

Dialing In: Implementing the Riverside Jail Supportline
Starting Over, Inc./Riverside All of Us or None
Critical Action & Social Advocacy
Ada Cohen

Table of Contents

Introduction..... 3

Positionality 4

Methodology..... 5

Research (Literature Review + Findings) 10

Moving Forward..... 28

Conclusion..... 29

Sources Listed..... 30

Introduction:

When I called Lenora Taylor, I was met with a questioning, “Hello?”.

“Hi, This is Ada with Starting Over, Inc. Jordanna gave me your information and told me this would be a good time to talk. Is now a good time?” I responded.

“Oh, yes. Call me back in 15, I’m driving home.” I gave her twenty. I figured whenever I am arriving home it takes me an additional five minutes or so to put my stuff down, get organized, find a quiet room. When I picked up the phone to call Ms. Taylor back, she answered, “I’ve been waiting on you.” It was evident in her voice that she really meant fifteen. It was Ms. Taylor’s grandson’s birthday and she didn’t have a moment to waste. So waste time we didn’t. She jumped straight into the story of her son’s experience being incarcerated in a Riverside County Jail during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020. Ms. Taylor explained that her son contracted the virus and his body did not react well; he went into a coma for five days. And while his body was not reacting well to this virus, the county was not responding well to the pandemic either. The sheriff’s department sent him to the hospital just long enough for him to regain consciousness. Once he was out of the coma, they promptly returned him to behind bars, but without food or medication. Ms. Taylor, scared and unsure of how to help her son, began to research. Her searches lead her to contact Starting Over, Inc./Riverside All of Us or None, the organization that I worked with during the fall of 2020.

I found myself working with Starting Over, Inc., and interviewing Ms. Taylor via the Critical Action & Social Advocacy (CASA) program at Pitzer College, the school I currently attend. CASA is designed to establish a reciprocal relationship between the school and the community. Students are taught ethical research methods and critical community organizing skills. Community partners gain, to put it bluntly, free labor. CASA is a semester-long course

that typically involves students taking two courses in a satellite schoolhouse in Ontario, California with participants attending an internship of their choice a few times a week. However, with the outbreak of COVID-19, Pitzer's, and consequently CASA's, classes and internships were relegated to the digital realm. I signed up for the CASA program for the fall of 2020 unsure of how it would transition online, but it was the only opportunity that got me excited about "returning" to Pitzer in the Fall. This was an incredible choice for me as the group of peers were intelligent and supportive, my internship was informative and transformative, and my understanding of my role in this field of work deepened.

Positionality:

I was born and raised in Birmingham, Alabama, a statement that is commonly met with raised eyebrows, followed by a questioning, "What is it like there?". I used to be offended by this statement and sometimes still have to fight back an eye-roll. Birmingham has an infamous history for being the most segregated city in the south and therefore was a hub for the Civil Rights Movement. I am not too bothered by people's assumption that every white person in the south is racist; the city's history does lend itself towards this thought process and it only provides further motivation for Birmingham constituents to practice being actively anti-racist. What frustrates me is non-Southerner's assumptions that their cities are much better. Racism is prevalent throughout the United States, if not overtly like it is in the south, then in covert, systematic barriers like gentrification, educational opportunities, and of course, incarceration.

I did not have to deal with these barriers, however. I am white, cis-gendered, financially more than comfortable, and have been afforded the best education available in Alabama and now, in my opinion, attend one of the best colleges in the nation. I have also been critically

examining my privilege for many years. At times, I've questioned my role in social change work to the extent that it has interfered with my willingness to tackle certain projects. It is necessary for me to examine my role in each situation, understanding when to step forward and step back, but it should not prevent me from offering my time and skills in at least some capacity, as everybody has time and skills yet not enough is going towards this work. Learning about positionality in CASA and simultaneously working with Starting Over, Inc./Riverside All of Us or None allowed me to put together many pieces of the puzzle I had been missing. Vonya Quarles, executive director of Starting Over, Inc. told me, "Just fit in where you can", meaning more or less read the room (Quarles). Offer to do the work to lift up the voices and narratives that need to be heard. Sometimes it will be necessary for me to talk to those who my identity can reach, and at others, it will be necessary for me to help those to share stories I will never fully understand.

Methodology:

Starting Over, Inc. is Riverside County's preeminent re-entry service provider. As an organization that is built around the belief that every human is equal, Starting Over specializes in providing formerly incarcerated folks with transitional housing, health services, post-conviction relief, assistance re-entering society in all capacities, and much more. Starting Over, Inc. (SOI) is also the umbrella organization for the Riverside Chapter of All of Us or None (RAOUON), a volunteer corp made up of formerly incarcerated individuals and their allies. RAOUON's mission is to "fight all forms of discrimination, with a specific focus on ending the discrimination and human rights abuses faced by incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people", as per their website (riversideallofusornone.org).

Riverside County, along with San Bernardino county, comprises the “Inland Empire” (IE) an unofficial yet well-known term to encapsulate the land east of the metropolitan kingdom that is Los Angeles. The Inland Empire provides, for some, an escape from the daily grind of the urban lifestyle, and for others a residency out of necessity.

“Affordable and, for once, racially unrestricted housing has attracted working-class whites following the eastward migration of warehouses and trucking companies, as well as African-American families trying to save their kids from the carnage of LA’s gang wars. Chicanos, more than a third of the population, follow in the footsteps of their grandparents, who toiled in the Inland Empire’s orchards and railroad shops” (Davis).

While championed as the most racially diverse area in the state of California, the suburban lifestyle proves challenging due to what many call “a radical ‘jobs/housing imbalance’” (Davis). One local economist identified the issue as “the exporting [of] the coastal communities’ problems to the inland region” (Davis). In other words, while jobs remain at the ports of Los Angeles and the warehouses scattered throughout Southern California, affordable housing only exists hours away from these job sites. And don’t let comparison fool you, either. While housing in the IE is affordable compared to the famous properties of Orange County and Malibu, they are still unattainable relative to the rural south or midwestern planes. The incredulous California gas prices do not help to create livable circumstances for the primarily blue-collar population of the Inland Empire.

This diverse and hard-working demographic is who SOI and RAOUON serve. While separate entities, the two organizations work hand-in-hand with staff members of SOI as primary leaders of RAOUON. Vonya Quarles, Co-founder/executive director of Starting Over, Inc. and head of Riverside All of Us or None, informs the Riverside community of her experience transitioning out of incarceration via a letter on RAOUON’s website. Quarles eloquently puts,

“It felt like I was a leper who was sent away to live a life of barren shame after finally being released from the colony. I had to carry the trauma inside me, deep down where others might not see it, and I would never tell the good people that I worked with, worshipped with, or shared the bleachers with at our children’s’ games.”

The United State’s carceral system has this fascination with keeping people locked away forever. If not physically in cages, then mentally, emotionally, and fiscally. Incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people are the only ones who can truly and accurately speak to their experiences and that is why both organizations are directed by those most impacted by these oppressive systems.

In the same letter, Quarles expands,

““We are the experts of our experiences’ which meant that we must be self-determined as opposed to having others define who we are. This is what served to change the frontier. We FELT our experiences in a way that others without the same experiences could not. They could sympathize, but what good would that do us. They could empathize, but empathy alone would not free our people. It has taken action and will continue to take action.”

When looking at projects of rectifying our justice system through the lens of survivor leadership, it seems mindless to approach this work with any other framework.

Arguably, the fact that experiences and therefore knowledge are first-hand is one of the greatest assets to Starting Over, Inc. In meetings, system-impacted folks are looked up to, not in a demeaning manner to the allies in the room, but with a shared understanding that no literature can capture the lived experiences on the inside. Another incredible asset I have recognized in my short time with SOI/RAOUON is that the organization is almost a coalition of sorts in that they have established relationships with countless other organizations. They truly see their role as helping inmates and loved-ones of inmates in any manner they can. A large part of that mission is recognizing what services they *can’t* provide, and having other resources they feel comfortable reaching out to for those instances.

A need, pertaining to my project, is voice and this assumes many different kinds of voices. Voice heard by the community, voice heard by the government, voice heard from the inmates, and voiced communications between these aid organizations. Voices are heard through communication, and I am quickly learning communication requires organization.

My project for Starting Over, Inc. is establishing a means of communication and organizing the information collected via these means. More specifically, I am assisting SOI in setting up a supportline that inmates in Riverside County Jails can contact to report COVID-19 conditions with the end goal of advocating for early release due to health concerns in addition to implementing best practices regarding COVID safety. As of now, those who call will reach a voicemail box that employees and volunteers will transcribe, take note of, and then get back in touch with the caller as we begin working on their case. A long-term goal is to have a live line that volunteers will work so that inmates can speak with a person upon reaching out. We hope this accessible and streamlined means of communication also provides oversight to the Sheriff's department. The sheriff runs all county jails, but the elected nature of this position means that they do not have superiors checking to make sure the jails are running as they should or inmates are being treated properly. For this reason, the supportline will provide a voice to the inmates in two ways. The first is that SOI can begin advocating for and with the inmates to receive the immediate changes that individual needs. The second is providing a voice to inmates as a collective by creating a direct line from the inside to the outside so that the sheriff cannot get away as easily with poor conditions.

This project is being conducted via community-based research. The community provided me a list of projects they have identified as a need and asked their interns to choose which aligned with their interests and skill sets. This is a beautiful way to organize projects as it clearly

communicates what the community needs, but it also provides the interns/researchers with the agency to choose projects that align with their passions and abilities. After the interns voiced which projects we were most interested in, the staff at SOI then tailored the projects to fit our skill sets even further. For example, I informed SOI that I am a media studies major on the film track, so they included crafting a video as part of my internship to publicize the launch of this hotline.

I am conducting interviews with those who SOI have assisted. Not only am I recording audio to promote the incredible work of SOI and RAOUON in a short video, but I am also learning in-depth, case by case, what services SOI provides so that I can more effectively organize information and make templates for data collection. The more I understand the work that SOI does, the more I can tailor this project to the organization.

There are two theoretical frameworks that guide my research and ground my analysis: counter-narratives as part of critical race theory and the participatory defense model as a means of intervention to the criminal “justice” system. Counternarrative, as defined by Torie Weiston-Serdan, is “the postmodern idea of challenging metanarratives is essential. Individuals who exist as marginalized beings have a unique perspective that can be expressed only by them” (Weiston-Serdan, 13). The participatory defense model goes hand in hand with counternarrative as a tool for social change. Participatory defense focuses on individual cases as a means of dissecting and eventually dismantling the collective whole.

“With participatory defense, community groups join together with families, friends, neighbors, and allies of defendants to learn about the facts and procedures of individual cases, perform investigations, present biographical videos to prosecutors and judges, and pack courtrooms in support of defendants... At every step, they aim to connect the stories of individual defendants to larger systemic injustices, exposing the everyday violence of policing, prosecution, and incarceration. Although the goal of participatory defense at any one moment might be to help free an individual defendant, ultimately the aim of the

practice is nothing less than an end to mass incarceration through “chang[ing] the landscape of power . . . in the criminal justice system” (Simonson, 71).

Both counternarrative and participatory defense share the throughline of the power of the individual. Mass incarceration, structural racism and the prison industrial complex (PIC) are all massive systems in which greed and oppression are deeply routed. Furthermore, those who created these horrific systems are still benefiting from the reality they have created so they have no motivation to change it. With such extreme opposition, it can be difficult, intimidating, and overwhelming to find a place to start this battle. It seems the individual case is as good as any. Both counternarrative and participatory defense incorporate reaching and engaging with a wider audience from family members, community members, advocates, lawyers, and the general public. So while these models are, on the surface, helping one individual, it is in actuality spreading messages far beyond.

Research (Literature Review & Data Coding):

When I was coming up with a research project for my Research Methods course as part of the Critical Action & Social Advocacy course, I looked to my boss at Starting Over, Inc., Jordanna Wong-Omshehe. We spent the first few weeks of the CASA program taking a deep dive into what community-lead research means. The core pillar of this framework is conducting research that the community deems necessary, not what the outsider finds fascinating to satisfy their intellectual curiosity. I asked Jordanna what research would be beneficial for the organization, and she noted that it would be useful to have research that highlights how having a hotline is a resource that would be utilized by the Riverside community. This project was birthed from conversations between the ACLU and SOI troubleshooting many problems they saw their

clients needed help with, however we needed to collect data that would hopefully prove the constituents found the solution of a supportline as necessary.

While we were getting the project moving, I was nervous that I was researching a question I already knew the answer to and therefore was worried I would phrase questions or lead people into answering in ways they did not truly believe. Furthermore, until recently, I was nervous about selection bias in choosing who answers the questions and surveys sent out. However, I realized this frequent problem in other studies does not particularly apply to us. Jordanna recommended who I should get in touch with for the interviews as they are people SOI has closer relationships with, and the survey we sent out was a voluntary response, meaning those who responded did so because of their passion for either the supportline or SOI/RAOUON in general. I think, however, because we are trying to help the SOI community, neither of those factors matter as much. This resource is available to all, so if those who are particularly excited about this resource are the ones to answer, then those are the people who will likely use it. While it is important to question and critique the methods by which this data was collected, I do not think that has too much of an impact on the overall results.

My findings show that the implementation of a supportline would be beneficial for the Riverside community due to four reasons: the horridness of Sheriff Chad Bianco's abuse of power, the added hurdle of the COVID-19 pandemic in jails, the difficulties of communication between the inside and outside, and the lack of resources for navigating incarceration in the Inland Empire. These are the structural reasons why a supportline is needed. In addition, the Riverside community expressed their support for this project via interviews and surveys, and emphasized many of the reasons I have identified through their personal experiences.

The concept for the Riverside Jail Supportline was born out of a meeting between the California ACLU and Starting Over, Inc. Both organizations were worried about the lack of transparency from the Sheriff's department regarding COVID-19 conditions inside Riverside County jails. Sheriff Chad Bianco was sharing little to no information with the public or with inmate advocacy groups, and the few details he did share were not promising. The ACLU and Starting Over, Inc. work in tandem. The ACLU refers clients to Starting Over, Inc, as the work SOI does is incredibly comprehensive; including but not limited to petitions, protests, social media campaigns, helping the family of incarcerated peoples, the list goes on. Before COVID, the primary means by which inmates would get in touch with SOI was via family-members of incarcerated peoples. With visitations halted at the beginning of the pandemic, alternative strategies formed regarding how to get information about the inside to the outside. While this work is primarily project-based, some research is necessary to prove to the public and to funders that this effort is necessary to support not only inmates of Riverside County Jail but to the Riverside Community as a whole.

This research takes on two parts: proving the necessity of implementing this hotline in Riverside County specifically and finding other similar supportlines that have been successful. The former component of this mission proved much more feasible than the latter. Community-based hotlines are established and maintained in just that, the community, not in academic settings or for larger populations than one community. Because these are community-run hotlines, it is difficult to find evidence of other such projects in scholarly databases or general searches, considering search engines are more than likely taking my location into account and therefore burying distanced community organizations deep in the web. Furthermore, academic literature on jails is limited (Lippke). With that said, I did find a highly

successful hotline wittily named JAIL (The Jail Accountability & Information Line) that goes inside the Ottawa-Carleton Detention Centre in Ontario, Canada. I will provide a more in-depth analysis of the work JAIL has done after describing conditions as it pertains to Riverside.

Since 2015, the percentage of inmates in Riverside County Jails that are non-sentenced (have not been convicted of a crime but cannot afford bail) has been steadily increasing. As of 2016, 58% of the population was non-sentenced and as of 2020, 89% of the population had not been convicted, averaging out at 79% from 2011-2020 (California Sentencing Institute/Board of State and Community Corrections). In other words, a majority of the people experiencing the cruel and unusual punishment of Riverside County Jails have not even been convicted of the crime they supposedly committed. And even those who did commit crimes or have already been convicted should not be subject to such abuse either. In the words of Bryan Stevenson, founder of the Equal Justice Initiative, “Each of us is more than the worst thing we’ve done.”

Most people charged with a crime are given the option to post bail. However, this system favors those with the financial means to afford bail, further disenfranchising and criminalizing poverty. This violates our judicial system’s motto of “innocent until proven guilty”, providing the base for a strong case for the abolition of jails. Richard Lippke of Indiana University expertly advocates for jail abolition as a feasible and ethically necessary but not before highlighting the cruelty of our jailing system.

“The literature on jails that does exist uniformly paints a depressing picture of them: Jails are invariably described as squalid facilities that are poorly monitored for violence against or exploitation of inmates by other inmates, lacking in the means to maintain adequate hygiene, and offering poor diets, little privacy, and almost no programming of any kind” (Lippke, 110).

This description was written before the COVID-19 outbreak as the lack of adequate hygiene and privacy (in other words distance) are the two most immediate and obvious resources needed to

combat this virus. People currently incarcerated in Riverside County Jails are bringing the lack of hygiene products and lack of distancing to the forefront of the conversation. An easy solution, supported by Richard Lippke and advocated for by Starting Over Inc., among many, is to release those who are being held pre-trial. Lippke explains how bail, in theory, is used as an accountability tool to ensure that those charged of a crime show up to their court date, and yet there “is no guarantee” and is “hard to tell” whether this method works at all. Furthermore, we let the wealthier folks out with no concern. To me, this practice seems exceedingly discriminatory towards the poor.

We have covered the pre-trial folks, but the case for releasing those who have been convicted is nearly equally as strong, especially during COVID times. “Most jail inmates who are serving sentences have been convicted of one or more misdemeanors, or perhaps one or more low-level felonies” (Lippke, 117). Those charged with low-level misdemeanors and felonies are not a threat to the safety of the public. In fact, 90% of inmates in Riverside County Jails are there for property crimes, not violence (#ReleaseRiverside Toolkit). Naturally, other institutions would be put in place as oversight on those convicted, but these institutions do not need to include the dehumanizing act of caging people. Furthermore, jail inmates’ sentences are so short-- a year, a month, or mere weeks-- they appear superfluous. Being subjugated to jail’s subhuman conditions could instill anger and resentment in former inmates that were not present before incarceration. Countless accounts from former inmates support this statement, including a handful from my own research.

Literature provides arguments for dismantling jails in general, but research collected from local sources highlights why we need oversight in Riverside specifically. Sheriff Chad Bianco has been a part of the Riverside Sheriff’s department since 1993 and was elected Sheriff, Public

Administrator, and Coroner in 2018, holding all three positions to date. In April of 2020, Riverside All of Us or None officially launched the #BootBianco campaign, as a call to increase oversight and accountability of the sheriff's department. In California, Sheriffs are elected to their positions as Chief Law Enforcement Officers. They do not answer to anybody, and Bianco is aware of this as evident by his statement, "It's not your job to tell me what to do" (BootBianco.com). This has been the theme of Bianco's term: recognition and consequently abuse of power. RAOUON is aware that the structure of the sheriff's department is what allows him to control with a nasty grip. With this acknowledgement, RAOUON is not asking for the removal of just Bianco, but rather "to advocate for transparency, accountability and the defunding of the Riverside Sheriff's Office"(Facebook). In 2020, the sheriff's department requested an increase of \$70 million and Riverside County increased the sheriff department's budget by nearly \$17 million (Johnson, 2020/2021). This doesn't sit well with the mother-in-law of an incarcerated man who explained to me that it is "totally ridiculous" that the department receives the level of funding and yet they are

"not able to have their (inmate's) rights, and not being able to have what they need... cleanliness, telephone calls, visitation, a clean restroom, a clean room to sleep in. That is all uncalled for when they have the funds to have those facilities cleaned in a proper way and in a healthy environment for those people that are in there (Rona, Telephone Interview)."

It turns out she is not the only one who feels this way. Riverside County has has an infamous history when it comes to jail conditions; it has been entangled in a class-action lawsuit since 2013, when plaintiffs sued the county for cruel and unusual punishment under the 8th amendment, unequal protection of the law, and no due process under the fourteenth amendment (Gray v. County of Riverside). The Prison Law Office reopened this case in April of 2020 when

Bianco's lack of ability to plan and communicate plans with advocates and family members lead to deaths of prison staff and inmates. The original case summary states,

“On April 28, 2016, Judge Phillips granted final approval of the agreement. The Consent Decree included a Remedial Plan designed to meet the minimum level of health care necessary to comply with the Eighth and Fourteenth Amendments” (Gray v. County of Riverside).

This was just one out of nine requests that were settled in 2015. It's concerning that it took a class-action lawsuit to grant Riverside County Jail inmates the *minimum* level of health care necessary to comply with the Eighth and Fourteenth Amendments. This was five years before the COVID-19 outbreak. In April of 2020, the lawsuit was updated as the plaintiffs did not feel that this agreement was being upheld amidst the pandemic. The Court agreed with the motion, noting:

“At the hearing, Defendant did not have information regarding conditions in the existing county jail facilities, insisted that moving prisoners to a newly completed, empty jail in Indio was not feasible, and admitted that it had not researched alternative housing options such as recreation centers, halfway houses, and hotels. Rather than having created a plan to safeguard those most vulnerable to the COVID-19 virus, Defendant conceded that it has not conducted an analysis of its own records to identify particularly vulnerable prisoners. It also has not conducted an analysis of its jail population to determine whether there are any low-level offenders who might be eligible for early release” (Gray v. County of Riverside).

The Defendant is Sheriff Chad Bianco. This testimony alone portrays a blatant disregard for not only the humanization and dignity of inmates but also of their survival.

This is further proven by inconsistencies between reports from inmates and statements made by Sheriff Bianco. One inmate reported to their wife that they were “filling empty shampoo bottles with the cleaners used by trustees for general cleaning... in an attempt to disinfect their bunks” (Damien, C. 2020, April 26). At the same time, Bianco was making public statements that “the jails are being cleaned multiple times per day and inmates are being

provided with ample cleaning supplies and personal hygiene items” (Damien, S. 2020 April 18). These reports are not in alignment, and Bianco’s credibility is diminished by his unwillingness to communicate with any community advocacy group, media outlet, or family members regarding his pandemic safety plan. In early April, Bianco claimed, "If we produce a written plan, that doesn’t account for anomalies. We have an end goal to ensure everyone is safe; how we get there will change day-to-day” (Damien, C. 2020 April 11). This is concerning on many levels, but the idea that the sheriff doesn’t even believe in creating a written plan because it “doesn’t account for anomalies” is worrying. It goes without saying that this virus is unpredictable, yet there are definitive steps that can be taken to lower the number of “anomalies” and concrete actions that can be established in the case of unexpected outbreaks. One woman I spoke with shared that showers and toilets were broken, increasing lines to use necessary items and decreasing accessibility to clean appliances (Rona, Telephone Interview).

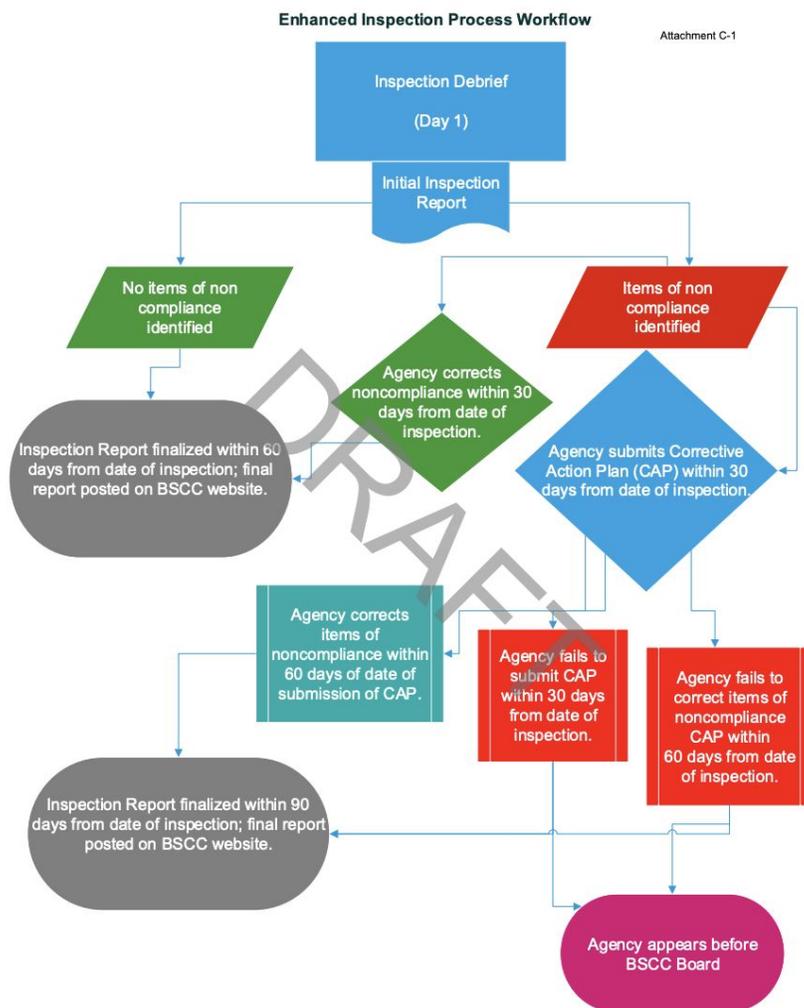
Sara Norman, the Prison Law Office attorney that is representing the plaintiffs in the lawsuit against the county unearthed extremely concerning news.

“She [Norman] discovered the county's "Pandemic Response Plan," the document submitted by county counsel that Bianco says isn't actually a plan, wasn't implemented until April 8 — six days after two deputies died from the illness and two days after Norman requested it” (Damien, C. 2020 April 11).

Sheriff Bianco’s is displaying a blatant disregard for human life and seemingly no one is holding him accountable for his actions. Being charged of a property crime should not be a death sentence and due to population rates inside COVID infested jails, death and danger are increasingly present. Early release would not only relieve many inmates and their families of the constant worry of catching COVID, but would also allow for social distancing practices to be put in place more effectively. Bianco is not a fan of this plan claiming, "The Prison Law Office is abusing the judicial system to order the release of inmates. We’re not going to do

it"(BootBianco.com). I would hardly consider calling for the release of those who are not a threat to society in order to save lives an “abuse of the criminal justice system”. All men, women, and children inside these facilities are under the care of Bianco and while he is aware of the power he has, he seems to be unaware of the responsibility in his hands for the care of all 3,800 inmates in Riverside County Jails.

The Board of State and Community Corrections (BSCC) is the only agency that (in theory) provides oversight of the sheriff’s department. Their roles include setting facility standards, setting training guidelines, administering grants to different counties, and jail inspections. The jails, however, are told ahead of time of their inspection date so they have time to prepare and erase evidence of the most horrific conditions. Furthermore, if it is found that a county is not meeting minimum facility requirements, they do not inform the public immediately but rather report it in a document that is released every two years despite conducting reviews biannually. Perhaps worst of all, the BSCC has no means to enforce changes in management even if they did report a facility violation. The most they can require is for the sheriff to appear before the Board if they do not comply with changes within 90 days, but they cannot enforce any of their critiques or recommendations. Attached is a flow chart provided by SOI that depicts the process of the BSCC’s inspections.



As you can see here, the flowchart ends at “Agency appears before the BSCC Board” with no follow-up to that meeting or rectifications required if the changes are still not up to standards. Perhaps an explanation for this dilemma is because the majority of BSCC board members are not interested in adjusting conditions for those inside. Avalon Edwards, Public Policy Fellow at Starting Over, explained the makeup of the board. It’s comprised of,

“Chiefs of Probation, the Secretary of California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR), Sheriffs, Chiefs of Police, and former judges. Of the 13 members, 2 are criminal justice reform advocates, and 1 is formerly incarcerated. This Board composition means that they don’t really see themselves as an *oversight* agency as much as collaborators and partners of county sheriffs and probation.”

While SOI sees the classification of collaborators as a negative, the BSCC appears to assume this title from a positive point of view. They explain their role on their website, stating, “we collaborate with local law enforcement agencies to maintain and enhance the safety and security of local adult and juvenile detention facilities” (California BSCC). The question remains-- who are they enhancing the safety and security for? The inmates or their wallets?

In September of 2020, 24 advocacy groups including Starting Over, Inc. and the California ACLU, banded together to send a letter to the BSCC, demanding they implement structurally sound methods of addressing abuses in California’s correctional facilities. The letter states

“Our long-standing concerns have intensified as recent news highlighted the horrific conditions maintained under BSCC’s watch. Last November, The Sacramento Bee and ProPublica reported on BSCC’s failure to address neglect in these facilities or even adequately document the findings by agency field inspectors. However, the BSCC has yet to take action on these urgent issues. This agency needs to move swiftly to address abuse and neglect within local adult and juvenile facilities.”

The letter continues to elaborate upon specific points of improvement including but not limited to improving their inspection process and establishing means of transparency when disseminating the information collected from these inspections (Strengthening Facilities Inspection Process by Board of State and Community Corrections). The fact that twenty-four prominent advocacy groups signed off on these demands highlights the necessity to alter or add oversight on those who run California’s jails and prisons.

Despite being in different countries the mission of JAIL (Jail Accountability and Information Line) for the Ottawa Corrections and Detention Center (OCDC) in Ontario, Canada seems to have found a method of oversight that works well. JAIL very closely mirrors that of the Riverside County Jail Supportline. JAIL was established in December of 2018 and has been open for calls ever since, totaling 2,390 calls taken. Their hotline has two main aims:

- 1) Accountability (holding OCDC staff and management accountable for the treatment of incarcerated individuals by tracking and resolving human rights violations within the jail); and
- 2) Information (providing information to people who are incarcerated at OCDC about their rights and community resources available to them upon re-entry into the community). (Benslimane et. al, 123)

While we do not have an exact mission statement at the moment, these are the two goals of the Riverside hotline.

Furthermore, the parent organization, Criminalization and Punishment Education Project (CPEP), shares the same guiding principles as Starting Over, Inc. (SOI). The first being “prisoners or former prisoners know best the resources available to prisoners to address these needs. They also know the risks and potential consequences associated with certain interventions” (Benslimane et. al, 122). In other words, you must have incarcerated, formerly incarcerated, and system-impacted folks leading the work that is being conducted. The second principle that is critical to both CPEP and SOI that they conduct all work with an abolitionist framework. This means that both organizations understand that abolition is a long-term goal, but everything we do should center that mission. In the meantime, however, we must provide aid to those who are currently harmed by our correctional systems. We keep abolition in mind by doing everything in our power to not increase funding for jails and prisons, as expansion is not the solution to inmates problems. We also make it clear that while we are attempting to better quality of life inside, no reform will be able to make conditions inside humane. CPEP explains,

“The eradication of imprisonment will require profound societal changes to end inequality and oppression, and the vast expansion of prevention, diversion, decarceration, and community-driven accountability measures. In the meantime, human beings that are imprisoned and those who work as staff in sites of confinement—people who are exposed to psychological and physical harm, some of whom may even lose their lives—cannot wait. Thus, abolition informs our organizing strategy and serves as a long-term goal,⁷³ as is evident in our campaign against building a new, bigger jail in our city. However, we

also fight for interim or transitional reforms to alleviate the suffering that imprisonment engenders” (Benslimane et. al, 120).

Due to JAIL’s mission and CPEP’s orientation as a parent organization, I feel comfortable estimating the success of Riverside Jail Hotline based on the success of JAIL. JAIL reported that they received 12 phone calls within the first day of opening the line (note: the line is only open 3 hours a day), proving the intense need for this resource (Benslimane et. al, 120). I also feel comfortable entertaining and potentially applying methodology and frameworks recommended by JAIL. For example, they lay out their six-step plan which is as follows: “establishing rapport (stage one), defining problems (stage two), exploring available resources (stage three), developing plans of action (stage four), implementing the plans of action (stage five), and assessing results (stage six)” (Benslimane et. al, 123). I appreciate an emphasis on steps that happen before and after the implementation of actions for change, starting with establishing rapport and ending with assessing results.

Finally, reading about JAIL and CPEP highlighted the notion that many of these issues that we are trying to fight within the Riverside County Jail system are the same issues CPEP is working to end in Ontario, Canada. I believe this realization doesn’t negate the need for a hotline in Riverside specifically, but rather highlights the need in that these issues are systemic in nature and therefore non negotiably present within Riverside County Jails. For example, JAIL mentioned their recognition that phone calls are the one reliable way to get in touch with the outside, yet they can be expensive. They spoke of risk aversion, the trend that law enforcement “have been increasingly reluctant to release many individuals facing charges, apparently out of fear that they will be blamed if the accused does something harmful while out of custody” (Benslimane et. al, 114). They speak of the squalid conditions found inside jails and the lack of cleaning supplies to remedy these conditions. All of these problems--lack of communication with

the outside, being caged pre-trial, and unsanitary conditions-- are heightened in COVID times. The mother of a man currently incarcerated in a Riverside County Jail spoke of the inmate's reduced phone time per week. These trends are supported by data already found in this paper. Lippke spoke of the immorality of holding folks charged but not convicted of a crime, and Norman elaborated on how this increases likelihood of catching the virus. A Riverside County Jail inmate spoke to his wife about filling shampoo bottles with co-opted cleaning supplies.

I struggled to find scholarly articles regarding jail hotlines, jail oversight, or even communication between the inside and outside, yet I did not struggle to find articles and research that exemplifies the need for a hotline for Riverside County Jails and a few examples of how useful, needed, and successful this resource could be. I firmly believe that jail abolition would be the best means to expel COVID-19 in jails, however, since this is a long-term goal, we must focus on the reality of what so many incarcerated people are experiencing today. Receiving a 30 day sentence in a jail should not be a potential death sentence.

The only way to truly understand what occurs inside Riverside County Jail walls is by hearing from those on the inside, yet this is made extremely difficult. Inmates have the option to call, email, or write letters to the outside. While this sounds like more than enough options, jail and prison staff are aware of the power of communication and therefore do not make efforts to make these options available. One concerned family member of a Riverside inmate informed me that her son-in-law was only receiving thirty minutes out of his cell a day. Not only was this detrimental to all inmates mental and physical well-being, but it also contributed to their inability to make phone calls. Additionally, at this time there was only one working phone, making the possibility of getting in a 10 minute phone call a week extremely unlikely. Inmates are watched over by guards during their phone calls, making it extremely difficult to tell friends and families

the issues of their confinement without fear of retaliation. But even if you do make it to the front of the phone line and are able to dial home, for many inmates it's a possibility that their family can't pick up because it costs money to accept calls inside jails, 0.25 cents a minute, making the cost of even a 10 minute phone call enough to feed your child (NCIC Inmate Communications).

Despite the fact that writing a letter does not require leaving your cell, acquiring stamps does. Riverside County Jails consider sending stamps and envelopes in letters "contraband", leaving inmates with the only option to buy stamps from the commissary (Riverside County Sheriff's Department). Once again, friends and family on the outside have to transfer funds into inmate's commissaries, privileging those with the means and connections to do so.

While having a supportline in no way will eliminate the innumerable barriers of communication between the outside and inside, it will assist by streamlining means of communication. Many Riverside All of Us or None members express not knowing where to turn when searching for assistance regarding navigating the carceral system. The hope is that if inmates and their loved ones are aware of a singular, all encompassing resource to turn to, that this will ease the burden of incarceration just a little by eliminating the research necessary to find resources that will help.

Finding resources is a particularly difficult challenge for those in counties surrounding Los Angeles County. Riverside County is home to 2.47 million people, yet receives far less attention in the shadows of its big sibling LA county, home to 10.04 million. With this said, Riverside County alone has a larger population than 16 states in the USA. Vonya Quarles, of Starting Over, Inc. mentioned the chronic lack of resources available to Riverside County (Quarles, V. *Re-creating our community spaces*). I asked Tessa Hicks-Peterson of the Critical Action & Social Advocacy program at Pitzer College to elaborate on Vonya's comment. She

explained that when non-profits and other aid organizations are figuring out where to establish themselves, they are drawn to the cities and the urban areas, such as Los Angeles while the outskirts of LA are left behind. This means that there are many criminal justice resources available in Los Angeles County, but not the Inland Empire. This was confirmed when speaking with Yvonne Rona, a client of Starting Over, Inc./Riverside All of Us or None. She told me how she was shocked when she heard back from RAOUON because she was expecting them to not be able to help her because her family member was in a Riverside jail, not Los Angeles. Starting Over, Inc. is the perfect group to host this supportline as well because it acts as a coalition of sorts, partnering with the other aid groups in Riverside.

In one of our intern meetings, I asked Jordanna and Avalon if we could learn of the groups SOI/RAOUON was affiliated with. We all felt as if there were names of organizations floating around that were important to know, yet we could not keep all of them straight! Jordanna sent us an email after the meeting with *eleven* organizations attached. There were groups ranging from mentorship organizations to mutual aid to policy and everything in between. In the words of one woman who RAOUON has helped, “If All of Us or None can’t do it, they know someone who can.” They don’t see others groups that overlap in their line of work as enemies, but rather allies. No two organizations do the same thing; it’s a venn diagram of aid, yet it is still not enough. Furthermore, knowing how to find these organizations is an added hurdle. If we have one well-known resource (a supportline) that can refer people to other organizations that can help them, it opens a world of possibilities. Most people do not know how to find all of these groups without a referral, myself included. I conducted an experiment in which I searched keywords and phrases that friends and family members of incarcerated folks might type in, and none of these groups that provide incredible services came up-- only a few law offices were

easily found. But legal aid isn't cheap, and this is all assuming people searching for these services even have access to the internet. Wifi is expensive. Riverside County Public libraries are limiting computer usage to one hour per one guest a day and three remain closed completely (Limited Service FAQ). All of these reasons lend themselves towards rationalizing a well-known, well publicized phone number as a means of getting in touch with family members of those incarcerated in Riverside.

Thus far, I have spoken to why a supportline is needed due to the structure of the Sheriff's position, the difficulties of navigating COVID-19 behind bars, the barriers of communication from the inside and outside, and the lack of resources and difficulty accessing them in Riverside. But above all of this, Riverside communicated directly that a supportline would indeed be beneficial for the community. I conducted two interviews with family members of men incarcerated in Riverside County Jails and I created a survey that was posted on Starting Over, Inc.'s and Riverside All of Us or None's social media accounts. These surveys received 13 responses total. The survey was short with only 6 questions. The questions included:

1. Do you live in Riverside County? (Yes or No)
2. What is your relationship to Starting Over, Inc./Riverside All of Us or None (i.e. member, recipient of org services, social media follower, etc.)? (short answer response)
3. Are you or is someone you know impacted by incarceration? (Options included...)
 - a. No
 - b. Yes- I am formerly incarcerated
 - c. Yes- Someone close to me is currently incarcerated
 - d. Yes- Someone close to me is formerly incarcerated
 - e. Other (type in your own answer)
4. Would having a supportline be beneficial to you in navigating the process of release and reentry? Explain your answer in as much or as little detail as you'd like. (long answer response)
5. If you have sought support before while navigating the jail system, what was your experience like finding a community based group or organization that assisted you? (long answer response)
6. Is there anything else you would like to share with SOI/RAOUON regarding support for people navigating release and reentry? (long answer response)

Of those who responded, 7 lived within Riverside County and 6 did not. 3 people identified as members of Riverside All of Us or None, and 4 reported they are social media followers. I could not ask clarifying questions regarding answers as this survey was anonymous, meaning I did not ask any identifying questions nor were email addresses, phone numbers, or any other personal information collected. 5 are formerly incarcerated and 6 have a loved one currently incarcerated. 1 person reported that someone close to them is formerly incarcerated and the last respondent chose the “Other” option, reporting that they are formerly incarcerated, have a loved one formerly incarcerated, and have a loved one currently incarcerated.

Of the 15 people in total who answered the question “Would a supportline be beneficial to you in navigating the carceral system?”, only one responded with a negative response. With this said, the one respondent who wasn’t as enthused about the supportline also seemed to have been defeated by the system. One person’s response to the fourth question was very thorough, confirming the reality that too many face when navigating incarceration. In response to “Would a supportline be beneficial to you?” they wrote,

“Yes, when I was unjustly and over prosecuted, I thought my future was over. I knew I could get a 17b motion [motion to change a felony to a misdemeanor], however, I had to do all the research myself on how to do it. I went to the public defender's office, but they were overwhelmed with cases. Only one person was assigned to the expungement unit. I turned to the county law library. After learning how to do it, I still had the obstacle of paying my fines. I could not get hired anywhere that I was qualified for because of my felony convictions. I wished there was someone that could help me find jobs that I was qualified for and that hired felons.”

This person confirmed that they had difficulty finding aid while incarcerated, taking it upon themselves to learn the law. While this is incredibly admirable and we must congratulate this person on taking matters into their own hands when facing down a long tunnel, it should not be the norm. A number of barriers could inhibit somebody else from taking a similar path including

but not limited to illiteracy, not knowing options, or simply being turned down so many times they lose hope. And even with the knowledge this particular person equipped themselves with, they still have difficulty finding employment once a company runs their background check and with paying off fines (Riverside All of Us or None recently had a guest speaker at a monthly meeting to help members address the issue of employment after incarceration). Another person responded, “a support line in general would be helpful because navigating throughout incarceration is extremely difficult” capitalizing the notion that figuring out where to turn is extremely difficult without the help of someone else who is knowledgeable on the system. Someone else informed us, “Before my brother is released a supportline would be greatly beneficial,” implying that the need is imminent for this respondent.

Moving Forward:

This project has gone through many phases. When I began working with SOI in August, we were working with the concept of a hotline and nothing more. I didn't know if we were trying to focus on one jail in Riverside or all of them, if we were trying to have a live line (a human pick up when the phone rang) or work with a message machine, if we were trying to collect calls from inside the jails or outside. All of these were questions we figured out as we assessed our capacity and resources. In an ideal world, we would establish a hotline that inmates can call and speak with a human. This requires two critical components: money to call inside jails and people to staff a hotline. For these reasons, having a live hotline is a future goal that we can re-center after an unknown amount of time working with the system we currently have in place. As a reminder, at the moment, people on the outside can call our number, leave a message, and expect a return call (or email/letter) with tangible steps to support their loved one. We have created an

instruction manual so that whoever comes to work on the supportline can pick up the basics quickly and continue on to improve the services.

Conclusion:

In this paper, I have identified why there is a need for a jail supportline in Riverside county. I began by explaining how I found myself having the great fortune to work with Starting Over, Inc. via the Critical Action & Social Advocacy program at Pitzer College. I explained my own positionality and how I was showing up and approaching the work. We established methodologies and frameworks including community-based research, counternarrative, and participatory defense. I then walked through the research I conducted, which included culminating literature that already exists as well as collecting new data from the Riverside community. The literature included examining jail conditions and arguments for closures regardless of a pandemic. We explored conditions inside Riverside County Jails. We looked at the problematic structure of the sheriff department and how we can increase oversight and accountability. Finally, I provided an example of a jail supportline that is successful in its respective community. The data collected from Riverside County demonstrates an overwhelming amount of support for implementing this resource. Some respondents elaborated on the confusion while navigating incarceration in general while others highlighted the need for additional resources immediately. Navigating incarceration on the inside and assisting from the outside is emotionally and mentally grueling work. Family members commonly do not know how or even where their loved ones are. Incarceration is not the answer to the problems in our society and the more we collect and hear the stories of those affected by this system, the more apparent this becomes. With this said, abolition will not happen overnight and therefore we need

to provide support for those who will experience the cruelties of jailing. The Riverside Jail Supportline is just one of many steps we can take to alleviate some of this pain.

Sources Listed:

Benslimane, Souheil; Speight, Sarah; Piché, Justin; and Doyle, Aaron. "The Jail Accountability & Information Line: Early Reflections on Praxis." *Journal of Law and Social Policy* 33. (2020): 111-133 <https://digitalcommons.osgoode.yorku.ca/jlsp/vol33/iss1/6>

Board of State and Community Corrections Jail Profile Survey: Jail Population Trends through Q2 2020 (pp. 1-121, Rep.). (n.d.). Board of State and Community Corrections. doi:http://www.bscc.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/Jail-Pop-Trends-Through-Q2-2020.pdf?fbclid=IwAR35n_M0Fg53BP8umJibv8S1gKKkzrpie36VFVGq6qsRXcbYqZaeyE5gmRQ

Boot Bianco. (n.d.). Retrieved November 28, 2020, from <https://www.bootbianco.com/boot-bianco>

California, BSCC. (2020). Facilities Standards & Operations (FSO). Retrieved October, 2020, from http://www.bscc.ca.gov/s_facilitiesstandardsoperations/

California Sentencing Institute: Riverside County. (n.d.). Retrieved October, 2020, from <http://casi.cjci.org/Adult/Riverside>

COVID-19 Preparedness Information - CDCR. (2020, October 19). Retrieved October 23, 2020, from <https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/covid19/>

Damien, C. (2020, April 11). Coronavirus: Judge asked to make Riverside County Sheriff's Dept. share plan to curb virus in jails. Retrieved October, 2020, from https://www.desertsun.com/story/news/crime_courts/2020/04/10/coronavirus-judge-asked-make-sheriffs-department-share-its-plan-protect-inmates/2973669001/

Damien, C. (2020, April 26). Stuck inside: Inmates and their families worry about coronavirus in the county's jails. Retrieved October 23, 2020, from https://www.desertsun.com/in-depth/news/crime_courts/2020/04/23/rate-coronavirus-riverside-countys-jails-has-families-concerned/5163491002/

Damien, S. (2020, April 18). 'Extremely reckless': Sheriff Bianco criticizes bail reduction order as inmate, employee coronavirus cases climb. Retrieved October 23, 2020, from https://www.desertsun.com/story/news/crime_courts/2020/04/17/coronavirus-riverside-county-sheriff-criticizes-bail-reduction-order/5157466002/

Davis, M. (2015, June 29). 'The Inland Empire'. Retrieved October 9, 2020, from <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/inland-empire/>

Gray v. County of Riverside, University of Michigan Law School Civil Rights Litigation Clearinghouse (5:13-cv-00444 (C.D. Cal.))

Information about SB hotline and BSCC [E-mail to A. Cohen; A. Edwards]. (2020, October 19).

Initiative, P. (n.d.). Number of people in jail, by offense type, conviction... Retrieved October 23, 2020, from https://www.prisonpolicy.org/graphs/pie2020_jail_detail.html

Johnson, G. A. (2020/2021). *Fiscal Year 2020/2021 Adopted Budget* (Vol. 1, pp. 1-470) (United States, County of Riverside, County Executive). California.

Lenora Taylor [Telephone interview]. (2020, October 1).

LIMITED SERVICE. (n.d.). Retrieved December 04, 2020, from <http://www.rivlib.net/website/limited-service-faqs--7093>

Lippke, R., & Weber, M. (2018). The Case Against Jails. In 1003498876 773678706 M. Gardner (Ed.), *The Ethics of Policing and Imprisonment* (pp. 63-86). Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. doi:<https://doi-org.ccl.idm.oclc.org/10.1007/978-3-319-97770-6>

NCIC Inmate Communications. "NCIC Inmate Phone Calls." *Riverside County Jail*, <https://www.ncic.ca/collect-calls/riverside-collect-calls>. Accessed November 2020.

Quarles, V. (2020, October 27). *Re-creating our community spaces: Transitional housing and community gardens*. Speech presented at CASA 101.

#ReleaseRiverside and #BootBianco Toolkit [Pamphlet]. Corona, CA.

Riverside All of Us or None. (n.d.). Retrieved October 9, 2020, from <https://riversideallofusornone.org/>

Riverside County Jails. (2020, April 8). Pandemic Response Plan County Filing 20200420. Retrieved October, 2020, from <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/6839378-PandemicResponsePlan-CountyFiling-20200420.html>

Riverside County Jails. (2020, April 8). Pandemic Response Plan County Filing 20200420. Retrieved October, 2020, from <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/6839378-PandemicResponsePlan-CountyFiling-20200420.html>

Riverside County Sheriff's Department. "Inmate Mail Policy." <https://ca-riversidesheriff-hidden.civicplus.com/221/Inmate-Mail-Policy>.

Simonson, J. (2019). The Place of "The People" in Criminal Procedure. *Columbia Law Review*, 119(1), 249-308. doi:<https://www.jstor.org/stable/26559622?seq=1>

Speight, S., Benslimane, S., Doyle, A., & Piché, J. (2020). *Quarterly Report #3* (Rep. No. Q3). Ontario, Canada: Criminalization and Punishment Education Project.
doi:http://cp-ep.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Q3-Report_JAIL-Hotline_final.pdf

Starting Over, Inc. (n.d.). Retrieved October 9, 2020, from
<http://startingoverinc.net/our-stories.html>

(2020, September 2). Strengthening Facilities Inspection Process by Board of State and Community Corrections [Letter to Board of State and Community Corrections].

Weiston-Serdan, T. (2017). Clearing the Air and Purifying the Water. In *Critical Mentoring: A Practical Guide*. Stylus Publishing, LLC.

Yvonne Rona [Telephone interview]. (2020, October 21).

-