



**million**  
ONE JAIL AT A TIME.  
*story*

## JAIL REFORM TOOLKIT & RESOURCE GUIDE

EPISODE 3

# Reform Activists and a New D.A. Find Common Ground

A PODCAST BY

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# Hello!

Thanks for listening to 70 Million. Whether you're a seasoned criminal justice reform advocate, private citizen, educator, public or private sector leader, we appreciate your interest in finding solutions to the incarceration quagmire.

We've assembled this 70 Million Criminal Justice Toolkit for those ready to turn interest into action.

This resource guide draws from practical tactics shared by those who launched the initiatives chronicled in our episodes, including:

-- How to access and deploy public and private sector databases and legislative bodies to build reform solutions.

-- How to highlight individual stories of the incarcerated in order to drive organizational and grassroots action.

--How to harness citizens' willingness to engage in methodical, trial-and-error pilot efforts in order to build effective reform programs and movements.

Our hope is that this Toolkit can help get you started. Keep in mind that steps do not have to happen strictly chronologically. Use them and the questions to frame and shape change in your community and let us know about it.

## CRIMINAL JUSTICE TOOLKIT

### Using the SMART model

The SMART model of program development and evaluation is an open-sourced method used by public sector, nonprofit and citizen/community groups to organize solutions-oriented projects.

**S**pecific (Steps 1-4)

**M**easurable (Steps 5-6)

**A**chievable (Steps 7-8)

**R**elevant (Steps 9-10)

**T**imebound (Step 11)

## STEP 1

### Identify & Analyze Concerns

# Be specific about what you are trying to achieve

**Case Study -- Episode 3 of 70 Million Podcast:** Prosecutors, judges, and law enforcement agencies can present a united front to address inequitable policies, rules, and practices that disproportionately negatively impact black and Latino defendants.

[Houston Justice](#), a grassroots reform organization founded in the aftermath of the 2014 Ferguson, Missouri demonstrations following Michael Brown's death seeks to change that dynamic in Harris County, Texas.



“The District Attorney was not playing fair, not with bail, not with nonviolent offenses, and not even doing a good job with violent offenses. A great example is the prosecution of 10,000 misdemeanor cases a year for marijuana possession at the expense of leaving 8,000 rape kits.”

**Kim Ogg, elected Harris County, Texas District Attorney in 2016, who worked with the grassroots team at Houston Justice.**

## STEP 2

### Identify and Convene Internal Division Representatives and External Stakeholders

# What is the minimum personnel needed?

- List Must-Have Roles
- List Potential Ideal Individuals to Assume Must-Have Roles

**Example:** In 2014, a Durrel Douglas, a labor organizer in Houston, decided to found a reform organization. He initially contacted two friends with similar interests and professional expertise who expanded scope to their concept.



“Three people lead the effort: Durrel, who had union organizing experience, Damien Thaddeus Jones, a policy activist focused on environmental justice, and Shekira Dennis, a former Obama White House intern interested in civic engagement.”

**Reporter Ruxandra Guidi for 70 Million. In the photo: Tina Kingshill and Durrel Douglas of Houston Justice discuss the details of Project Orange, a grassroots effort to register voters in Harris County jails.**

## STEP 3

### Itemize Resources, Inputs, and Assets Needed to Achieve Solutions/Outcomes

# What do we want to accomplish?

- Why is this goal important?
- Who should be involved?
- What resources are needed?

**Example:** After examining data on Harris County's courts and jails, and several months of conferring with local community leaders, pastors, and public officials, Durrel and his two colleagues decided to focus Houston Justice's reform efforts on three areas: Inmate justice, political justice, and economic justice. According to available resources and achievable goals, Houston Justice decided to specify their focus with concrete actions, including:

- Inmate access to voting and voter registration
- Improving Jail Safety and Standards
- Diversifying the Grand Jury System in Harris County



Terrence Koontz has tried to build his life back up after a felony conviction for drunk driving and evading arrest when he was 37 years old. He's since become an advocate for bail reform in Houston.

Photo credit: Christian Janai Photography.

**STEP 4****Action Planning**

# Develop Framework & Timeline for Achieving Goals

**Example:** After establishing its framework and goals (inmate justice, economic justice, political justice), Houston Justice aligned actionable tactics and strategies to their goals, based on their available resources:

- Raise public awareness of the need for reform by door-knocking in neighborhoods and county government offices, holding town halls and information sessions in churches and community centers.
- Developing social media messaging campaigns.
- Aligning with a network of like-minded activists and organizations.



“We lobbied legislators, we knocked on doors, we organized in churches, as it pertained to grand jury reform and that had taken us so far.”

**Shekira Dennis, co-founder of Houston Justice.**

## STEP 5

### Measuring Progress & Efficacy

- Set evaluation criteria to determine progress & success rate
- Assess Legislative/Funding/Regulatory Barriers & Opportunities

**Example:** Houston Justice identified a clear initial goal for its nascent campaign: Reforming the county prosecutor's office. The Harris County DA was up for re-election, and Houston Justice called for her resignation to spur reform in the grand jury system, and begin tackling the high incarceration rate of blacks in Harris County as well as abuse of blacks by local police and in the jail system.

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## STEP 6

### Support Desired Outcomes with Data and/or Metrics

**Example:** By strategically homing in on a single concrete change, the resignation of Harris County's DA, Houston Justice rallied stakeholders and allies to push for public accountability of courts and law enforcement agencies. Houston Justice shared data to inform public awareness to increase pressure on the system. By 2015, their efforts bore fruit in the form of a serious challenger for the DA office in Harris County.



“During [District Attorney Devon] Anderson’s tenure, 200 African-American inmates died in jail [over a decade], due to neglect and abuse. Eighty-five percent of them had been awaiting trial and hadn’t yet been convicted of a crime.”

Reporter Ruxandra Guidi for 70 Million.



## STEP 7

### Achievability Review

- Revisit whether goals are realistic and introduce flexibility in goal-setting
- Operational Oversight Assessment

**Example:** Develop a flexible strategy to overcome the stubborn and complex web of barriers to reform, including political opposition and lack of financial support for community efforts to affect changes. An intersectional approach can include a voter registration campaign of inmates. Houston Justice's #ProjectOrange campaign registered more than 600 inmates and their family members in Harris County in the early months of 2018.

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## STEP 8

### Program(s) and Asset Resource Monitoring

**Example:** Given its limited resources in its first year, Houston Justice recognized that relationship-building and strategic selection of cause-areas was required. Its campaign to force resignation of a District Attorney led to an alliance with a reform-minded candidate for DA. The election of Kim Ogg in 2016, the first Democrat to be top prosecutor of Harris County in more than 30 years, demonstrated positive return on investment for Houston Justice. Progress can advance by building trust within pragmatic alliances to achieve incremental gains on the way to tangible reform.



“It’s never going to be -- ‘the activist community is excited about the DA’s office’, alright? We’re trying to really work past 20 to 30 years of insensitivities to communities, so there’s a gap of trust. We gotta bridge that gap.”

**Shekira Dennis, co-founder of Houston Justice**

## STEP 9

### Relevancy Check-Up

- Examine whether each milestone supports the overall vision
- Preliminary Outcomes Evaluation & Process Updates

**Example:** Conduct cost-benefit analysis, then re-prioritize goals if needed. Houston Justice’s campaign to change the grand jury system began in 2014 with a drive to collect grand jury applications from a wide, diverse cross-section of neighborhoods within Harris County. It also lobbied the state legislature, and coordinated reform allies to do the same. In 2015, Texas Gov. Greg Abbott signed a bill eliminating the old process of grand jury selection that had relied on an opaque process known as “pick a pal,” that had effectively locked out diverse jury pools.

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## STEP 10

### Full Program Review

**Example:** Example: Houston Justice’s intersectional approach to reform (focusing on ‘pro-justice’ reforms in political, economic, and inmate justice arenas), leads the organization to add new campaigns once gains are achieved in respective pillars of their mission. For example, its support of a new District Attorney who was elected in Harris County resulted in the firing of prosecutors who had upheld the earlier inequitable practices that negatively impacted blacks, Latinos, and poor residents who encountered the criminal justice system. Ensuing campaigns on inmate registration, and reform projects in the county’s school system have been launched in 2017 and 2018.



“Under the new law, judges will pick grand jurors using the same random-selection system used to seat regular civil and criminal court juries. Prospective juror names are selected from voter rolls and driver license records, a larger pool that supporters of the change said will result in more diverse grand juries across the state.”

From the [Houston Chronicle](#).

## STEP 11

### Ensure Reform Efforts Are Time-bound

# How long does it take to achieve goals?

- Are established deadlines realistic?

**Example:** Harris County's election cycle in 2017 was met with targeted, timebound Houston Justice campaigns to support candidates and issues favorable to reform during election season. For example, in 2017, its [Political Justice campaign](#) mobilized targeted efforts to:

- Register voters in the county jail and their families
- Move the Sheriff's Department, County Clerk's Office, and County Tax-Assessor Collector's office to create an ongoing mechanism for voting around election time.
- Create and issue a voter's guide for each item on the ballot.



## RESOURCES

To get started developing a reform project on issues similar to those addressed by Houston Justice:

- Learn more about Houston Justice [here](#).
- Learn more [here](#) about the data that led advocates to form Houston Justice.
- Learn about Federal [lawsuits to force](#) Harris County to end its cash-bail requirement.
- Learn about efforts to push [for greater](#) public accountability at the Houston Independent School District.

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