



Skagit County Board of Commissioners

Ron Wesen, First District

Peter Browning, Second District

Lisa Janicki, Third District

February 23, 2023

Senator Keith Wagoner
203 Irv Newhouse Building
Olympia, WA 98504-0426

Senator Ron Muzzall
PO Box 40410
Olympia, WA 98504

Senator Liz Lovelett
213 John A. Cherberg Building
PO Box 40440
Olympia, WA 98504

RE: Jail System Study and Jail Modernization Task Force Proviso - Request for Support Letter

Dear Senators Wagoner, Muzzall, and Lovelett,

One of the Washington State Association of Counties' (WSAC) 2023 legislative [priorities](#) is for the legislature to: (1) Fund a holistic study and analysis of Washington State's jail system (\$263,000 in the 24-25 biennium); and (2) Establish and fund a Jail Modernization Task Force to review and consider a variety of issues with the ultimate goal of developing strategies and recommended changes to plan for and create a modernized jail system that will support and promote recovery (\$395,000 split between the 24-25 and 25-27 biennia).

Washington State's county jails have become the de facto facilities for housing those suffering from behavioral health issues. This is despite the fact that county jails were not designed, built, or intended to care for individuals with specialized behavioral or physical health needs. In fact, over the years, counties have had to make facility and operational modifications to better accommodate the changing demographics of those housed in county jails, including separation of warring gang members, increased female populations, and those with behavioral health needs. This, in part, has created capacity issues, leading to severe overcrowding and understaffing.

Counties have already identified an immediate, statewide need for nearly \$3 billion in either extensive facility remodels or altogether new jail facilities. For many counties, the existing jail configuration and footprint preclude any meaningful and permanent answers to space-related issues, meaning the only real solution is to build a new jail.

Counties find it prudent to study the jail system prior to (1) beginning the feasibility, planning, and construction phases for jails and associated facilities that may not meet current societal needs, or state policy directives requesting funding for these facilities; or (2) requesting funding for these facilities. The requested study, to be conducted by the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (WSIPP) with data collection assistance provided by the Washington State Association of Counties (WSAC), will look at a number of issues associated with jail facilities and operations, including data related, but not limited, to the incarceration of individuals with behavioral health needs, the costs of competency restoration in jails, jail workforce issues, and other services, supports, and programming provided in jails. This is separate and distinct from the Jail Standards Task Force, which is currently determining standards that jails should comply with related to conditions, operations, inspections, enforcement, oversight, and living space, to name a few.

Concurrent with the WSIPP study, the Ruckelshaus Center will convene stakeholders and interested parties to conduct an assessment to design a facilitated collaborative process and work plan. Upon completion of WSIPP's study and report, as well as the Ruckelshaus Center's assessment, the Ruckelshaus Center will facilitate a collaborative process with Jail Modernization Task Force members. The Task Force must review and consider a variety of issues including, but not limited to, the WSIPP report, and any resulting legislation and

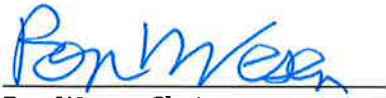
recommendations that have come from the Criminal Sentencing Task Force and the Jail Standards Task Force. The Task Force must develop statewide jail modernization recommendations and submit a final report to the legislature. For reference, the study followed by a resulting task force is modeled after the recent process the Criminal Sentencing Task Force went through.

We are writing to request that you support this proviso request in its entirety. Given the backlog of Trueblood class members in jails (See SSB 5440), the emphasis on behavioral health issues in our state, and the ongoing interest in the provision of safe jail facilities and services, it is clear that this request is timely and necessary. While the time horizon for the completion of this proviso is longer than we would like, we also don't want to be in the position where we are two years down the road and wishing that we had the data and recommendations that this proviso sets out to provide.

Thank you for your time and attention to this very important issue.

Sincerely,

**BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS
SKAGIT COUNTY, WASHINGTON**



Ron Wesen, Chair



Lisa Janicki, Commissioner



Peter Browning, Commissioner