



TOOLS OF THE GAME

VOLUME 1



Background

In April 2023, the JustUS Coordinating Council™ (JCC) was launched, a national collective led by systems-impacted leaders, community members, and national organizations who no longer demand a “Seat at the Table” but are instead “BUILDING OUR OWN.”

Our mission is to enhance quality of life for justice-impacted individuals and their communities in order to restore human dignity. We do this by dismantling the racist policies that uphold systemic oppression and marginalization that are rooted in racial inequalities.

Overview

Tools of the Game is a wide-reaching set of advocacy frameworks, templates, and guides for any person interested in learning about and navigating policy making spaces. These tools reflect some of the best tactics and strategies from across the criminal legal reform space and are meant to be used by members of the JCC and our affiliated communities seeking to create collective impact. The JustLeadershipUSA® policy team remains available as an additional resource, and we encourage the use of these tools along with our resource library, 2025-2029 Roadmap, and policy reports. We are deeply appreciative of the many experts and partners who have contributed to these tools as we have adapted them for use. By investing in our own understanding, we can deepen our expertise and create greater impact for economic justice.

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OVERVIEW OF AGENCY ROLES IN SHAPING POLICY



As persons with lived experience, it's crucial to understand the different systems and individuals who have a say in public policy. These stakeholders influence decisions on issues like bail reform, voting rights, and even services such as food assistance. Let's explore four key stakeholder groups, the roles they play, and how we can engage with them to push for positive changes in our communities.

Government Agencies

Who They Are — Government agencies include departments (Department of Justice), offices (Office of Child Support Services), bureaus (Bureau of Motor Vehicles), and more. Each of these agencies are created to implement policy, procedures, and programmatic offerings that help systems function in the public or private sector.

Their Role in Policy Creation — While they don't make laws, government agencies play a significant role in enforcing and implementing them. They also have the power to create regulations and guidelines based on existing laws or interpret laws and policies that give clarity on how they should work in community. Agencies often provide feedback to lawmakers during the legislative process and also frequently engage with the public depending on the scope of their work.

Engagement Considerations — Governmental agencies are primarily responsible for using public fiscal resources (dollars from legislation, taxes, budgets from county executives, etc.) to effectively provide key services as outlined in their statutory authority.

Statutory Authority: The power a government agency has to implement, interpret, and enforce policy created by legislation. *Example: The Occupational Health and Safety Administration is given statutory authority by the Occupational Health and Safety Act in 1970.*

Because these government agencies typically cannot *change* a law, the role of the government agency in creating economic opportunity rests in their ability to guide how the public uses their expertise and to listen to the needs of the public as they fund programs and procedures. The policy and initiatives they create and implement (within the scope of their *statutory authority*) are a great area of opportunity for influence.

Tactics / Examples

- Share research and data that highlight how certain policies disproportionately impact persons with lived experience. This data could influence future policy initiatives.
- Advocate for changes in the language of rules that could expand services, like food assistance or employment training dollars, for people leaving prison.
- Push for new initiatives or programs that increase services specifically for persons and families impacted by the criminal legal system.
- Raise awareness of how other agencies have addressed a similar issue, whether in your local community or a community nearby.

Example: In recent years, advocates have worked with government agencies to improve changing child support payment amounts during incarceration. These changes can only be implemented if a state's child support agency takes action to create this flexibility.

Questions for Consideration — What are the greatest needs in your community to create economic opportunity? Where are there significant roadblocks? Are these opportunities and barriers due to how a law is being implemented by an agency or due to the law itself?

Elected and Appointed Officials

Who They Are — Government agencies require various levels of leadership. These roles are often filled with individuals elected by the public or appointed by officials already elected. Elected officials include roles such as members of Congress, state legislators, governors, mayors, and city council members. They represent the public and (depending on the branch of government in which they work) make various decisions on laws, programs, funding, and more. While many of those most visible to the public are elected to office, others are appointed by elected officials or agencies instead based on their expertise and the need of the government agency (e.g., State Medicaid Directors, Department of Corrections Directors, Child Support Administrators, etc). In some instances, a role could be both appointed *and* elected (e.g., if a judge retires early or leaves the bench for another reason, often they are replaced through an appointed new judge).

Their Role in Policy Creation — Elected and appointed officials have the power to propose, vote on, and pass laws. Both elected and appointed officials are the target of many different special interest groups' attention, and the nature of their role and decision making can be deeply political. Their influence is crucial in shaping policies, including those that impact the criminal justice system. As elections approach, however, appointed officials may leave their post, and the life cycle of an elected official is not guaranteed. With policy creation also comes the creation of the funding to make it happen. Elected and appointed officials are key in securing funding for new initiatives and policies they help create—often with taxpayer dollars. Our voice as members of the public are critical during these planning and policy creation cycles as decisions are made.

Enhancing Our Voice with Values: A tried and true method of positioning our needs and rights with the interests of policymakers is to align our goals with the shared values of decision-makers. Building advocacy around policy change requires finding common ground with those in power. To learn more about using a Value, Problem, Solution, Action method in your advocacy

communications, check out [Communications and Values-Based Messaging](#) also found in this toolkit.

Tactics / Examples

- Meet with elected or appointed officials to explain how certain policies affect previously incarcerated individuals and communities impacted by the justice system. If an elected or appointed official will not take a meeting consider meeting with their second in command or another person who works closely with your target.
- Attend an interested party or stakeholder meeting to learn more about the current efforts on the issue and to engage with other advocates (potentially both those in favor and those opposed to your stance).
- Encourage them to support reforms like bail reform or the restoration of voting rights for people with felony convictions. When offering this encouragement, think about what would motivate this particular policy maker to care and what funding might be needed to create the solution you propose.
- Attend a public event or fundraiser for the elected or appointed official, introduce yourself and give them a 15-second pitch with a follow-up meeting request.
- Prepare public commentary for city council meetings, and partner with others to ensure the scope of your issue is fully covered. Local governments provide public hearings regarding funding priorities and positions where community members can comment.
- Organize letter-writing campaigns or public demonstrations to show community support of new programs, ending bad policies, or driving additional funding for economic opportunity. If they represent your district or area, your voice as a constituent can be used to open doors to policy conversations as well.

Example: In the fight for bail reform, advocates have engaged local elected officials to sponsor and vote for legislation that eliminates cash bail for low-level offenses. This change can help ensure that people aren't jailed simply because they can't afford to pay bail. How advocates engage, however, depends on the power and position of the policymaker. It also depends on the organization or individual's relationship to the issue.

Questions for Consideration — What steps could you take to *build a relationship* with elected officials who might support criminal justice reform? How would you explain the importance of reform in your community? If you are asking for additional funding, how will the government agency pay for it? How might an upcoming election or an appointee who is just starting in their role influence your messaging and timing?

Interested Party — A broad term that refers to anyone with an interest in a particular decision, process, or outcome. Interested parties may not be directly affected but are still curious or concerned about the issue. They may observe or provide input but aren't necessarily actively involved or influential. Their interest may or may not lead them to deeper involvement. *Example: City Hall is hosting an interested parties meeting to discuss their application for housing-related funds.*

Stakeholder — A more specific term, referring to individuals or groups who have a vested interest and may be directly affected by a project, decision, or organization's actions. Stakeholders often have some level of influence or active involvement, and their needs or concerns are usually a priority in decision-making. *Example: The Department of Health is gathering surveys from stakeholders for their priorities.*

Constituent — A person who lives in a specific area and is represented by an elected official. Their interests are linked to the policy decisions made by those officials, even if they're not directly involved in the decision-making process. *Example: Commissioner Smith is hosting a listening session with constituents to discuss her reelection campaign priorities.*

Workgroups, Committees, Commissions, Boards, and Caucuses

Who They Are — Workgroups, committees, etc. are formal or informal groups of policymakers, advocates, and community leaders who come together to focus on specific issues. These groups are often formed based around a topic (e.g., Equity in Sentencing Workgroup), policy platform (e.g., Prison Oversight Caucus), or statutory function (e.g., Senate Rules Committee). They are found within legislative bodies, administrative agencies, or as part of local or statewide advocacy efforts. They can be both permanent or temporary and can represent both interest areas or geographic areas. Area commissions, for example, are typically made up of residents and business owners who work together to advocate for their local needs.

Their Role in Policy Creation — These groups analyze specific issues, develop recommendations, and help create solutions to identified policy needs. Committees in legislatures often review bills before they go to the full body for a vote. Caucuses, such as those focusing on criminal legal reform, provide a space for stakeholders with shared goals to advocate for change. Workgroups may consist of experts and stakeholders who provide detailed feedback to inform new policies or their implementation. Regardless of who is in these groups, their role is to generate thought partnerships that lead to change. These changes drive both policy and funding that can either help or hinder the community.

Policy Implementation — It is often said by advocates that policy implementation does not match intention. While a piece of legislation or agency policy may be meant to create access to a new resource, if the agency or organization implementing it grants funding to a provider or creates a new program that can't be used because of when or where it serves the public, the implementation (or putting it into action) does not create the access intended. This is one of many reasons why our experiences with access (and exclusion) are so important.

Engagement Considerations

- Many of these policy groups hold public forums you can attend. These can include a hearing, a town hall, a listening session, a panel, an interested party meeting, and more. Attend or speak at one that focuses on an identified policy change you are championing. Don't forget to build relationships by introducing yourself to others!

- Build relationships with members of caucuses focused on issues like voting rights for formerly incarcerated individuals. Work with them to co-sponsor or support bills that align with your goals.
- Join or contribute to workgroups that focus on your targeted reform needs. Use your experience to inform policy discussions and highlight the challenges faced by previously incarcerated individuals. This can aid in proper implementation.
- Submit written recommendations or testimonies to groups considering reforms to ensure your voice is part of the decision-making process. Consider the type of public or private event you are providing recommendations to and the weight the group hosting them carries in policy decision making.

Example: In states pushing for bail reform, special legislative committees have been formed to examine alternatives to cash bail. Advocates working with these committees have been able to propose changes, such as pretrial diversion programs that directly address the needs of individuals impacted by cash bail systems.

Questions for Consideration — How can you or your organization more actively participate in workgroups or committees to influence criminal legal policy? Should your involvement be in person at a meeting or hearing or could you save resources by weighing in via phone or written comment? What expertise or lived experience could you or your organization offer to help these groups make informed decisions to ensure policies are implemented in a way that creates equity? How can you use these groups to research what other viewpoints exist?

Agency Staff

Who They Are — Agency staff are employees who work within government organizations like the Department of Corrections and local social services, as well as various office staff for lawmakers. They may include caseworkers, program managers, policy analysts, chiefs of staff, legislative directors, deputy directors, and many others who are responsible for creating, changing, and implementing laws and managing public services.

Their Role in Policy Creation — While agency staff do not make laws, they play a key role in interpreting and enforcing policies. Because a great deal of their role is assisting in the functions of the agencies who employ them, they are often well informed of policy developments, decision making, and other considerations essential for advocates. They provide insights into how policies are working on the ground and often give feedback to lawmakers on how to improve them. While elected and appointed officials may designate certain staff to work with stakeholders and constituents, there are many other important staff roles with whom advocates should consider establishing strategic relationships. Their experience with the daily operations of policymaking of all kinds makes them valuable in shaping how they are put into action. **Most importantly, the majority of agency staff do not depend on elections or appointments to keep their role.** As such, the time to develop working relationships is longer and can mature into powerful partnerships.

Engagement Considerations

- Build relationships with agency staff to understand how current policies are being applied and identify gaps that need reform. Determine the most appropriate way to communicate these to staff.
- Share data and stories from your community to highlight the challenges and successes of programs born out of policy they help implement and manage.
- Advocate for agency-level changes, such as streamlining processes for accessing services like food assistance or voter registration for persons with lived experience. These advocacy efforts can then be communicated upward and outward to elected and appointed supervisors or members of committees that employees staff and support.
- Participate in public hearings or comment periods where agency staff gather community feedback.

Example: In the realm of healthcare, agency staff at state-level departments of Medicaid may assist in gathering the experience and priorities of persons with lived experience. Engaging with staff members who handle this type of outreach can help ensure that they provide accurate information to their elected or appointed bosses while providing advocates and organizations the opportunity to monitor progress, opposition, and approval timelines.

Questions for Consideration — How can agency staff help in making policies work better for you, your family, your community, and your organization? What steps can you or your coalition take to ensure agencies are effectively serving formerly incarcerated individuals? What type of agency staff role is the best to start with once you have found the target agency or elected/appointed official for your advocacy as a stakeholder?

By better understanding the key roles highlighted in this document as well as many others, we can be more strategic as stakeholders and constituents, push for policy changes that will make a difference in the lives of persons with lived experience, and ensure *all of us* have full participation in society.

Questions for Reflection and Strategy

Many advocacy groups specifically target elected officials and the creation of laws. How might you and/or your organization or coalition broaden your focus beyond City Hall or the statehouse to agencies and their staff?

Within your specific advocacy space (e.g., voting, housing, sentencing, LGBTQIA+, etc.), can you identify examples of each of the categories covered in this document? How can you be more strategic as you engage with each of them? What are *their* priorities?

How can understanding the specific statutory authority of a government agency help you identify opportunities for advocacy within that agency's scope? Reflect on a service area relevant to your community, such as food assistance or employment programs, and consider how the agency's authority in that area might limit or enable new initiatives or policy change.

THE POWER OF ADMINISTRATIVE POLICY

Executive and regulatory agencies play a significant role in shaping public policy. While Congress passes laws, it's these agencies—at the federal, state, and local levels—that often have the power to bring those laws to life. These agencies are tasked with designing programs, interpreting policies, and allocating funding, all of which can directly impact the daily lives of individuals and communities. This document aims to educate you on how agencies use their authority in these key areas, with relevant examples at the local level.

1. Program Design and Implementation

What is it?

Program design and implementation refers to how government agencies put the dollars in action they are given by law. After Congress or a state legislature passes or changes a policy, agencies at the city or county level often translate it into practical services, benefits, and regulations. This includes determining eligibility, setting standards for participation, and establishing procedures for how the program will operate. Agencies also make decisions about who can access these services, how success will be measured, and how they can collaborate with other government entities.

How does it work?

When a law is passed, agencies have the responsibility to develop detailed rules about how the law will be implemented. This includes setting eligibility criteria, establishing metrics for success, and creating programs that deliver services to communities using dollars designated by law. They also work to eliminate barriers to participation and ensure that funds are distributed efficiently and equitably. In addition, agencies may work with other agencies to improve program outcomes, apply lessons learned from similar initiatives, and reach more people.

Key Concepts:

Eliminating Barriers and Exclusions

Agencies must consider who will be able to access a program and how to eliminate any barriers to participation. This includes considering factors like language, disability access, income level, and geography. Agencies can design programs to ensure that vulnerable populations are not excluded from receiving benefits.

Example: Los Angeles County – Public Health Initiatives: The Los Angeles County Department of Public Health has taken steps to eliminate barriers in its public health programs, such as vaccine distribution or health screenings. By providing outreach in multiple languages, ensuring mobile clinics reach underserved areas, and offering extended hours for appointments, the department has increased access for directly impacted communities. Such efforts are intentional designs to reduce barriers to healthcare.

Measurement and Metrics

To determine the effectiveness of a program, agencies create specific metrics to track success. These could include the number of people served, improvements in health outcomes, or the reduction in unemployment rates. The way success is measured can have a big impact on how the program is perceived and whether it continues to receive support and funding. These definitions of success should be created with the voice of the target community.

Example: San Francisco – Homelessness Outreach and Services: San Francisco's Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing uses specific metrics to measure the success of its homelessness outreach programs. These include the number of people successfully placed in permanent housing and the reduction in emergency room visits by homeless individuals. The city uses these metrics not only to evaluate program effectiveness but also to attract continued funding and support from both local government and philanthropic organizations.

Interagency Opportunities

Different agencies often collaborate to improve program outcomes, especially when addressing complex social issues. Interagency collaboration ensures a holistic approach is taken, allowing for the sharing of resources, knowledge, and expertise. The JustUS Coordinating Council advocates for a whole-of-government approach to creating economic mobility so that agencies work together to address a wide range of interconnected needs.

Example: Chicago – Youth Services Collaboration: The City of Chicago runs a youth services program aimed at reducing gang violence and improving education outcomes. The program involves collaboration between the Chicago Public Schools (CPS), the Department of Family and Support Services, and local community organizations. By coordinating efforts, these agencies seek to provide comprehensive services, such as after-school programs, mentoring, and job training, to help opportunity youth (young people between ages 16 to 24 who aren't enrolled in school or working) continue their education and provide support in their development.

Why It Matters:

- **Inclusivity and access:** How agencies design programs and set eligibility criteria can determine whether vulnerable populations benefit from public services. A well-designed program ensures that services are accessible to those who need them most. Many times, however, policymakers may create carve outs and loopholes that only create further harm.
- **Success measurement:** Agencies that establish clear metrics can track their progress, improve efficiency, and ensure that programs are meeting the intended goals. Success must be measured with the voice of the person with lived experience at the table to more accurately determine if the impact of the law matches how an administrative agency intended it.
- **Collaboration:** When agencies work together, they can create more effective solutions, improve resource allocation, and reach more people with essential services. Advocates can also leverage the relationships that agencies have with each other as a way of increasing their strategic partnerships at a faster rate.

2. Policy Guidance and Interpretation

What is it?

Policy guidance and interpretation refer to the power of agencies to clarify and define the laws passed by local, state, or federal bodies. While laws set the broad framework, agencies provide the specific rules and guidance on how to apply and enforce them. Agencies help interpret complex legal language, and their guidance can shape how the law is applied on the ground and how programs and processes are designed. Guidance and interpretation can also include providing new tools to legal experts, government officials, and advocates to ensure consistent and effective implementation.

How does it work?

Agencies interpret the laws passed by legislatures and translate those interpretations into actionable guidelines. These clarifications help local governments, businesses, legal professionals, and community groups understand their obligations and the practical application of the law. Agencies also develop new tools that can help these groups apply the law more effectively, creating clearer pathways to enforce rights, advocate for change, and hold agencies accountable.

Key Concepts:

Communication to Other Experts

Agencies often communicate their interpretations of laws to professionals who need to apply them. This includes issuing guidance, training materials, or advisory opinions to ensure legal experts, businesses, and public officials understand how to comply with new rules. These communications often are attacked by those with opposing viewpoints and can even end up in a courtroom if an individual or organization believes an agency went too far.

Example: New York City – Small Business Relief: During the COVID-19 pandemic, the New York City Department of Small Business Services (SBS) issued detailed guidelines on how small businesses could apply for grants and relief programs. These guidelines helped legal advisors, accountants, and business owners understand eligibility, documentation requirements, and application processes, ensuring that businesses could access the support they needed during a difficult time.

New Tools for the Legal Community and Other Experts

Agencies also develop tools for legal professionals, public administrators, and other experts to navigate complex laws. These tools might include training manuals, technical assistance centers, online portals, or legal databases that make compliance and enforcement easier to understand. Often these tools are accessible by any member of the public through the agency's website or through a member of their agency that is responsible for outreach.

Example: Austin, TX – Affordable Housing Development: The City of Austin’s Housing and Planning Department created a series of online resources and toolkits for developers, legal professionals, and community organizations interested in affordable housing projects. These resources provided guidance on zoning laws, tax incentives, and funding sources available for affordable housing development.

New Tools for Advocates

In addition to providing guidance for legal professionals, agencies also create new tools that help advocates apply and influence policy. These resources can help advocacy groups better understand and leverage government regulations to support their goals. Many of these resources are created for distribution at resource fairs, town halls, or other community spaces. Occasionally, advocacy groups will create their own materials utilizing other concepts discussed above.

Example: Seattle – Environmental Advocacy: The City of Seattle’s Office of Sustainability and Environment developed a tool to help community organizations advocate for cleaner air and water. The Environmental Justice Mapping Tool, available online, allows community advocates to identify neighborhoods with high levels of pollution, health risks, and environmental injustice. By providing advocates with this data, the city empowers them to push for stronger policies and programs that address environmental equity.

Why It Matters:

- **Clear communication:** Effective guidance ensures that legal experts, businesses, and other professionals understand how to comply with laws and regulations. This helps create consistency and fairness in how laws are applied and can help inform future policy change and funding decisions.
- **Tools for professionals:** By creating new tools, agencies ensure that experts can effectively navigate complex rules and provide the necessary legal or administrative services to their clients.
- **Empowering advocates:** Providing advocates with clear, accessible tools and data empowers them to better advocate for their communities, pushing for policies that promote justice and equity.

3. Funding Discretion

What is it?

Funding discretion refers to the authority of executive agencies to determine how federal, state, or local funds are allocated to various programs or projects. While elected bodies such as city councils or county boards approve budgets, agencies at the city or county level decide how to distribute those funds, which projects or populations to prioritize, and how much money to put toward each initiative.

This discretion has a significant impact on how resources are used and which communities or issues receive attention.

How does it work?

Agencies determine the priorities for funding, establish eligibility criteria for who can receive funds, and decide whether to give preference to certain types of projects or innovations. These decisions can shape local development, improve public services, or drive new initiatives in areas like education, housing, and infrastructure. Funding flows from agencies into communities in many ways.

Key Concepts:

Eligibility

Eligibility refers to the rules that determine who can receive funding. This might include factors such as the type of organization (e.g., nonprofits, schools, local governments), the population being served (e.g., low-income individuals, seniors, veterans), or the geographic area being targeted (e.g., underserved neighborhoods or rural areas).

Example: Maricopa County, AZ – Homelessness Assistance: Maricopa County’s Human Services Department distributes federal funding for homelessness prevention and housing assistance. Eligibility for these funds is based on factors like income level, family size, and homelessness risk. The county has worked to expand eligibility to include families at risk of homelessness, not just those already living on the streets, in order to prevent future homelessness before it starts.

Federal Grant Funding Types

- **Formula** — These dollars are determined in part by the policy that created them. The term “formula” refers to a specific percentage that is written into legislation and must be spent in that way by the agency who is distributing the funds as part of the law.
 - *Block Grants are very similar to formula grants in that they are created by policy. Block grants, however, typically offer a bit more flexibility for how to achieve funding goals outlined in policy where traditional formula funding is more rigid with process.*
- **Pass-Through** — These dollars are given to an agency for distribution by an administrative body that is part of a larger government system (federal → state | state → county). The pass-through agency often can decide how these dollars flow (competitive or formula) and often the projects or initiatives that are funded are eligible for future funding as pass-through dollars continue. Many agencies award both competitive and non-competitive pass-through dollars, and pass-through funding is a great way for new organizations to get started in the grant management process.

- **Competitive** — This type of federal grant is one of the most familiar to community-based organizations. Competitive funding is awarded through a process in which you plan and budget a project, explain your goals, and submit it to the funder for determination. These grants are also known as “discretionary” funding. While these can fund a wide variety of social issues in a wide variety of ways, grant recipients often still must report on outcomes, impact, and how funds were used.
- **Continuation** — Funding is sometimes available for projects and initiatives created through either competitive funding or formula funding. While different factors can cause funding to shrink or cease, continuation funding is one way an initiative can continue to operate. The process of getting additional funds is sometimes less difficult than initial application, but in some instances renewals compete with new initiatives.

Preferences in Grantmaking

Agencies may choose to prioritize certain types of projects or populations when distributing funds. This could mean giving extra weight to projects that align with local policy goals or that serve underrepresented or high-need communities. These preferences can be tailored to carve out (or carve in) different populations in addition to what else may be written in law. Funding preferences often can change as agency leadership changes.

Example: Denver – Community Development Block Grants: The City of Denver allocates Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funding to projects that benefit low- and moderate-income residents. The city’s preference is to fund projects that focus on affordable housing, economic development, and public services for underserved communities. By prioritizing these initiatives, Denver ensures that its CDBG funds support the city’s broader goals of equity and neighborhood revitalization.

Innovation

Innovation in funding refers to an agency’s ability to support new or experimental approaches to solving community challenges. This might include piloting new technologies, supporting creative solutions, or funding projects that challenge traditional methods. Agencies can also model innovation in grantmaking by allocating their funds to other projects within their ability to help provide additional support or to model new ways of approaching a problem.

Example: Portland, OR – Green Infrastructure: Portland’s Bureau of Environmental Services funds green infrastructure projects to manage stormwater and reduce pollution. For example, the city has funded the development of “green streets”—landscaped streetscapes designed to absorb stormwater. These types of projects are often more experimental and innovative, aiming to test solutions that are more sustainable and cost-effective than traditional infrastructure.

Why It Matters:

- **Eligibility criteria:** The way eligibility is structured can determine which communities or organizations have access to critical resources. Clear and inclusive eligibility guidelines ensure that funds are used effectively.
- **Grantmaking preferences:** By prioritizing certain projects or communities, agencies can drive policy goals, such as advancing social justice, reducing inequities, or fostering economic growth in high-need areas.
- **Supporting innovation:** Supporting new ideas and approaches to solving community problems can lead to breakthroughs that address long-standing challenges in more effective ways.

Conclusion

Executive and regulatory agencies at the city and county level play a crucial role in shaping policy and impacting our daily lives. Through their control over program design and implementation, policy guidance and interpretation, and funding discretion, these agencies can promote equity, drive innovation, and ensure that policies are applied in ways that truly benefit communities. Understanding how these agencies work and the discretion they have is essential for advocates, community leaders, and policymakers who want to influence change at the local level. By working with or influencing these agencies, we can help ensure that policies are more inclusive, effective, and impactful for the communities that need them most.

Questions for Reflection and Strategy

How could you or your organization use existing relationships you have with policy makers to encourage their collaboration with other agencies or elected officials? How would you explain the benefit to them?

How can you leverage the program design and implementation process to ensure that the needs of historically underserved communities are prioritized when new policies are rolled out by government agencies?

What specific metrics or data would you use to evaluate the success of a government program, and how can you ensure that the voices of the communities affected are integral to defining those success measures?

Think of an example in your community similar to the examples in this document. Did the impact for the community match what lawmakers and administrators hoped to accomplish? How would the voice of the community make a difference?

What tools could you develop or use to support other advocates in holding agencies accountable and to situate you or your organization as a thought partner? How can you keep your finger on the pulse of administrative policy and programs.

COMMUNICATIONS

OP-ED TIPS AND GUIDELINES



Summary / Overview

One of the best ways of reaching audiences through print and online media is through opinion editorials, called op-eds, and guest columns. They allow us to tell our own stories and circulate our messages to audiences, without too much editing or influences from news outlets. The downside is they can often be rejected by news editors, especially in a busy news cycle. Still, they allow us to paint a clear, human picture for audiences.

Tips to Keep in Mind

- **Brevity!** Word count: *Between 600-800 words*. Editors will often immediately reject op-eds that are longer. The shorter, the better.
- **Tie the Op-Ed to a Recent Event:** A pandemic, a local, national, or regional news story, etc. Regional or local editors particularly like stories that discuss the local impact of a national news story.
- **Think About your Audience:** Who is this designed to reach?
 - Advocates?
 - Legislators?
 - Prosecutors or Judges?
- **What Media Outlets Do Their Supporters Read/Watch?**
 - Daily newspapers?
 - Magazines?
 - Online magazines?
 - Streaming videos?

Overall Op-Ed Structure

- **Intro:** Grab your reader's attention, through **the headline**, and the **first two sentences**. Tying the op-ed to a news event makes it timely and relevant.
- **Thesis:** What is the point of the op-ed? What do you want the reader to know? What are the values you want to uplift?
- **Argument:** This is where you start to prove your point. Try to base this on evidence and facts:
 - First-hand experience
 - Relevant history
 - Data and statistics, etc.
- **Conclusion:** Restate the point of the op-ed. What do you want your audience to do? What actions do you want them to take?
 - Note: News editors will often reject op-eds that reference actions that highlight an organization's own work, such as their campaign efforts, reports, etc.
 - Try to make the action something that your audience can see themselves doing! Call your legislator, attend a rally, support a bill, etc. The easier, the better.

COMMUNICATIONS AND VALUES-BASED MESSAGING



Using VPSA

Our country's current narrative around directly impacted people dehumanizes and creates stigma, stereotypes, and fear. To confront that, we use a "values-based messaging" frame that uplifts shared, common values, as a strategic way to tell our stories, spread our campaigns, and shift the narrative. To be effective communicators, these are strategies you should adopt.

We use a four-step communication format as a messaging strategy that's rooted in values, called **VPSA**, which stands for Value, Problem, Solution, Action.

Value: Audiences are more receptive to our messages when we frame them by shared values, such as dignity, fairness, respect, equal rights, and humanity. It is vitally important that we connect ALL of our arguments to universal values that we all care about.

Problem: What are the systemic, institutional threats and barriers that stand in the way of achieving our values? It helps to use **two or three** short examples that highlight these systemic problems.

Solution: We need to give people a clear path forward, that solves the problems, and uplifts our common values. Audiences need positive solutions, or they will often ignore messages. **Make sure the audience knows that solutions to these problems exist.**

Action: *This is the strongest part of VPSA.* We need to leave people with a concrete, concise call-to-action: Attend a rally, vote, call your representative, send a letter, etc. These actions need to be something your audience can imagine themselves doing. The clearer the call, the more likely our audience will take action.

The strength of VPSA is it is versatile. It can be used in opinion-editorials, letters to editors, press interviews, during public and online rallies, and as consistent talking points. Using VPSA will help you strengthen your message, control your narrative, and move hearts, minds, and policy.

VPSA — SAMPLE SPEECH

Begin with shared **values**.

VALUE

Here in America we agree that we want a criminal justice system that upholds our constitutional promise of **equal justice and due process** while keeping us **safe** and giving everyone an **equitable opportunity at a second chance**.

Criminal Justice Values: Equal Justice - Basic Human Rights - Democratic Founding Ideals: Constitutional Freedoms - Due Process - Civic Engagement

Work toward identifying the **problem**.

PROBLEM

Yet the magnitude of collateral consequences within our current system stands in stark contrast to this vision.

Offer a proposed **solution**.

SOLUTION

It doesn't have to be this way. We know from experience and empirical data around the country that a combination of pre-release workforce training, wrap around transition support services and supportive supervision will keep us safe while simultaneously living up to the ideals and values we hold dear.

End with a **call to action or ask**.

ACTION

By sponsoring this Bill package, your voice and vote will help end the practices of collateral consequences in our criminal justice system and people like me and others similarly impacted will truly have an equitable chance and opportunity to return to work and acquire housing.

MORE VPSA EXAMPLES:

Begin with shared values.	Work toward identifying the problem.	Offer a proposed solution.	End with a call to action or ask.
<p>VALUE</p> <p>Here in America, we agree that we want a criminal justice system that upholds our constitutional promise of equal justice and due process while keeping us safe and giving everyone an equitable opportunity at a second chance.</p>	<p>PROBLEM</p> <p>Yet the magnitude of wrongful convictions within our current justice system stands in stark contrast to this vision, where over 60% of exonerated cases involved eyewitness misidentification and 53% involved misapplied forensic science.</p>	<p>SOLUTION</p> <p>It doesn't have to be this way. We know from research around the country that by implementing pretrial integrity investigations, consistent training on the correct use of eyewitness testimony, along with accountability for systems and actors within the system will keep us safe and live up to the ideals and values we hold dear while preventing wrongful arrests, convictions, and incarceration.</p>	<p>ACTION</p> <p>We ask that you support and help us implement the DOJ's Guiding Best Practices for Science-Based Eyewitness ID Practices for Law Enforcement and Prosecutors within our County criminal court system.</p>
<p>VALUE</p> <p>Every citizen has the right to provide for themselves and their family with basic needs, such as food, housing, education, and safety.</p>	<p>PROBLEM</p> <p>Individuals living with a felony conviction face the denial of these fundamental rights, contrary to the core values of our nation. There are currently 48,000 legal barriers that hinder these basic rights for citizens with a felony.</p>	<p>SOLUTION</p> <p>Recognize that people who have been convicted of a crime are still human beings and citizens of our nation, reflecting the foundational principles of America.</p>	<p>ACTION</p> <p>We must utilize our voices and voting power to advocate for changes in laws that unjustly deny individuals with felony convictions the right to secure housing, earn a living to support their families, and provide opportunities for quality education. It is crucial to challenge these barriers and work towards a more inclusive and just society.</p>
<p>VALUE</p> <p>Businesses thrive when people and communities thrive.</p>	<p>PROBLEM</p> <p>People with criminal convictions are statistically more likely to be rearrested if they are unemployed, which causes businesses to lack access to employees while driving recidivism higher increasing incarceration statistics.</p>	<p>SOLUTION</p> <p>People with past criminal histories deserve a fair chance to contribute to themselves, their families, and their community. We have drafted a proposed Bill that introduces legislation that bans the box on both State and federal applications; those for employment, education, health care, insurance, and other forms asking if the applicant has been convicted of a past crime.</p>	<p>ACTION</p> <p>We ask that you support this proposed legislation and sign on to our Campaign Call for Banning The Box.</p>

PERSON-FIRST LANGUAGE

Dehumanizing Language and What to Do:

At any point in which you have contact with an external party, whether it be a legislator or a journalist, they may use language that is dehumanizing. JLUSA has a toolkit on [person-first](#) language. Sometimes these descriptors of directly impacted people are said with malice but often it is merely ignorance. When speaking with a policymaker whom you are trying to influence, you often want to mirror back the appropriate terminology. If they keep saying “ex-con,” you should respond with something that incorporates person-first language like “formerly incarcerated.” With a legislator and a journalist, you can often use that moment to say actually the appropriate term is “X.” Expound and suggest that you appreciate the opportunity to explain why it is so critical to use the appropriate language.

Instead of	Use this
<i>“Felons, Criminals, Convicts, etc.”</i>	People convicted of felonies
<i>“Inmates, Prisoners”</i>	Incarcerated people
<i>“Ex-Con”</i>	Formerly incarcerated people
<i>“Defendants”</i>	Those accused of a crime



**INMATE FELON
CRIMINAL CONVICT**

Incarcerated people are mothers, fathers, teachers, and community leaders. Their lives matter.

JOIN  AT justuscc.org

You should prepare yourself and any others for the possibility that when engaging with others they might hear something offensive. This is one of numerous advantages to advocating in groups. In the heat of the moment you or someone else may need to take a moment and collect yourself. If you search “instant ways to self-soothe” and other permutations of this phrase, you may find some exercises that will ground you. Acknowledge that it is OK to feel upset. Ultimately you will get the most out of the exchange by de-escalating but also modeling better language and teaching the person what is appropriate to say and what is not. If there is continued harassment on their end, it is OK to end the conversation early.

They are likely not someone who is persuadable on the issue at hand. Advocacy is important, but your own well-being is most important!

WRITE YOUR OWN VPSA SPEECH

VALUE	PROBLEM
SOLUTION	ACTION

LEGISLATIVE TEXT

Crafting a bill based on a policy recommendation is a long process, including drafting, negotiation, and legal review. Once you have identified public officials who are interested in taking up this issue, their office can help connect with resources to draft the legislative text. This politician will become the “Sponsor” of your bill. The [2025-2029 Roadmap](#) is a great starting point for ideas of legislation that could be drafted and introduced. More on moving a policy recommendation to a bill in forthcoming toolkits!

Help Inside the Legislature

The best place to start is contacting elected officials to determine how to move forward. ([See information on many of the states’ bill drafting manuals.](#)) Bill drafting can be performed by anyone and most elected officials will either work to craft the bill themselves, receive support from advocacy groups in that issue area, or send components of their legislation to a bill drafting commission that exists in the U.S. Congress and many state legislatures. Bill Drafting Commissions adapt policy (the more detailed the better) to all the sections of existing law that require amendment or removal to enact the policy changes. A simple one-line proposal can require changing dozens of existing statutes. These commissions are state specific, so not all elected officials will have access to them as a resource. On the federal level, the House of Representatives also has legal counsel that offers guidance on [bill drafting](#).

Help Outside the Legislature

When there is not a bill drafting commission or a Legislative Director with expertise, it is a common best practice to hire or seek volunteers from someone with a law background who can cross-reference existing laws with this proposed legislation and verify it is consistent with the state constitution. Ideally you want a free resource and can find that through pro bono law firms (recommended for more sophisticated work) or legal clinics at law schools.

It’s important to note that legislative text will go through many revisions throughout the legislative process. As the bill travels through committees and is debated, text may be added or removed that fundamentally alters the meaning of the bill. We, as advocates, need to follow the legislation after introduction to ensure that even with any changes, the text still addresses providing emergency management plans for prisons and jails, and maintains our core values.

Example: Advocates worked to push protections for women who are incarcerated. Here is the resulting policy issue that has been put into [legislative text](#).

MAKE YOUR VOICE HEARD: PUBLIC COMMENT



What is a Public Comment?

Each federal agency must follow certain rules anytime they want to create, clarify, or change policy. These rules are separate from legislation that happens in Congress. We have the right to comment on federal policies, which the Executive branch must consider and respond to. However, this right is under-utilized. Comments are crucial for informing policy makers, potentially even causing them to act and make changes or add clarity to proposed policy. Our perspectives as individuals who are directly impacted are incredibly important to highlighting the harms of the criminal legal system. Effective comments provide relevant information and explain personal impacts. The notice-and-comment process allows public feedback and a response—and sometimes action—related to all unique comments.

Drafting Your Public Comment

When drafting your comment, here are a few recommended best practices:

- If you choose to use a template letter, we recommend using the template as a starting point and to include your unique thoughts, examples, and voice. You can learn more about each comment's specific questions in each policy's docket listing.
- If you do not use a template, it is important to include the docket number for this particular policy change.
- Public comment periods often are accompanied by an overview of the changes from various advocacy groups, as well as specific questions the federal government would like feedback on. We encourage you to choose content that you feel comfortable commenting on and have perspectives that provide answers and insights. Remember, the federal government must read and respond to each unique comment!
- Including both data from stories and numbers compliments your perspective in the comments. These help the federal government learn about the policy's impact.
- Coalitions or organizations may consider if you want to submit comments collectively or as individual members.

Questions for Public Comment

In addition to content categories and the sign-on letter text as starting points for your comments, agencies also specifically request comments and answers to specific questions that you may consider including responses to. These questions are usually found toward the bottom of the Federal Register listing but can also provide specifics for your use. It is not necessary for those wishing to comment to answer all of the questions nor is it required that comments are styled in question/answer formatting. Select the content that best aligns with your experience and expertise!

Submitting a Public Comment

[Regulations.gov](https://www.regulations.gov) is the official platform for public comments on regulations. Each rule has a docket folder containing all relevant materials, accessible through the site. Comments can be submitted by clicking "Submit a formal comment" on the Federal Register document page or by

searching for the docket number on Regulations.gov and clicking “Comment Now!” You can type your comment directly into the text box or upload a file. Both site links can be found below in the resource section.

To learn more about the Regulations.gov site, we encourage you to [utilize their brief video](#). *New final rules must be sent to Congress for review. If you would also like to provide feedback on a regulation to your Congressional lawmaker for additional advocacy, you can locate your U.S. Representative and/or Senator by using the resource link below.*

Additional Resources

[Regulations.gov: Submit and Read Public Comments](#)

[The Federal Rulemaking Process](#)

[The Federal Register *Sample: HUD’s 2024 Proposed Rule*](#)

[Boundless: How to Submit a Public Comment](#)

[Brookings Institute: How to Effectively Comment on Regulation](#)

[Find Your Member of Congress](#)

TIPS ON MEETING WITH POLICYMAKERS

From your local city council to your Senators in Washington, meeting with your elected officials about civil liberties issues is a lot easier than most people think. Remember, policymakers work for you!

What is a lobby visit? A lobby visit is merely a meeting for you to tell your elected representative what you think about a certain issue or bill, and to try to get him or her to take action on that issue.

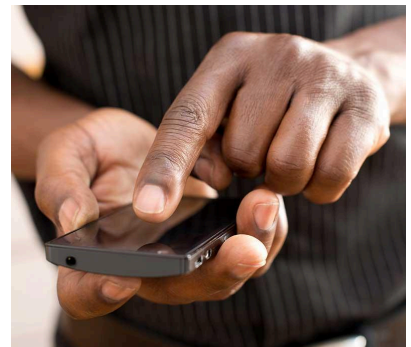
Where can you meet? It's not necessary to travel to Washington—every Member of Congress (MoC) also has one or more offices in their congressional district. Even though the Member is not in the local office(s) very much, there is a permanent staff member at each office with whom you can meet.

Requesting Your Meeting

Make your request in writing and follow up with a call to the Appointment Secretary/Scheduler. Call the office and request to speak with the scheduler and/or person responsible for policy around criminal justice. You can use this sample script:

Hello, my name is _____, and I am calling from _____. I would like to schedule time to speak with (Elected Official's Name) and/or someone whose policy area is related to criminal justice and/or (ISSUE AREA). I am working to introduce legislation related to (ISSUE AREA).

(Suggest specific times and dates for your meeting.)



Make sure they know that you are a constituent, if you live within their district. If you are not from their district it would be beneficial to find someone from that district to make the call and attend the meeting with you. If this is not a viable option, it's OK! Still attempt to schedule a meeting.

Many times, schedulers will ask for an email with all the details of your request. Include one pagers and/or policy recommendations, restate the time/date of meeting request and other important details about your campaign

Increasingly, we are seeing legislators use [online meeting forms](#) — complete the details and follow up with the office within a few days to confirm receipt.

Prepare for Your Meeting

- ❑ Bring one-pagers, [policy recommendations](#), and other supplemental documents as materials that you can leave with your elected official.
- ❑ Decide who will attend the meeting. Keep it small. Bring 4-5 people who represent different groups that are invested in the legislation, such as formerly incarcerated people, family

members of those currently incarcerated, doctors, religious leaders, public health officials, emergency management personnel, corrections staff, etc.

- ❑ Agree on talking points with the group that will be in attendance at the meeting.
- ❑ Plan out the flow of the meeting. It is easy to be nervous or intimidated by speaking with elected officials, especially about issues that you are passionate about. Additionally, time can be limited, so laying out your talking points and who will address what can keep the meeting on track. You may want to assign attendees to some of the following roles:
 - ❑ Conversation starter
 - ❑ Photo taker
 - ❑ Share a personal story
 - ❑ Share the data and research behind your campaign
 - ❑ Closer — make the final ask of the legislator
- ❑ Research the elected official prior to your meeting. Take a look at their voting record specific to criminal justice issues.

During the Meeting

- ❑ Establish your legitimacy as a constituent or subject matter expert during introductions.
- ❑ Be prompt and patient. Elected officials run on very tight schedules. Be sure to show up on time for your appointment, and be patient. It is not uncommon for legislators to be late or to have your meeting interrupted by other business.
- ❑ Keep it short and focused! On average, you will have 15-20 minutes with an elected official/staff person. Stick to talking points and deliver your message clearly.
- ❑ Bring up any personal, professional, or political connections to the elected official that you may have. Use the opening of the meeting to thank the legislator for any work they have done, i.e., votes, letters, legislation, etc. You always want the legislator or staff to realize you know a great deal about them or their boss.
- ❑ Make it conversational. Yes, there is a short window, however engaging the member or staffer in a dialogue helps to make your pitch feel more genuine and less like a salesperson.
- ❑ Stick to your talking points! Stay on topic, and back them up with printed materials that you will leave with your elected official.
- ❑ Provide personal stories and examples of impact. Always try to tie the issue back to whatever that legislator is trying to promote as part of their “brand.” You can often find this on their website or campaign page (which reflects how they want to be seen). For example if they champion that they fight for fiscal responsibility speak to how this aligns with their vision because of the cost-savings benefits.
- ❑ If you don't know the answer to a question, it's OK! It's better to say, “I can get back to you with that specific information” rather than giving inaccurate information that damages your credibility. Following up, usually via email, gives you the chance to stay relevant and shows your dedication.
- ❑ Set deadlines for a response. Legislators may not be ready to make a full commitment in your meeting with them. If they have to think about it, or if you are meeting with a staff member, ask

when you should check back in to find out what your legislator intends to do about your request. Set a clear timeline for when this will happen.

- ❑ Make sure your ask of the elected official is clear. “We want you to sponsor legislation, including bill drafting and introduction, that will XXX. Will your office commit to making this a reality?” *Don’t settle for non-answers.*

Close the Meeting by Letting Them Know that You’ll Be Back.

- ❑ Your MoC works for you. Let them or their District Director know that you’ll be back as often as it takes to make sure that your voice is heard. Get the contact information of everyone you meet with and send a follow-up email when you get home.

Record It or It Didn’t Happen.

- ❑ Get a picture of your group at the office or, better yet, get a video of your group before, during, and after your visit.
- ❑ Then, send it to us so we can help amplify your efforts. Include a description of the video, the name of your group, and the names of the people in the video/picture
- ❑ *Note: Please familiarize yourself with your state and local laws that govern recording, along with any applicable Senate or House rules, prior to recording. These laws and rules vary substantially from jurisdiction to jurisdiction.*

After the Meeting

- ❑ Right after the meeting, debrief with your group on their thoughts as to how the meeting ran. Discuss what follow-ups need to occur and who can help support you with that information.
- ❑ Send a personal thank you letter to legislative members/staffers with whom you’ve met.
- ❑ Follow up, within a week, with any requested materials and information (the faster the better).
- ❑ If the elected official or staff member doesn't meet the deadline, ask him or her to set another deadline. Be persistent and flexible!

If you are meeting with a member of Congress or State Legislators, let the JustUS Coordinating Council know what you learned during your meeting by sending an e-mail to policycomms@justuscc.org. Knowing what arguments your member used, what issues are important to them, and what positions they took will help us make the table more effective.