2	3	*	1	1	7
Court admin.	2	1	2		1		6
Victim services	4	1					5
Behavioral health		1		2			3
Research/data	1	1		1			3
Advocacy	2						2
Total	37	19	18	17	16	12	119

Notes: Numbers are as reported in September 2021. As numbers increase, the cell colors become darker.

* Montgomery County’s Department of Community Corrections provides various forms of pretrial support, but the county does not have a formal pretrial services program, and Pulaski County does not have pretrial services programs.

Building Partnerships and Supporting Collaboration

Building and maintaining partnerships can be a challenging process but is a critical component of any initiative in which a key factor to success is effective collaboration across a multitude of stakeholders. In this section, we describe the Research-Action Sites’ experiences establishing and fostering partnerships and highlight the barriers to and facilitators of meaningful and productive partnership and collaboration, as identified by stakeholders. Whereas we primarily focus on the efforts to build and sustain the Research-Action Site policy teams, we acknowledge that broader partnerships are being developed as well.

Champions and Gatekeepers

Many partnerships are successful because of a strong champion—someone who can take the helm of the project and help identify and engage all the relevant stakeholders. The project champion likely has strong social and cultural capital in the jurisdiction. Many of the Research-Action Site policy teams benefit from a central figure like this who helps direct project development. The roles of the champion may include securing funding and resources for the project, obtaining buy-in in the early phases, being the face of and advocating for the project, mediating conflict, addressing challenges, and ensuring steady progress. One stakeholder reflected,

There are people who are interested [in the APPR project]. Particularly [the project champion], as a major driver, [they’re] the one who applied for a grant and who’s gotten everybody involved to be part of it. So, I guess, in that sense the “Why” [we are participating] is because there’s a person in a position to get us involved to do it.

Although project champions are helpful to project success, it is important that they not dominate decision making. This caution also applies to other strong voices within the policy team. In our discussions, several stakeholders noted frustration in feeling that decisions were being made in silos (e.g., via side conversations or ad hoc meetings) or that project leaders were steering decisions too much. Partnerships can benefit from less-hierarchical structures that allow multiple stakeholders to assume leadership positions. When developing roles and responsibilities, project champions should share group facilitation responsibilities to avoid perceptions of exerting too much influence or pushing an agenda. One stakeholder said that people in that site take turns in hosting and facilitate meetings, which helped to create the feeling that “we’re all equal.” Project champions may also consider allowing other stakeholders to weigh in first when making key decisions. In large collaborative efforts like APPR, partners need to feel valued and able to voice their opinions, including questioning processes and expressing dissent.

Getting the Right People to the Table

As noted, the Research-Action Sites' policy teams comprise various stakeholders, including criminal legal system actors such as defense attorneys, judges, and law enforcement officers. Some sites have expanded their policy teams to include non-system actors, like victim advocates, representatives from nongovernmental advocacy organizations, academics and researchers, and community members. Before engaging partners, leaders should consider the needs of the project—including resources, planned activities, and the voices and perspectives needed to make informed decisions—to determine whom to invite. Leaders should identify whose participation is essential to project success with thought to the pretrial improvements that are under consideration (e.g., who will be affected by potential changes?). It is also helpful to consider whether there are types of staff whose input is critical to specific tasks or activities (e.g., the chief of police for executive decisions, a crime analyst who can provide data, a patrol officer who can advise on field practices).

One stakeholder cited as a primary achievement the project's development of a policy team that is inclusive of all key stakeholders. With this team, the person said, the APPR goals are achievable:

Look at the table we have. This table started with two people... coming together with an idea.... From those two people, now all the stakeholders are at the table,... all singularly focused on, "Let's do this." We haven't done it yet. But there's not a key stakeholder that's not at the table.... So we can do it, because everyone is there.

Yet, for complex initiatives such as APPR, engaging all relevant stakeholders may be challenging because of competing commitments, hesitance to be associated with an unfamiliar or potentially unpopular initiative, lack of understanding of the value of their participation, or pre-existing strained relationships. Lack of participation or outright opposition from an essential stakeholder can be detrimental to a project's success, so it is important to continue making the effort to include all groups who may be affected by this work. In one site, delegates from the office of a newly elected district attorney joined the policy team after the policy team had already completed a significant task (development of a violent offense list). To be collaborative, the policy team worked with the new members to incorporate their feedback to include additional offenses, and thereby likely avoided a significant implementation barrier down the road and alienation of a critical partner.

Learn more about violent offense lists and their development in the Research-Action Sites by downloading our brief at [Understanding the Local Context](#)

Because of the potential challenges, we recommend that sites early and consistently spend the time to encourage participation by key stakeholders, such as by communicating the project's purpose and demonstrating the value in connection to stakeholders' work. It is also helpful to delineate who should be involved and the expectations for participation. If stakeholders who are crucial to the success of the project decline to participate, teams should be prepared with strategies to minimize and mitigate future opposition. Strategies could include conducting one-on-one check-ins to gauge attitudes and points of resistance, providing updates that specify how changes or improvements may affect the stakeholder's sector (e.g., how planned activities affect policing practice), and routinely demonstrating the importance of their perspective and its contribution to more comprehensively informed decision making. These ongoing efforts may be best received if they come from someone who is viewed as a neutral entity (e.g., project champion, TA provider).

For example, one site has had difficulty getting consistent involvement from an important but uninterested stakeholder department. Through the leadership of a strong project champion and relationship-building efforts, a representative from the department agreed to participate in the policy team. However, after this representative left the department, the department's participation in policy team meetings and workgroups was inconsistent. Greatly valuing the department's input, the project champion and TA team continued engagement efforts. They kept the department on the e mail distribution list, provided meeting updates, and continually tried to identify representatives to serve on the policy team and workgroups. As a result, the department has always had some connection to the project despite ongoing hesitancy, and a representative has been part of many important conversations and accomplishments.

Building Collective Goals and Collaborative Processes

Getting partners on board and sustaining relationships are no small feats, as each partner may have different perceptions of the project's goals, motivations to join the partnership, or expectations of what the project can achieve. One stakeholder offered a metaphor: members of the policy team want "different kinds of cake" (i.e., changes to the pretrial process), but they do all want cake. Participating in APPR can help them decide what types of cake to choose.

Co-developing goals is a fundamental APPR activity, and it is extremely important that all stakeholders have the opportunity to provide input during goal development, as this can increase a sense of ownership of and commitment to the project. Once goals are defined, they must be clear to everyone involved. Goal achievement is difficult when there is confusion about what the project is trying to accomplish. Some stakeholders noted challenges related to a lack of goal clarity, including feelings of aimlessness and disorganization, repeated discussions and decisions, and loss of momentum.

The APPR project exists to assist jurisdictions with implementation of the Public Safety Assessment (PSA) and broader pretrial policies that align with sites' vision, values, and goals for their pretrial systems. So, while many Research-Action Sites are aiming to implement the PSA, they are also considering what other policy and practice changes to make and how to make these system changes a reality through collaborative teams. Given the large number of decision points in the pretrial process, this approach can result in an expansive project with many goals and moving parts. Helpful project management practices that sites have employed include establishing a structure for decision

The Ramsey County team is developing an initiative "blueprint" to add structure to its project and define its vision and process more concretely. The blueprint describes the team's shared vision, guiding principles, meeting norms, stakeholders and roles, subgroups, and definition for community co-design (a foundational component of the project).

making, defining roles and responsibilities, developing a timeline with expected milestones, and creating accountability measures. When developing processes, teams should consider how to ensure that various voices are being incorporated in decision making, people are making informed decisions (e.g., on how resources are shared), activities are outcome driven, decisions are communicated to the team, and progress is monitored and shared. Additionally, documenting agreed-upon processes (e.g., in a work plan) is beneficial to increase transparency, shared understanding, and sustainability.

It is important to set and communicate realistic timelines and to be transparent about what can be expected and when. APPR is a project with far-reaching goals that require intense resources, time, and political buy-in. Two years into APPR, some stakeholders are feeling the weight of the project and “growing weary” of the slow pace. Some stakeholders have expressed frustration with the trajectory of the project or with the lack of a clear road map to guide them. As one person stated, “The question is, when do we move forward? When do we get out of just conceptualizing to actual action?” Another stakeholder shared,

If there was a little more direction at the beginning and a plan as to what was going on, I think that with some education on some of these topics early on, it would move things a little faster... [to get] a little bit of buy-in and people [could] focus on certain parts of the education process that might be particularly useful to them.

Group decision making is an inherent aspect of collaborative initiatives like APPR; thus, it is vital that teams define what it means to reach agreement or consensus. A “majority wins” approach may be viewed by some as the most effective and fair; however, this approach is sensitive to who is present and allowed to provide input when decisions are made. Perceptions of being excluded or discounted can engender distrust and lead to partner disengagement. Teams should consider the following when making collaborative decisions^d:

- What does consensus mean (e.g., majority, two-thirds, unanimous support)?
- Was everyone at the table provided the necessary information to make an informed decision?
- Is there a space for partners to dissent without retribution, shame, or minimalization of their perspectives?
- When there are differing perspectives, what is the process to review and explore ideas?

Many sites use workgroups to examine, discuss, and make preliminary decisions on specific topics (e.g., developing the violent offense list). These workgroups report their findings and ideas to the larger policy team. As with the policy team, workgroups should develop plans with roles and responsibilities, a timeline for completing activities, and a process for sharing information with the larger group. Compared with the larger policy team, workgroups can provide great opportunities for deeper conversations and recommendations about targeted issues that are more specific to the local pretrial system. They may also offer a more efficient approach to decision making for teams.

Stakeholders must be kept aware of and understand the project’s structure and processes. As noted, lack of clarity has been a source of frustration and could result in partners’ losing trust or feeling disconnected from the project. Transparency and communication are key. As the project progresses, it is likely that changes will be made—and appropriate to do so—but the changes must be communicated. Do not assume that everyone is on the same page—confirm it.

Montgomery County retooled its policy team structure and activities to form workgroups focused on agreed-upon policy improvement areas. This was done to re-energize the policy team and use a more action-oriented approach, providing more consistent and attainable wins.

Managing Conflict

Although legal system actors share a unified goal of promoting public safety, the system includes traditionally adversarial roles (e.g., prosecution and defense) and elected officials who may not align politically with each other. Additionally, there may be strained relationships between community or nongovernmental groups and system stakeholders. Sites should be aware of these potential sources of conflict and be prepared for and willing to engage in difficult conversations. Solutions that incorporate diverse perspectives are likely to be better supported and more feasibly implemented.

Remember that, for some people, these are new conversations. One stakeholder observed that resistance may be a result of “a lot of rooted thinking” and “reflexive pushback.” Another stakeholder acknowledged,

The failure rate is quite low [even among people who are labeled as being] in high-risk groups. But even I am still embedded in the mindset, the culture that if you commit a violent crime, you should go to jail.

Overcoming ingrained beliefs or practices may require a mind or culture shift, which may be facilitated by genuine acknowledgment of others’ viewpoints, collaborative and ongoing learning, and a focus on smaller changes that, collectively, lead to more significant change.

Teams should foster respectful environments in which people feel comfortable sharing their input and others employ mindful listening. Teams should also consider differing communication styles; it may be helpful to create multiple avenues for feedback, as some people may prefer options like one-on-one conversation or e mail to speaking out in large team meetings. When asked what advice they would give to a jurisdiction, a stakeholder noted,

Be open-minded.... You can disagree and that’s okay. You can have different agendas, but still work toward a mutual goal. It is possible that the goal itself does not have to alienate an entire department or an entire group of stakeholders. And to welcome the adversarial because it’ll make your program stronger.

^d Learn about consensus decision making here: <https://www.seedsforchange.org.uk/consensus>

“A Collaborative Mind, As Opposed to a Siloed Mind”: Benefits and Successes

For most Research-Action Sites, establishing policy teams and working collaboratively have been primary accomplishments of their APPR work to date (see sidebar). For some, this project is the first time that adversarial stakeholders and those representing an array of agencies have worked together on a common goal. Project teams have engaged a wide variety of stakeholders, including groups that historically have not been as engaged in similar initiatives but are important to their success. In particular, several sites emphasized engagement of law enforcement as an achievement. One stakeholder stated,

The idea that we have law enforcement at the table who are hearing everything that we’re hearing and being part of these conversations is huge.... Because we’ve had diversionary type programs before, [but] law enforcement wasn’t on board, [so] they failed. A lot of the improvements we want to make will fail unless we have buy-in.... We now have a venue that they are part of.

The importance of having a “venue” was echoed by other stakeholders, with one person noting that a primary benefit of APPR is that it “creates a mechanism that otherwise wouldn’t exist” to bring cross-agency stakeholders to the table, develop collaborative processes, share information, and make decisions. The benefit of having a structure and strong relationships has extended outside APPR as well. Notably, for some sites it was helpful in [responding to COVID-19](#) for key system stakeholders to have a regular forum to discuss changes in practices, as well as challenges and strategies to address them. In one site where tensions were high after a high-profile incident, stakeholders spent a meeting sharing and discussing their reactions. Additionally, the Pierce County and Thurston County policy teams took advantage of their time together to address several contextual challenges (e.g., when the state supreme court ruled the state’s simple drug possession law unconstitutional) that significantly affected their criminal legal systems.

Numerous stakeholders also stated that developing a shared vision, mission, and values for the project helped build consensus by fostering relationships, building trust, and coming to a shared understanding of what the project is working toward. One person noted,

Everybody has their own discipline and their own mission and their purpose, and I feel like we all respect that and still can have discussions about how to work best together. There is a common thread of, what we’ve been doing is not working... and that things need to be changed, and things need to be more equitable.

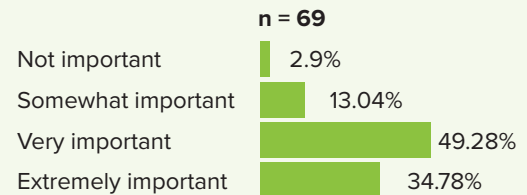
Additionally, stakeholders have largely agreed that completing a pretrial system map was a beneficial and illuminating exercise. It is easy to take for granted that people working in the criminal legal system fully understand how the system works. However, it is not realistic to assume that all system stakeholders have a comprehensive understanding of each step in the process or of the ripple effects of changes. One stakeholder explained the benefit of the system mapping process:

I think there were a lot of “aha” moments. I think a lot of folks understood what they did and maybe didn’t understand how that may have impacted something downstream. So, I think that has been very valuable.... Mapping that all out and getting those detailed pieces really helped us as a team understand that whole process but also helped the folks who were in more of a silo understand what occurs when X, Y, or Z happens in their house? What’s the residual of that? What happens downstream?

Another stakeholder stated that people did not want to “look foolish” asking questions during mapping activities but empathized that colleagues were confronted with many “new words and concepts.” It may be helpful for sites to explicitly acknowledge that stakeholders start with varying levels of knowledge, and mapping (and other APPR activities) is a learning process that is intended to produce shared understanding. This appears to have been the result as stakeholders across the sites reflected on how system mapping increased their understanding of their pretrial system (particularly outside of their sector); broke down silos; and increased a sense of interconnectivity—“seeing the bigger picture.” This holistic view and understanding led to “better workgroups, better partnerships, and collaboration,” according to one stakeholder.

Stakeholders also spoke about the positive aspects of the collective knowledge building that was happening on their teams. This knowledge building has been achieved through several pathways. First, teams have been reviewing and discussing the research that supports pretrial advancements, such as the APPR [pretrial research summaries](#). Stakeholders have found this research incredibly helpful not only for their own learning but also to communicate the purpose and goals of their projects to colleagues outside the policy team. Second, teams have been learning more about their local criminal legal system data—for example, what is and is not collected, who collects it, how to access it, and what challenges arise in analyzing it. For some, this learning process has led to discussions about needed data-related improvements. Others have reported having increased access to data because of improved communications and relationships and the collective support of policy team members. A third pathway has been learning from peers in other Research-Action Sites or other jurisdictions with experience implementing the PSA and other pretrial improvements. For some stakeholders, hearing how practices have been applied in a real-world context has been valuable, because there is a common belief that “our situation is different” and what works elsewhere cannot work locally. One stakeholder said,

Almost all (84%) policy team members who responded to the APPR Pretrial Perspectives Survey said **increasing stakeholder collaboration is extremely or very important** to their participation in the APPR project.



Pierce County also developed a “COVID map” to reflect the changes made to pretrial system practices to respond to the pandemic. The team then compared the two maps to identify what they might want to sustain.

We know that for whatever reason, there is Problem A. It exists. I can see that, but I can't get others to see it. And just because I've maybe heard of other things that are happening across the nation, I can't really see how that might work in our own system.

Stakeholders observed that resistance to change is often a result of misinformation or lack of information and that sharing research, data, and experiences has been helpful to assuage concerns and garner buy-in to the project.

In Closing

Despite any challenges that have been encountered, policy team members feel that the partnerships and relationship building facilitated by APPR have been a major step toward advancing their pretrial justice systems. As one stakeholder reflected, "Everyone does not always embrace change and if people do embrace change, they have different agendas.... You[ve] got to manage all that... and so I'm just encouraged after two years that we are still having the conversation and making progress."

RTI International (www.rti.org) is the independent National Research Partner for APPR.

RTI International is a trade name of Research Triangle Institute. RTI and the RTI logo are U.S. registered trademarks of Research Triangle Institute.

