

**Meeting Minutes**  
**Law and Justice Council**  
**Wednesday, February 14, 2024 – 12:00 p.m.**  
**Benton County Administration Building**

This Council meets about, and takes action on, issues pertaining to local criminal justice matters. This includes but is not limited to: Issues regarding jail management and DOC coordination, local crime trends and availability of criminal justice resources, sharing of information, personnel and infrastructure to reduce duplication of efforts and facilitate policing and supervision efforts to reduce recidivism and enhance responses to offender violations.

Chris Guerrero – City of Kennewick Police Chief  
Tom Croskrey – Benton County Sheriff  
Jon Law – Benton County Sheriff’s Office Undersheriff  
Charlie Dow – Office of Public Defense Manager  
John Trumbo – City of Kennewick Council Member  
Chuck Torelli – City of Kennewick Council Member  
Cameron Fordmeir – Citizen Member  
Dave Neher – Interim Chief for City of Richland  
Dave Wheeler – Benton County Probation Manager  
Tiffany Runge – Superior Court Administrator  
Matt Rasmussen – Deputy County Administrator  
Eric Eisinger – Benton County Prosecutor  
Jennifer Azure – Benton County District Court Judge  
Casey Kist – Benton County Corrections Lieutenant  
Thomas Grego – West Richland Police Chief  
Fred Brink – West Richland Mayor Pro-Tem  
Melissa Hedrick – West Richland Police Assistant to the Chief  
Diana Ruff – Superior Court Judge  
Brian Ace – Citizen Member  
Kevin Kennedy – Citizen Member  
Laurencio Sanguino – City Attorney, Kennewick  
Jessica Foltz – City Attorney, West Richland

Chief Guerrero called to order at 12:00

**Introductions**

Around the Room Introductions

**Approval of Minutes (Action)**

Chief Guerrero asked for a motion to approve minutes from January 10, 2024

Fred Brink made a motion to approve the minutes, Sheriff Croskrey seconded, motion passes unanimously.

**New Business**

- **Regional Updates**

Sheriff Croskrey stated that the Sheriff's Office is in the process of hiring people. There are 2 openings for lateral candidates. We are working on an annual report for 2023, which is significant to show the commissioners that Washington state is low on average deputies – we would need 55 deputies to be average. He said they are not moving to get 55 people, but something for us to look at and why the crime rate is rising in Benton County but not in Franklin or Walla Walla. Working on in the Sheriff's Office, it has been many decades since there has been an addition to the sheriff's office budget.

Undersheriff Law stated it's been since 2010 since we received any new deputies

Sheriff Croskrey stated that Sheriff Raymond wants to work on 1/10 of percent for radio systems. It is a concept he wants us to begin working on. Going to at least take a look at and first stop will be Matt Rasmussen.

Deputy County Administrator Matt Rasmussen stated that this is being discussed at a regional level

West Richland Mayor Pro-Tem Fred Brink stated that county fires system is trying to migrate to a vhf system

Deputy County Administrator Matt Rasmussen agreed and stated the dollar amount associated with migration, it's just too high to come up with

Sheriff Croskrey stated that FCSO is in a bad spot. If their system has problems, they are out of luck. One thing he asked Mr. Atwood, how much money do we need

City of Kennewick Police Chief Chris Guerrero stated that all fire is on vhf, more issue for fire on Benton County side, all of franklin is on it

Citizen Member Brian Ace stated that it will be similar to how BC approached PSST

Deputy County Administrator Matt Rasmussen stated that it's all a part of the preliminary discussions

City of Kennewick Council Member Chuck Torelli asked if in conjunction we can look at a levy lift vs. safety tax, sunsets on its own.

Sheriff Croskrey stated that he is certainly open to these discussions and Sheriff Raymond was clear it's what he wants to work on

West Richland Police Chief Thomas Grego stated that WRPD is fully staffed. There are retirements coming later this year, lower than the standard, we need more officers. Also looking at what the excess was and hopefully they can begin using the 300,000 to bring on a new officer

Citizen Member Kevin Kennedy asked what kinds of crime are occurring

West Richland Police Chief Thomas Grego stated when at academy never had drive-by, had 2 this year

Sheriff Croskrey mentioned a significant uptick in homicides and vehicle thefts. BCSO is encountering burglary and auto thefts. If we could get more folks out in the field

City of Richland Interim Chief Dave Neher stated that he recently compiled the annual report, saw market increase in DV and assaults. Hats off to the PA's office for compiling a pro-active team related to this. It helps put victims in the system and get them the help they need. Auto thefts are down, implementation of flock has helped with this. Down 6 officers, 2 years ago they added 5 positions, would like to see something like that again.

Citizen Member Brian Ace asked about Flock cameras and what they are

City of Richland Interim Chief Dave Neher said we have cameras throughout the city that are license plate readers. Anytime a vehicle plate is stolen, we can log it in the system. It helps us contain this and helps with homicide investigations as well.

West Richland Police Chief Thomas Grego mentioned that when Emma was missing in WRPD, it helped bring that vehicle together

City of Kennewick Police Chief Chris Guerrero the cameras were funded through the auto theft prevention board, done regionally but now we have had to fund them within our own budgets. Great for investigative leads. We had 27 auto thefts in a week, all juvenile offenders, trying to build cases, we can't chase them. Having a discussion with council members on why this is occurring, and why we can't charge.

Undersheriff Law stated that some farms have purchased their own and began sharing information with us.

Citizen Member Brian Ace asked about private businesses.

City of Kennewick Police Chief Chris Guerrero stated they are working with small businesses as well

Citizen Member Brian Ace thanked everyone for the education

Benton County Corrections Lieutenant Casey Kist mentioned they are dealing with same issues, hiring, down 3, hired 19 last year. Last weekend the emergency response team is back up again, 3-day in-house training. We will help agencies to be able to work safely together to remove individuals safely.

Superior Court Judge Diana Ruff stated they have made a concerted effort to put judges on domestic trials and other civil matters are getting heard

District Court Judge Jennifer Azure stated trials are scheduled Monday, only 9 jurors showed up, so it didn't go. They are going every week since beginning of the year. Working with OPD and the PA to push things through. Worked on a diversion program to make this work and recovery navigator program. They don't have any actual numbers on success rates, but most defendants are in custody. Staffing shortages have been filled. We will be asking for a Commissioner in DC, we are down 1.6, should be at 6.6, we are at 5. Should help get cases out. In need of a bailiff. Therapeutic court is going well. Lowest recidivism rate in recovery court.

Probation Manager Dave Wheeler stated a big thing on our radar, is the remodel. Making upgrades to up front administration. Moving contract forward to get approved and design done and up and going by end of the year. It will construct new housing units. Adding some units on back of facility. Should be done by 2026. Allows us to maintain juveniles there. DV cases we are seeing with juveniles, pretty good resources we can throw towards those items. We have many counselors that we can use for these issues in home. We have begun seeing mental health struggles where we are individually designing tracks for substance abuse and/or mental health components. As far as felony offenses, there was an uptick, Assaults and robberies, kids are being admitted to detention on stolen vehicles and weapons.

Prosecuting Attorney Eric Eisinger provided reports to BC offices on what is being referred to our office. Got to sit down with each Chief and see what is going well and what could be improved. Addressing office organization and did mission, vision statements and getting buy in on the most important issues our partners are needing. Going into 2024 with intentionality. Made an offer to a lateral DPA from Snohomish County, the criminal division will be down 3 positions. 400 outstanding screenings. Capacity issues we are facing with defense counsel. Pressing forward intentionally to deal with these issues. Very grateful for our law enforcement partners.

City of Kennewick Police Chief Chris Guerrero said it's the first time it has ever happened where we have had these discussions. Eric Eisinger is the first person to come in and ask if they are doing what they should be doing. Kennewick has 6 openings, 8 graduating from academy tomorrow, 10 that graduated academy have made it thru FTO program. All made it. Attributed to the Pasco academy. 4-6 weeks ahead of the other academies. The product coming back from Spokane and Burien is just not what Pasco is. We have a lateral officer in the hopper and a conditional with a cadet. 30 traffic stops in half a day on a Saturday. The trickle effect this will have on courts and PA's office. Going through stats and completed strategic plan to go over with council soon. Lots of support from legislation to get cops hired. We are at 1.25, state average is 1.6. We hope to be trending downward after all our openings are filled.

- **Office of Public Defense**

Office of Public Defense Manager Charlie Dow – not a voting member, we have talked about the budget quite a bit. Chief would be at the top, I'm at the bottom to meet the budget. When I hear 55 new deputies, I'm trying to figure out where we figure out budget. State rules on appointing cases. Superior court is 150 cases, if we are talking about each attorney being able to take 150 cases, they could be in trouble by the bar if they are presumed to not be in alignment with 6<sup>th</sup> amendment. SC = 1500, need 10 attorneys. Assuming all stars align. There is a market force we cannot get over. The problem is in the past, they were assigning contracts for a whole case load. I am hearing from private sector that attorneys are then missing out on a lot of private income. I believe if we have associates taking on 75% caseload and then be able to take on additional. Been working with Matt Rasmussen and Administration to rethink our contract to see how we can

make it more reasonable and attractive. There is competition amongst county OPD. If Yakima offers better rate, then we see a dip in that. Biggest myths about this, is that it's my offices work that a dismissal. It's a tough line to walk. Appointing by arraignment date. The major focus from day one is recruitment. Lots of recruiting happening on college campuses. Intern in house right now from University of Georgia. In house DC defender. Loan forgiveness is helping us attract candidates.

City of Kennewick Police Chief Chris Guerrero said it's much more in depth. The way I'm thinking of it is, if we arrest 100 people, 100 cases go to DC, are 100 getting assigned to a defense attorney.

Office of Public Defense Manager Charlie Dow replied that no that number is going down for all jurisdictions. It's significant, BC has the shortest backlog. Over 100 in Richland. Advising individuals when they come in. Two practical things at play, we don't have an attorney for you today, prioritizing those in custody. You have a right to a speedy trial in 90 days and you have the right to go to trial and hope we have an attorney. You can push the trial and stay on our list.

City of Kennewick Police Chief Chris Guerrero asked if DC court knows what the backlog looks like

District Court Judge Jennifer Azure stated that they have continued about half today out to a week but still within speedy trial. She stated that the problem they see is that you are assigned counsel, but sometimes its other issues.

City Attorney Laurencio Sanguino stated that they dismissed 150 cases in December, limited number of cases for filing. DC is hitting their own issues and struggles. Over 300 cases unassigned. Concerning thing is how frequently KPD is charging.

City of Kennewick Police Chief Chris Guerrero stated that they see what is happening with crime, we look to put people in jail, but we need the full circle criminal justice system to be working

District Court Judge Jennifer Azure – very difficult to hold someone in custody, we don't have very many violent offenses. Our rules as judges are very strict in how long we can hold someone. Oftentimes it's a first offense.

Superior Court Judge Diana Ruff stated tri-cities have had lower number of attorneys, OPD is fighting with a stigma related to being an OPD attorney, he is competing with private firms who are also struggling to hire. We lack a pipeline for talent from the bottom up.

Office of Public Defense Manager Charlie Dow stated they spent \$4,000 on advertising to all western law schools, got zero response. Went on Washington state BAR website and ordered emails and started cold calling/emailing.

City Attorney Laurencio Sanguino encouraged BC OPD to look in Oregon.

- **Public Comment**

There was no public comment section as we did not have anyone from the public in attendance

Meeting adjourned at approximately 1:02