

The San Francisco Pretrial Diversion Project: A Unique and Effective Model

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Executive Summary

For fifty years, the San Francisco Pretrial Diversion Project (SF Pretrial) has worked to promote community safety, individual rights, and community well-being. Local judges, the San Francisco Bar Association, and community members founded it in 1976. Since then, it has grown into one of the most respected pretrial services programs in the country. This report shows what makes SF Pretrial both unique and effective, and why it matters for San Francisco.

What SF Pretrial Does

When someone is charged with a crime and stays in the community until their case is over, two things must happen. They need to show up for court, and they need to stay out of trouble with the law. That sounds simple. But for people dealing with homelessness, mental health issues, substance use, or poverty, it is not. SF Pretrial's programs range from basic court-date reminders for lower-risk individuals to intensive case management that connects people with housing, treatment, healthcare sign-up, and other key services. Unlike most pretrial programs in the country, SF Pretrial provides this full range of support under one roof. That means fewer people fall through the cracks, and it leads to better program communication and greater efficiency.

Why SF Pretrial Works

SF Pretrial's court appearance and public safety/law-abiding rates are comparable to or better than those of many California counties. This is a strong result given San Francisco's urban setting and the complex needs of the people in its legal system. Research shows that simply watching whether someone follows court orders does little to change outcomes. What does work is tackling the root causes—such as housing problems, untreated mental illness and substance use, and weak life skills—that lead to missed court dates and crime. SF Pretrial has done this since its founding. Now many other pretrial services agencies across the United States are starting to do the same.

What Makes SF Pretrial Unique

Several features set SF Pretrial apart from most pretrial programs across the country:

Independent nonprofit structure. SF Pretrial is not housed within a law enforcement agency. It operates as a community-based nonprofit, which lets it serve all parties, such as the courts, prosecutors, defense attorneys, and the sheriff's office, as a neutral partner. Most pretrial programs sit inside government agencies. This can create barriers to a results-based, flexible, and client-focused approach. SF Pretrial's independence also lets it adapt quickly to changes in law, research-based practices, and national standards without the usual government red tape.

Breadth and depth of services. Beyond standard pretrial oversight, SF Pretrial offers more than a dozen programs. These include diversion, caregiver support, community service options, restorative justice, housing help, in-house therapy groups, Medicaid sign-up, and on-site, multi-service coordination. Very few pretrial programs offer this range of combined services.

Built-in evaluation and improvement. SF Pretrial has staff who track outcomes, produce public impact reports, and use data to improve programs. It also has staff who maintain and grow its network of community service providers. Most pretrial programs have limited ability to analyze data and report results.

National recognition and influence. SF Pretrial is one of a few programs in the country to have earned National Association of Pretrial Service Agencies (NAPSA) accreditation. The program and its staff have received national awards for outstanding service. Its leaders have added to national research, co-authored works on effective pretrial practices, trained professionals across the country, and directly advised other jurisdictions building or improving their own pretrial programs..

A Cost-Effective Model

Because SF Pretrial does not use sworn peace officers for assessment or supervision, its costs are generally lower than those of law enforcement agencies doing similar work. Its nonprofit structure and diverse funding from local, state, federal, and philanthropic sources add financial stability. SF Pretrial also runs from a central location, the J:HUB, which makes services easier to reach and helps staff work together.

The Bottom Line

SF Pretrial exists because people charged with, but not yet convicted of, a crime have legal rights, many personal and social needs, and still live in the community. The program's fifty-year track record shows that meeting people's underlying needs by linking them to community-based supports helps them, the legal system, and the City and County of San Francisco. Courts run more smoothly when people show up for their hearings. Neighborhoods are safer when people get help rather than falling deeper into crisis. And the legal system can work better when a separate, independent group coordinates this help. SF Pretrial is more than a local program. It is a national model that works.

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Purpose of This Report

This report summarizes the impact of the [San Francisco Pretrial Diversion Project](#) (“SF Pretrial”) on the San Francisco community and local criminal legal system. It shows SF Pretrial’s value to the community. It explains how its mission, structure, staffing, services, research, and community engagement make its effectiveness possible, and rare.

The report also describes how SF Pretrial serves as a model for pretrial programs across California and the nation, both those already running and those just getting started. SF Pretrial sets an example of what pretrial programs can achieve, whether they are non-profits or government agencies.

Overview of SF Pretrial

History

In 1976, San Francisco Municipal Court judges, the San Francisco Bar Association, and local citizens established SF Pretrial. The program's purpose was to enhance community safety and restoration through dignity, respect, compassion, and accountability.

Fifty years later, SF Pretrial has added to that original foundation. Today, it contributes to the local legal system's goals of ensuring that people charged with a criminal offense abide by the law, appear in court, and receive supportive services while at liberty in the community.

Structure

SF Pretrial is a community-based non-profit that works daily with the local court, prosecutor's office, public and private defense attorneys, and the sheriff's office and jail. Its non-profit status allows it to serve all these justice partners independently and neutrally. SF Pretrial is one of a small number of non-profit pretrial service agencies in the United States with this kind of flexibility.¹

SF Pretrial's governing board includes ten members with backgrounds spanning public service and private industry. Its day-to-day leadership and staff are equally varied, with experience in community services, higher education, probation, the private sector, and lived experience in the legal system.

Funding

SF Pretrial has had over a dozen funding sources in recent years. These include local government agencies such as the San Francisco Sheriff's Office; Superior Court; District Attorney's Office; Human Services Agency; Homelessness and Supportive Housing; and Department of Children, Youth, & their Families. Additional funding has come from Bay Area philanthropies, the US Department of Justice, the California Governor's Office, and the California Judicial Council.

Legal Authority and Reporting

The California State Legislature authorizes SF Pretrial's existence.

California Assembly Bill 102 (CA AB102: the Budget Act of 2025), Section 4, Provision 9, states:

¹ Other non-profit pretrial services agencies include the [New York Criminal Justice Agency](#), [Maine Pretrial Services](#), and [JusticePoint](#) (operating in Wisconsin and Minnesota).

The Superior Court of California, County of Santa Clara, may contract with the Office of Pretrial Services in that county. The Superior Court of California, County of San Francisco, may contract with the Sheriff's Office and the existing not-for-profit entity that is performing pretrial services in the city and county for pretrial assessment and supervision services.

Under California law, the San Francisco and Santa Clara County pretrial services programs are the only non-probation programs authorized to provide pretrial services.

Provision 10 allows a county department, such as the Sheriff's Office, to contract with a non-profit like SF Pretrial. Provision 10 states:

The county department with which the court has contracted is not precluded from contracting with community-based organizations to provide complementary or supportive services in furtherance of the county department's pretrial release services if all of the following conditions have been satisfied:

- (a) The contractor adheres to the same transparency, accountability, and outcome measure standards that apply to county probation departments.*
- (b) The contractor has a proven record of providing culturally competent and responsive rehabilitative services.*
- (c) The contract will not result in the displacement of county employees or a reduction in the provision of services by county probation department employees.*
- (d) The contractor pays wages and benefits to its nonsupervisory employees that are commensurate with or greater than the wages and benefits paid to public employees in similar job classifications*
- (e) The contractor does not pay wages and benefits to its most highly compensated executive and managerial employees that are significantly higher than the rates that would be paid to public employees performing similar job duties.*
- (f) The county has consulted with the court prior to entering into a contract for the provision of these services.*

Provision 12 establishes reporting requirements for all pretrial services programs:

To receive the funding allocated in Provision 7, courts and county departments and their contractors shall collaborate with local justice system partners in reporting to the Judicial Council on pretrial programs and practices, including information on expenditure of funds, as required by the Judicial Council, for evaluation of the programs and practices.

In 2018, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors unanimously passed [Resolution No. 437-18](#). This resolution "allow[s] the San Francisco Pretrial Services Agency to continue operating in its current form as an independent non-profit organization...[and t]hat the operating model should reflect the principles of neutrality and structural independence from the law enforcement functions..."

SF Pretrial reports that it has complied with all contracted reporting requests under California law and is in compliance with [California's annual filing requirements](#) for nonprofits.

Depth and Breadth of Services

SF Pretrial provides a wide range of pretrial and court-related services, matching people to programs based on their individual needs. When someone has a pending criminal case, they are presumed innocent under federal and state law. The court may order them to participate in one or more of SF Pretrial's programs, which range from light to intensive. All programming is aimed at helping participants stay out of further legal trouble, appear for court dates, and connect with community treatment providers as needed.

At the lower end of the continuum, Own Recognizance, No Active Supervision (OR-NAS) and Own Recognizance, Minimum Supervision (OR-MS) serve people who need less structure. Court date reminders are sent to participants in both programs.²

At the higher end, Active Case Management (ACM) involves staff contact several times per week and voluntary participation in treatment for issues that may contribute to criminal behavior or missed court appearances. In-Custody Referral (ICR) assists people who have been in jail for an extended period and can now transition to outpatient or inpatient treatment.

This continuum is unique among pretrial programs nationally. Although most programs adjust supervision to assessed risk levels, they tend to focus on managing compliance with court-ordered requirements. These requirements, on their own, do little to impact the causes of criminal behavior or court nonappearance. Some pretrial programs include referrals for personal and social needs, but rarely in a comprehensive or structured way. SF Pretrial's approach centers on addressing each person's unique needs, which in turn supports their compliance with court obligations, including showing up for hearings. Research has repeatedly shown that traditional supervision has minimal impact on improving pretrial outcomes.³ Needs-based supportive services offer greater potential for achieving community safety and court appearance goals, while also upholding people's right to liberty while their case is pending.

Other Justice Services Programs

SF Pretrial is also unusual among pretrial programs because it offers a broad array of services benefiting both the individuals involved and the legal system as a whole:

- [Pretrial Diversion](#) (PTD) allows people charged with a misdemeanor to complete certain requirements and have their case formally dismissed.

² Multiple [research studies](#) have shown that auto-enrolled court date reminders, whether texts, calls, emails, or letters, are the most effective actions a court or pretrial program can take to improve people's court appearance.

³ See the Pretrial Monitoring [research summary](#).

- Primary Caregiver Diversion (PCD) connects caregivers of children to services that reduce the harms children experience from separation.
- Project 20 (P20) allows people to perform services that benefit the community, such as street beautification, instead of paying court fines or fees.
- Neighborhood Court (NCT) involves people convicted of a misdemeanor restoring harm they caused to others in the community.
- Enhanced Care Management (ECM) provides intensive care coordination for people with complex, long-term medical and social needs, connecting them to [Medi-Cal](#), California's Medicaid program.
- Housing Services helps justice-involved people experiencing homelessness to obtain temporary, stabilizing housing or permanent, longer-term housing.
- In-House Groups are provided for substance use, harm reduction, cognitive behavioral therapy, and anger management, whether court-ordered or voluntary.
- Affordable Care Act (ACA) Enrollment is provided to people in jail who are not yet enrolled in healthcare.
- Discharge Planning (DP) serves people who have frequent contact with the legal system, connecting them with services to help break the cycle of involvement.
- Judicial Services Team staff maintain regular contact with justice partners during and outside of court, keeping SF Pretrial clients updated on their case status, court obligations, and treatment plans.
- Pretrial Pathways Initiative (launched February 2026) coordinates clinical partners, housing providers, job readiness resources, and peer navigators who conduct wellness checks for pretrial clients with complex health and housing needs. Coordinated onsite clinical services are available for clients in crisis.

People with pending cases often face a unique combination of personal and social needs. SF Pretrial is distinctive because it can immediately draw on its wide array of services to meet urgent or persistent needs. Coordinating these varied services is challenging but critical for maximizing effectiveness and minimizing costs and inefficiencies.

By providing this depth and breadth of individualized services to people on pretrial release or who have been convicted, SF Pretrial creates a relatively seamless system of care “under one roof.” Most other pretrial programs, or even entire local legal systems, cannot deliver this kind of coordinated care because multiple separate agencies are typically involved, which often leads to gaps or overlap in services.

Program Development and Evaluation

Beyond its direct services, SF Pretrial routinely analyzes data to evaluate and improve its programming.

The Department of Policy & Evaluation (DPE) analyzes and reports outcome data for SF Pretrial's various programs, creates presentations for local and national audiences, and designs staff training.

Many pretrial programs track at least some recommended outcome measures,⁴ but most have limited analytical capacity and report only basic metrics. A smaller number go further by tracking a range of measures, using them to improve practices, and producing clear reports for both legal system and community audiences. SF Pretrial is among this select group. Its [annual impact reports](#) are both engaging and informative.

SF Pretrial also has a Director of Strategic Partnerships who maintains existing relationships and identifies new community partners providing services and support to clients. Very few pretrial programs dedicate professional staff to this function, giving SF Pretrial a broader network of community-based services than most programs can offer.

Pretrial Outcomes

Main Outcomes

Under California law, all people accused of a crime who remain in the community while their case is pending must meet two legally required conditions of pretrial release:

1. Abide by the law, and
2. Appear for court hearings.

Judges may impose additional release conditions to help a person meet these requirements, such as pretrial supervision, no-contact orders, drug testing, or electronic monitoring.

Most pretrial programs primarily monitor compliance with release conditions and notify the court of violations. SF Pretrial goes well beyond this by also connecting people with services that address their underlying needs, such as housing, mental health, and substance use. This helps clients not only remain law-abiding and appear in court, but also become healthier individuals who can care for their families and contribute to their communities.

SF Pretrial's success rates⁵ for the major outcomes of remaining law-abiding and appearing in court are comparable to those of other pretrial programs nationally. Across SF Pretrial's pretrial release programming, approximately 9 in 10 clients remain law-abiding and more than 7 in 10 make their court appearances. In addition, these law-abiding and court appearance rates are [comparable to or higher than](#)⁶ those reported in other urban or similarly-sized California counties.

These are strong results for a program operating in a large urban environment with typical big-city challenges: poverty, homelessness, housing unaffordability, traffic

⁴ See, for example, the [Advancing Pretrial Policy and Research](#) and [National Institute of Corrections'](#) lists of recommended measures.

⁵ See SF Pretrial's [annual reports](#).

⁶ See page 32.

congestion, and high rates of mental health and substance use issues, all of which can contribute to missed court appearances and criminal behavior.

SF Pretrial also facilitates the pretrial release of many people admitted to jail on new charges. It provides 24/7 coverage to complete a pretrial assessment for every person booked into the county jail. Staff also escort clients out of jail to meetings with pretrial services staff or community service providers, and back again.

Other Related Outcomes

SF Pretrial is currently building its capacity to track the nature and frequency of services delivered through its justice services programming (e.g., referral types, housing or treatment placements, client follow-through). To support this effort, SF Pretrial had a custom case management system built and plans to analyze and report these data in the near future.

Other Important and Unique Features

SF Pretrial has many features that contribute to its cost-effectiveness and its reputation among peers as one of the best pretrial services programs in the country. The features below are among those that other programs' leaders find most inspirational or want to emulate.

Legal and Evidence-Based Practices

SF Pretrial is committed to practices that are grounded in law and supported by evidence, as described in the National Association of Pretrial Service Agencies (NAPSA) [national standards](#). Its services support the foundational American legal principles unique to pretrial justice: the presumption of innocence, the right to bail, non-excessive bail, and fair trial rights.

SF Pretrial weaves supportive services throughout its programming for people in the community while their criminal case is pending. This approach has the potential to improve not only the lives of the accused, but also those of their family members and communities. The commitment to supportive services shows up in:

- Staff selection, training, and coaching, with many staff having social work or clinical expertise and lived experience in the legal system
- The depth and breadth of programming, described above
- Pretrial and other outcome measures, described above
- Partnerships with community-based and government service providers to meet individual client needs
- A focus on communicating court obligations to clients, and then addressing the underlying personal and social needs that enable people to fulfill those obligations. [Research](#) shows this approach is more effective for community safety than enforcing compliance alone

Not all clients experience a successful outcome. But when they do, it can be life-altering.

Joe B. [name changed] was charged with a felony in a high-profile San Francisco case and court-ordered to participate in SF Pretrial’s programming. Joe’s case manager quickly realized he needed significant support. Joe had recently lost his shelter bed, so she secured a new one and then helped him move into low-rent community housing. Confused and fearful about the court process, Joe was reassured when she appeared in court with him. He was stuttering from overmedication, so she got his medication adjusted, enabling him to communicate more confidently with his defense attorney and the judge. Knowing that a conviction would require drug testing and therapy, she arranged for him to begin therapy voluntarily during pretrial release. Joe was convicted and sentenced to probation. Today, he has one year left on his sentence with minimal reporting requirements. He continues to make progress in therapy, is planning to get a part-time job, and smiles now—something he didn’t do when his case began.

As reflected in the NAPSA Standards and publications from other pretrial experts,⁷ the pretrial field is moving away from routine compliance management and toward addressing people’s needs to improve community safety and court appearance outcomes. SF Pretrial, since its founding 50 years ago, has been working in this direction from the start, meaning little organizational transition is needed. This allows SF Pretrial to focus its time, energy, and funding on expanding and optimizing its service-focused options rather than undertaking the time-consuming cultural change that compliance-oriented agencies face.

SF Pretrial also demonstrates its commitment to excellence by refining practices that are already research-supported. Staff are partnering with the nation’s foremost court appearance experts at the [\(Un\)warranted project](#) and with the Sheriff’s Office to improve court date reminders and forms detailing clients’ court obligations. When reminders incorporate behavioral design, they [improve](#) court appearance rates.⁸

Awards, Recognition, and Contributions

SF Pretrial and its leadership have received numerous local, state, and national awards and have made significant contributions to the pretrial field. Highlights include:

- SF Pretrial was a National Criminal Justice Association (NCJA) Outstanding Criminal Justice Program [award winner](#) in 2019.
- SF Pretrial contributes to national and California-specific research and understanding of effective pretrial practices, such as [increasing court appearance rates](#), [diverting people](#) accused of felonies away from deeper system involvement, and demonstrating the [effects of the Humphrey decision](#).
- SF Pretrial leadership co-authored an essay on the effects of new California case law on pretrial services, published in the [Handbook on Pretrial Justice \(2021\)](#), alongside nineteen other essays by nationally recognized pretrial experts.

⁷ See publications or recorded training events on pretrial supportive services from [Advancing Pretrial Policy and Research](#), the [Vera Institute of Justice](#), the [National Institute of Corrections](#), and [Justice System Partners](#).

⁸ The assistance is provided at no cost to SF Pretrial, the Sheriff’s Office, or the City and County of San Francisco.

- SF Pretrial staff have served as faculty for [national pretrial trainings](#), presented at multiple national and state (Texas and California) conferences, and been featured in [stories of exemplary pretrial programs](#).
- Court Team Manager Gerald White received the 2022 NAPSA Bruce Beaudin [Award](#) for exemplifying the goals and objectives of the pretrial services profession.
- Chief Executive Officer David Mauroff served on the NAPSA Board of Directors for three years (through 2025), is regarded by his peers as a national leader in pretrial services, and has frequently advised leaders of newly formed or expanding pretrial services programs, whether non-profit or government-run.
- SF Pretrial has been one of fewer than ten pretrial service agencies nationwide designated as a NAPSA Accredited Program. SF Pretrial is currently seeking accreditation renewal.

David Mauroff and his team have helped our program with implementing our risk assessment tool and efficient jail-release practices. Through site visits they have shared insights on job classifications, staff compensation, field-based work, and how to integrate client services into day-to-day pretrial operations. As pretrial services continue to rapidly evolve in response to new legislation, national and local reform, and budget challenges, SF Pretrial has been a generous collaborator, connecting us with key justice and community partners, including the District Attorney, Public Defender, and Sheriff.

- Matthew Fisk, Director of Pretrial Services, Santa Clara County, California

SF Pretrial works to fulfill its legal mandate of transparency under CA AB102 (2025) in several ways:

- Its physical location (the [J:HUB](#)) at 8th and Folsom Streets is accessible and near the neighborhoods where many clients live, offering privacy, high access to community services, and space for staff collaboration across program areas.
- Its [website](#) provides detailed information about the organization, programs, annual impact reports, and funding sources, enabling system stakeholders and community partners to understand SF Pretrial's values and practices.
- SF Pretrial is developing a public-facing online data dashboard with assistance from the Harvard Kennedy School Government Performance Lab, which will display client counts, program outcomes, and other key metrics.

SF Pretrial works to fulfill its legal mandate of accountability under CA AB102 (2025):

- SF Pretrial reports industry-recommended pretrial outcomes of law-abiding/public safety rates and court appearance rates. Other measures, such as client participation in various pretrial supportive services, are currently being tracked for future reporting.

- SF Pretrial uses a validated pretrial assessment tool (the Public Safety Assessment), as required by California Law.⁹
- SF Pretrial reports that it fulfills reporting requirements to its variety of funders, including the San Francisco Sheriff's Office, with whom it has a five-year competitive contract, and to the local Superior Court. SF Pretrial is required to reapply to be the local pretrial services provider. It was recently awarded another five years of funding, up to nine years total, under the City & County of San Francisco's formal Request for Proposals (RFP) process.

While other pretrial programs have achieved some of these activities or received state or national recognition, very few, inside or outside California, have accomplished as much as SF Pretrial, particularly over the past five years. This is a primary reason why many other pretrial agencies look to SF Pretrial as a national model.

Structural Advantages

SF Pretrial has one main structural advantage and a possible secondary one compared to most other pretrial programs in the United States. The main advantage is that SF Pretrial is not housed within a law enforcement agency.¹⁰ The possible secondary advantage is that it operates as an independent, community-based non-profit; it is not administratively housed in the executive or judicial branch of government. A high-functioning pretrial program is possible without these advantages, but it typically has greater challenges to overcome when trying to adapt to new developments in pretrial law, research, and national standards.¹¹

Pretrial Services and Law Enforcement

In California, most pretrial services functions (assessment and supervision) are performed by a probation department, with a few handled by a sheriff's office or another county agency.

When pretrial services are housed in a law enforcement agency, whether a sheriff's office or a probation department,¹² the agency must make intentional and sometimes

⁹ See [CA SB36 \(2019\)](#).

¹⁰ California Penal Code [§ 830.1](#) designates sheriff's deputies and police officers as "peace officers" (i.e., law enforcement), and [§ 830.5](#) does the same for probation officers. The Chief Probation Officers of California (CPOC) [website](#) refers to CPOC as "law enforcement leaders."

¹¹ The question of which agency or organization should provide pretrial services in San Francisco is [several years old](#) and continues into 2026. This report is intended to inform those who will decide the many important aspects of pretrial services in San Francisco, given that these decisions ultimately affect how well people abide by the law, appear in court, and become healthy, contributing members of their communities. This paper does not take a position on which type of agency, whether law enforcement, government, or nonprofit, should provide pretrial services.

¹² California probation departments face additional challenges in providing effective pretrial services beyond those encountered by many probation departments in other states. In much of the country, probation departments are not law enforcement agencies. Their staff do not wear badges, carry firearms, have warrantless arrest powers for supervision violations, or execute searches and seizures. California probation departments, by contrast, are law enforcement agencies with these duties and powers.

difficult cultural shifts to work effectively with people who have not been convicted. These shifts can take time and include, among others:

- broadening the agency's mission and policies to give pretrial services equal status with other functions (such as patrol, detention, or probation supervision)
- focusing on shorter-term client goals relevant to the pretrial period
- refraining from discussing alleged offenses due to constitutional protections
- prohibiting punitive or enforcement actions based on the presumption of innocence;
- having flexible staffing schedules for clients who are often in crisis at arrest
- using pretrial-specific staff selection, training, and coaching
- incorporating pretrial legal rights into policies
- adjusting branding and language (e.g., unconvicted people are not "probationers" or "offenders"), and
- managing clients' potential confusion about the difference between pretrial services and probation supervision

Maintaining separation is the challenge of any organization trying to perform both probation and pretrial release functions. Physical separation, while admirable, is likely secondary to mental separation, in which officers have a clear understanding of the fundamental differences between pretrial release and probation so that officer actions manifest in ways demonstrating that understanding. In short, pretrial release and probation are both important to our system of criminal justice, but their significant differences compel us to operate within each field with knowledge and purpose. Knowing those differences is essential not only to becoming a good and effective pretrial or probation officer or supervisor. It is essential for pretrial justice itself, and critical to maintaining the foundational pillars of our American system of justice.

- Timothy R. Schnacke, in [Pretrial Release and Probation, What is the Same and What is Different](#), 2018

Beyond cultural challenges, there are financial considerations as well. Even when law enforcement agencies provide legal and evidence-based pretrial services consistent with the law, research, and national standards, the cost is often higher than when other county agencies or non-profits provide the same services. This is largely because sheriff's offices and probation departments tend to use sworn peace officers for pretrial duties, often community-based supervision and sometimes assessment, that could be performed by unsworn professionals who typically have lower personnel costs.

As a result, SF Pretrial (or another non-law-enforcement organization) does not face many of the legal, administrative, cultural, and financial challenges that California law-enforcement-oriented agencies must overcome.

Contractual Relationship with Local Government

Independence from direct government administration enables SF Pretrial, and similar community-based programs, to adapt more quickly to rapidly evolving pretrial law,

research, standards, and practices. While these changes have been underway for decades, they have accelerated significantly over the past twenty years.

An independent non-profit pretrial agency can have a few advantages over one that is government-run, including the ability to nimbly seek out and drive partnerships with other local non-profits to best serve vulnerable populations and the community, build greater trust between the people served and the staff providing the services (as a few state representatives recently emphasized to me), and remain insulated from executive or judicial branch concerns.

- Elizabeth Simoni, Executive Director of Maine Pretrial Services

Community-based organizations generally face fewer bureaucratic requirements and are more insulated from top-down directives compared to government agencies.¹³

Across the criminal legal system, there is a growing movement to shift pretrial services from a primarily compliance-focused function (acting as a “referee”) to a supportive, success-based function that addresses people’s underlying needs (more like a “coach”).¹⁴ This transition is driven by evolving pretrial law and research on effective practices, among other factors. SF Pretrial is already doing much of this work and has been directly and indirectly informing other California agencies and the broader national effort for years.

¹³ Non-profit status is not without its downsides. Non-profits contracting with local or state governments often must continually “prove” themselves in ways government agencies do not. They typically face extra reporting requirements, must show results before officials are satisfied with the return on investment, and must compete with other non-profits or for-profits when contracts are awarded or renewed.

¹⁴ See the [Coach \(Referee\) Model for Change](#) for a helpful description of this transition.

About the Author

Michael R. Jones, Ph.D. is a senior criminal justice consultant with over 20 years of experience helping county and state justice systems, including in California, improve performance through data-guided strategy and cross-agency coordination. As founder and President of [Pinnacle Justice Consulting](#), he advises elected officials and justice partners nationwide on pretrial policy, jail population management, and system governance. His work has helped jurisdictions improve court appearance rates, reduce jail populations, and make defensible, cost-effective decisions, often without expanding facilities, programs, or staffing. Dr. Jones is widely respected for his independent, neutral perspective and his ability to translate data and research into practical options for decision-makers. His Ph.D. is in clinical psychology from the University of Missouri-Columbia.

Note from the Author

The views in this report reflect the knowledge and expertise I have gained throughout my career, first as a local government employee, and then as a criminal legal system consultant working with local and state governments, non-profits, and philanthropies over the past few decades.