

# Bail-bond system changes greeted with cautious optimism in New Orleans

by JOHN SIMERMAN, THE TIMES-PICAYUNE • MAY 16, 2012

Three weeks after its official launch in Orleans Parish, [a new pretrial services program](#) conducted by the [Vera Institute of Justice](#) is drawing praise from all quarters of the criminal justice system. Screeners, working to determine whether arrested individuals should be detained before their court appearances, have conducted 151 assessments so far. While it's too early to gauge results, the program is giving judges and magistrate commissioners a better look at defendants before they set bail, with the goal of releasing more people who are not a risk to public safety, said Jon Wool, director of the Vera's New Orleans office.



[View full size](#) Jennifer Zdon Sheriff Marlin Gusman talks with inmates held in the male holding tank at the processing center in June 2008.

So far, 23 defendants have been granted bonds of \$2,500 or less and 10 more have been released on their own recognizance.

The fact the program is finally up and running, after nearly two years of hammering out details and overcoming political obstacles, is a feat in itself, Wool said Tuesday at a symposium at Tulane University.

One major sticking point was placing Vera personnel inside the jail's secured area, Orleans Parish Sheriff [Marlin Gusman](#) said. A sheriff's deputy has been assigned to stand watch during the assessments.

Other issues were turf and money. Releasing more inmates directly affects Gusman's bottom line, since his office is paid based on occupancy. Also, District Attorney [Leon Cannizzaro's](#) office and the court split revenues from bail bond forfeitures.

Then there is the political peril of an inmate committing a violent crime while free without bond, or with a low bond based on a risk assessment.

"Everyone's taking a risk here," Wool said. "They're taking a risk in investing in a program that in other jurisdictions has proven to pay back two- or three-fold. But there's no guarantee."

Wool and Gusman were panelists at the symposium put on by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice and moderated by Times-Picayune crime reporter Brendan McCarthy. Also on the panel were First Assistant District Attorney Graymond Martin, New Orleans Crime Commissioner James Carter, Jee Park of the Orleans Parish public defender's office and Camille Buras, the chief judge at Criminal District Court.

Wool said the assessments now are being done with about 75 percent of defendants in criminal court, but have not yet been extended to

Municipal Court.

The work is financed through a U.S. Department of Justice grant along with additional assistance from the city, with costs running about \$45,000 a month, Wool said. Carter said he expects the city to continue its support indefinitely.

The new system is designed to focus bail decisions less on the crime and more on the defendant. A six-page questionnaire looks at a defendant's substance abuse and criminal histories, prior failures to appear in court, residency, employment and family.

The result is a numbered ranking and a rating of low, moderate or high risk. The judges and commissioners have the final say.

"This is tough. You're going to have bad things happen. You can't get around it," Gusman said.

"Our backdrop is an out-of-control ... violence problem. Our public doesn't want to hear about people getting out of jail for free," Buras said. "It's not a get-out-of-jail-free card. It's a thoughtful, insightful risk-factor analysis."

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