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A Life Changing Therapeutic Community

Voices of Smart Justice



2015 Justice Summit Opening Session

The first [Justice Summit](#) of 2015 took place in January in beautiful Sarasota, Florida. With more than 200 policymakers in attendance and an agenda packed with expert speakers on a wide variety of topics, the pace was electric with networking and very real conversations about change.

Some of the highlights included meaningful discussions on:

- **Substance abuse.** Around 80% of all crimes have a drug element to them. Either the crime involved drugs, was committed to obtain drugs, or was committed while under the influence of drugs.
- **Juvenile Justice.** Youthful offenders are the biggest breeding ground for the

[November 2015
Justice Summit](#)



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adult prison population.

- **Diversion.** Many non-violent offenders can fulfill a sentence through programs designed to ensure they will not re-offend.
- **Mental and Behavioral Issues.** In an effort to decriminalize mental illness, we must all come together to get support for making treatment a priority with funders.

In addition, the guest speakers were riveting. [Sheriff Susan Pamerleau's](#) background is quite unique; she was a victim of domestic violence during an 8-year marriage. In turn, she has made it her mission in Bexar County, Texas to crack down on the family violence issues and employ smart justice initiatives to combat such experiences as her own.

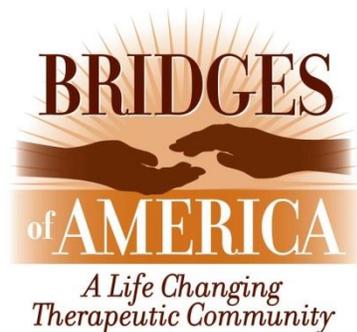
A return speaker, Jay Neal is a former Georgia legislator and the Executive Director of the [Office of Transition, Support, and Re-Entry](#). Also an ordained minister, Rev. Neal is a strong proponent of faith-based initiatives.

And [Timothy Cannon](#), Florida DOC Deputy Secretary of Institutions, delivered a riveting message of support for smart justice initiatives and in working together to achieve shared goals.

I had the honor of [opening the conference](#) with an overview of how I thought we could best make use of our time together. I challenged the group to come to the table not just for discussions, but to stay at the table until we could hammer out initiatives that will result in significant improvements to our systems and outcomes. I'm very encouraged by the mix of policymakers, providers and other professionals who find value in attending these events produced by the [Florida Smart Justice Alliance](#). These are people who are committed to addressing the issues that will keep Florida safer and save taxpayer money.

As some of you may be aware, there have been many unfavorable articles concerning the Florida Department of Corrections recently in

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local and statewide media. They are listed at the end of this column. Our next Summit is going to be in late November 2015, again in Sarasota. You can learn more about Justice Summit V [here](#). DOC Secretary Julie Jones has committed to participate, as have numerous legislators and policymakers. I urge you to make plans now to attend. All stakeholders - inmates, their families, corrections workers, employers in community release, providers across the board of substance abuse and mental illness and others - need a voice. If there was ever a time to stand up and be heard, it is now. We need to talk about how we can partner and support the DOC to help come up with solutions to the growing problems they face.

To realize real and meaningful change, we all have to start from a place of common ground and go from there ... recognizing that we all have our own filters. As we move through this year's legislative session and prepare for the next [Summit](#), let's keep the momentum going. Let's stay at the table and work for solutions.

Sincerely,


Ari Costantino Brown
President and CEO

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Bridges of America is a nonprofit organization founded in 1972 with the mission of changing criminal behavior through a practical, comprehensive approach that includes intensive substance-abuse counseling, parenting classes and work-release programs. Bridges' core value is a belief that people can change.