



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

## REFORM TOOLKIT

S2 E4

# The Work of Closing a Notorious Jail

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A PODCAST BY

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MacArthur  
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PEABODY  
NOMINEE



# WHO

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**Close the Workhouse**

# WHO

**“We’re keeping people down there with rats, roaches. They got black mold ... And we spend \$16 million on it every year.”**

-Inez Bordeaux, organizer, Close the Workhouse



The Medium Security Institution, better known as the Workhouse, is a jail that has sat on the edge of St. Louis for over 50 years. Conditions at the Workhouse are notoriously bad for inmates, but they made national news in the summer of 2017.

Temperatures in St. Louis hit 108 degrees, and the Workhouse had no air conditioning. Inmates stuck their arms out of the windows and [screamed for help](#). [Organizers responded by protesting outside](#) the jail with pots and pans and signs that read “We treat animals better.”

In 2018, organizers came together again to form the [Close the Workhouse campaign](#). The community-driven effort calls for the immediate closure of the Workhouse and a [“significant decrease in the incarcerated population in St. Louis.”](#)

*Inez Bordeaux holds up a sign while doing street outreach in north St. Louis to raise awareness about Close the Workhouse. Photo by Carolina Hidalgo.*

# WHAT

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**A campaign to close the Medium  
Security Institution and invest in  
Black residents**

# WHAT

**“If you’re black in this city, you’ve either been to the Workhouse or you know someone that’s been to the Workhouse.”**

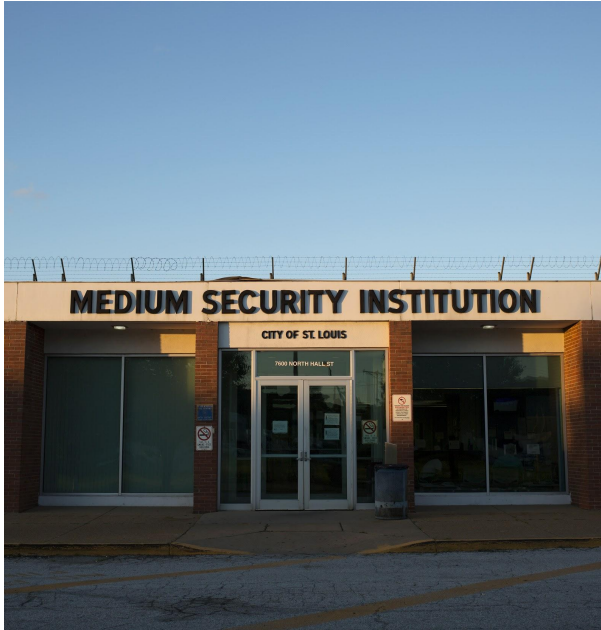
-Inez Bordeaux, organizer on Close the Workhouse campaign

The Close the Workhouse campaign is mostly led by black women from St. Louis. The campaign has over 25 organizational partners including national ones like [The Bail Project](#) and the [Arch City Defenders](#) as well as local groups like [Action St. Louis](#), an organizing collective led by black millennial organizers.

The campaign is abolitionist, meaning that its aim is to abolish all jails and prisons and instead invest in jobs, education, housing, and health care. Organizers say that the Workhouse doesn’t need better food or cleaner cells—it needs to not exist.

The campaign outlined its plans in [a 44-page report](#) and has the support of some legislators.

*The Medium Security Institution, more commonly known as the Workhouse, in St. Louis, Missouri. Photo by Carolina Hidalgo.*



# WHERE

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**St. Louis, Missouri**

# WHERE

**“When Michael Brown was murdered and the world turned its eyes to Ferguson, Missouri, we felt a deep call, a deep sense of connection, and a deep sense of grief that propelled us into saying he must be the last.”**

-Michelle Higgins, lead organizer for Close the Workhouse



The campaign to close the Workhouse is part of a larger push for criminal justice reform that the city has been experiencing since the death of [Michael Brown Jr.](#) in August 2014. The 18-year-old African-American man was shot by Darren Wilson, a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri.

The shooting sparked an uprising in Ferguson that quickly became a [modern-day civil rights movement](#) centered on race and criminal justice. In St. Louis, the issue goes far beyond policing.

While only 49% of St. Louisans are Black, more than 80% of people in the Workhouse are African-American. Most of them have not been convicted of a crime—they are simply waiting for their court date—and cannot afford bail.

*Michelle Higgins (right), Close the Workhouse’s lead organizer, preps for a monthly campaign meeting. Photo by Carolina Hidalgo.*



# WHEN

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**2018 - Present**



# WHEN

**“We’re not talking about another jail you should use. We’re talking about putting far, far, far fewer people in jail.”**

**- Blake Strode, executive director of ArchCity Defenders**



Close the Workhouse began in 2018, but efforts to reform the Workhouse and its predecessor stretch back decades.

The original Workhouse was a debtor’s prison next to a limestone quarry, where inmates spent their days hammering rocks. The city shut down that jail in in the 60s, and many hoped that new Workhouse would be a safer alternative.

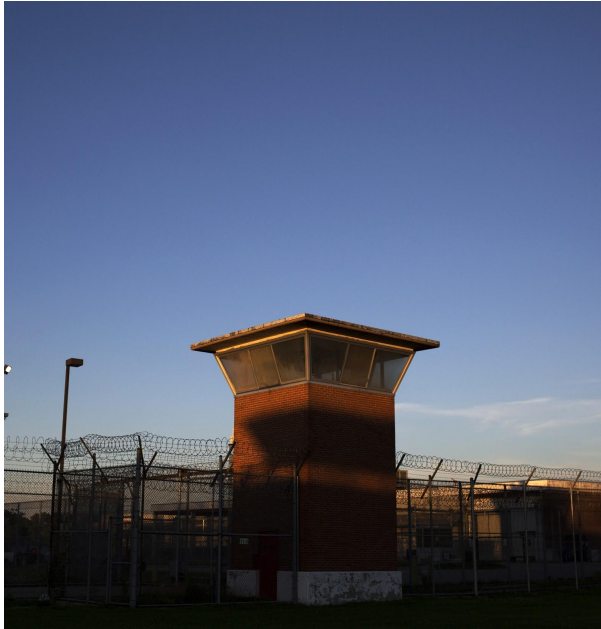
But the new jail continues to have problems. In 2009, the ACLU of Eastern Missouri [released a report](#) documenting physical and sexual abuse in the Workhouse and in 2013, two Workhouse guards pled guilty to forcing inmates into [“gladiator-style” combat](#). ArchCity Defenders is currently [suing the city](#) over conditions at the Workhouse.

*Brittany Ferrell, left, an activist, organizer and nurse, leads a panel discussion about medical care inside the Workhouse during a Close the Workhouse meeting. Photo by Carolina Hidalgo.*

# WHEN

**“It would be a travesty if I close our facilities in the city of St. Louis and these programs that have been pushing my numbers down go away.”**

- St. Louis Public Safety Director Jimmie Edwards



The Workhouse [can hold over 1,100 people](#) but there have been efforts in recent years to reduce the inmate population. The facility currently houses about 350 people. Last year, the [Mayor’s office brought in two fellows](#) to find ways to further advance criminal justice reform and find alternatives to cash bail.

Separately, nearby [St. Louis County](#) has also had success with reducing its jail population in recent years [through a MacArthur Foundation supported effort](#) to build pretrial diversion programs that connect nonviolent, low-risk individuals with services like substance abuse treatment and housing. A [University of Missouri-St. Louis analysis](#) of the initiative found that between 2016 and 2018, the length of stay for African-Americans in jail fell by 28 percent.

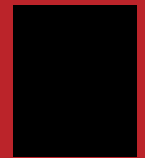
*The Medium Security Institution, more commonly known as the Workhouse, in St. Louis, Missouri.  
Photo by Carolina Hidalgo.*

# WHY

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**The Case of  
Inez Bordeaux**



# WHY

**“That 30 days in the Workhouse, that was the first time I ever thought that I’m not going to be OK ... That’s what the Workhouse does to people. It changes you.”**

-Inez Bordeaux, organizer on Close the Workhouse campaign

After escaping a violent marriage, Inez Bordeaux lost her job and started collecting unemployment benefits. She eventually found a steady job as a nurse, but it didn’t pay enough to cover the daycare bill. Without daycare, she couldn’t work, and she made \$57 a month too much to qualify for child care benefits in Missouri. So she kept collecting unemployment.

She eventually stopped, but was charged with a felony for “stealing” unemployment funds. Not knowing that she should have been charged with a misdemeanor, she took a plea deal that required her to pay back the money. But she couldn’t get a job with the charge on her record and wasn’t able to complete the payment plan.

She was arrested and sent to the Workhouse. She was labeled a suicide risk and placed in a cell where she sat by herself for three days.

*Inez Bordeaux. Photo by Carolina Hidalgo.*



# HOW

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**Bordeaux's Fight for Justice**

# HOW

**“It makes me feel strong. Like I’m part of an unstoppable force ... That’s how I feel about the Close the Workhouse campaign. Like we’re unstoppable.”**

-Inez Bordeaux, organizer on Close the Workhouse campaign

Bordeaux spent a month in the Workhouse. She says she remembers rats and mold and water pouring from the ceiling. She says she saw people picking roaches out of their food.

Bordeaux says she’s still traumatized by her time at the jail and cries every time she talks about the experience. But she says it’s not tears of sadness, but tears of anger.

She has put all of her anger into the Close the Workhouse campaign. Bordeaux says that the campaign has made her feel hopeful again, but she won’t feel secure until the jail finally closes.

*Inez Bordeaux hands out fliers about Close the Workhouse as part of the campaign’s outreach efforts in south St. Louis. Photo by Carolina Hidalgo.*



# RESOURCES

To get started developing a reform project like the Close the Workhouse campaign:

- [“Close the Workhouse: A Plan to Close the Workhouse & Promote a New Vision for St. Louis”](#)
- [“Is Prison Necessary?” in the New York Times Magazine](#)
- [MacArthur Safety and Justice Challenge site in St. Louis](#)
- [ArchCity Defenders](#)
- [The Plan to Close Rikers Island in NYC](#)

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