Every year, about 15,000 people are booked into the Allegheny County Jail (ACJ). These individuals are assessed to determine the level of security risk they pose while in custody.[1] The result is a classification level — ranging from minimum to maximum — that is used by the jail to make decisions about housing and eligibility for programming.

1 Classification assessment differs from risk assessments used in Pretrial Services and Adult Probation. Pretrial Services assesses for the risk that a defendant will fail to appear for court and the likelihood that he or she will commit a new crime during the pretrial period. Adult Probation uses a locally validated proxy to determine risk of re-offending, as well as a risk/needs assessment for supervision planning.

Inmate classification systems are required by the Pennsylvania Code and are an important part of jail operations. Beginning in the fall of 2014, the ACJ planned a review of its classification system to improve the accuracy and objectivity of this process. It has now been a little over a year since the implementation of the new evidence-based system. What follows in this report is a description of the process used to develop a new classification system, a review of the changes resulting from the updated system, and how the improved system has supported jail operations.

CLASSIFICATION IN THE ALLEGHENY COUNTY JAIL

Classification Supervisor Sergeant Hermita Thomas, a veteran officer at the ACJ, has seen her fair share of changes since 1994. She initially came on as a part of the transition team from the old jail to the current facility, and spent years working as a Sergeant at the employee entrance. From early on she wanted to "learn all aspects of the jail," and when she heard about changes being made to the classification system, she knew that she wanted to be a part of the change.

> **"Classification is the brain of the jail."**
>
> — *LaToya Warren, ACJ Chief Deputy Warden*

Sitting in her office on the ACJ's ground floor, Sergeant Thomas describes the current classification process. Following arraignment, everyone is processed into the facility by an intake officer and then given a medical assessment. From there, they are assigned to housing that meets their immediate needs, which for many is the classification unit.

On the classification unit, an officer pulls files that detail an individual's correctional history and then conducts an interview to discuss the last seven years of that history. Interviews were previously conducted by video, but now take place in a private interview room on the fourth floor of the jail. Sergeant Thomas explains that the one-on-one interview not only provides classification officers with additional information, but also serves as a safety net to catch issues that might not have been observed or revealed during intake. For example, a classification

officer might recognize that someone is in active detoxification — but was afraid to admit drug use during intake — and refer him to medical care, or provide an opportunity for an inmate to request protective custody.

During the interview, the officer also completes questions that are scored to produce a classification level. The classification level is used to determine where that person will be housed in the jail. Each inmate is reclassified every 60 days while in the jail; reclassification is a behavior-based system that considers conduct and program participation to determine whether or not a different classification level is appropriate.

IDENTIFYING AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Getting to the point where classification in the jail is a timely and standardized process did not happen overnight. The first step was diagnosing the problem. During the ACJ's 2013 strategic planning process, classification was identified as one of the areas in need of review. One indicator was the number of people housed according to maximum risk classification status. Typically, less than a quarter of jail inmates are classified as maximum risk[2]; prior to 2015, maximum risk inmates at the ACJ made up nearly half of the ACJ population.

Corrections officials and consultants wanted to improve the classification process, the classification tool, and the resulting housing assignment process. Historically, the less standardized process worked well enough to maintain security, but as Chief Deputy Warden LaToya Warren put it, "just because we didn't have incidents didn't mean we had a good classification approach or an efficient jail operation." A major concern was that classification decisions were not made with a validated tool, leaving the classification process open to inconsistent results and subjective interpretations.

At the same time, there were classification policies that did not take into account the unique background and circumstances of each individual. People who had state convictions were automatically classified as maximum risk, regardless of their charges or behavior in the jail. This policy, as well as the absence of a standardized tool, led to a jail population that was disproportionately categorized as maximum risk.

Workflow was another area in need of improvement. Classification was occurring through an "assembly line" approach in which one person pulled files and another person input information, but no one understood an inmate's profile across the entire process. The fragmented approach resulted in initial delays as well as a backlog in the number of people needing to be reclassified.

It became clear that the ACJ needed a scientifically validated classification instrument to be able to make transparent and unbiased decisions, as well as a more efficient process to utilize the instrument.

2 Austin, J. and Mattson, B. (2015). *Implementation of the Allegheny County Bureau of Corrections objective inmate classification system.* Justice Analytics, Inc. & JFA Institute.

DEVELOPING CLASSIFICATION INSTRUMENTS AND CREATING STANDARDS

Project consultants from the JFA Institute and Justice Analytics, Inc. were hired to develop a new assessment instrument that would standardize classification decisions. Using guidelines from the National Institute of Corrections and research in the field, they created classification and reclassification instruments that would be employed by officers to uniformly assign levels of risk. Dr. Brian Mattson of Justice Analytics, Inc., one of the consultants working on the project, suggests that the most significant aspect of the new instruments was the application of scientific standards of institutional risk. The instrument evaluates the number and severity of past and current convictions, prior escapes, past institutional conduct and additional risk factors to assign a classification level. The instrument also outlines the scenarios in which an officer may override the score, allowing for professional judgment while protecting against bias. The reclassification instrument takes into account these same factors and also considers current behavior in the jail.

Once the instrument was completed, a pilot was conducted to test it on a random sample of the jail population. The pilot showed that the new instrument resulted in fewer maximum risk classifications and increased the proportion of medium and minimum classifications. Comparing the pilot results with the jail's disciplinary records confirmed that those individuals classified as maximum risk by the new instrument had higher rates of misconduct than medium- and minimum-risk individuals, providing evidence that the classification system was accurately assessing risk.

At the same time that the instruments were being developed, Chief Deputy Warden Warren was working to overhaul procedure in the classification department. This involved re-training officers, creating guidelines for daily output, setting a 72-hour deadline for completion of classification assessment, and ensuring that reclassification was conducted consistently every 60 days. Chief Deputy Warden Warren attributes much of the success of implementing these new standards to Sergeant Thomas. "She is open to learning everything," Chief Deputy Warden Warren said, and her ability to earn the trust of other officers has "made a world of difference."

A SHIFT IN THE JAIL POPULATION

With the successful pilot completed and the classification process streamlined, the ACJ began fully implementing the new system in February 2015. Classification officers began using the newly developed instruments for classification and reclassification. They worked hard to meet the new standards and eliminated the use of paper files as well as the backlog of people needing to be reclassified.

The potential of the new instruments, demonstrated in the pilot, was consistent with the numbers once implementation began. The instruments have resulted in a shift in the jail population. The percentage of people classified as maximum risk has decreased, with

corresponding increases in the percentages classified as medium and minimum risk. While 47 percent of inmates were classified as maximum risk in December 2014, only 21 percent were classified that way nearly a year later. As a result of the new instrument's ability to more accurately assess risk and the elimination of policies that uniformly required certain populations to be classified as maximum risk, the current distribution of classification levels is now in line with other correctional institutions.

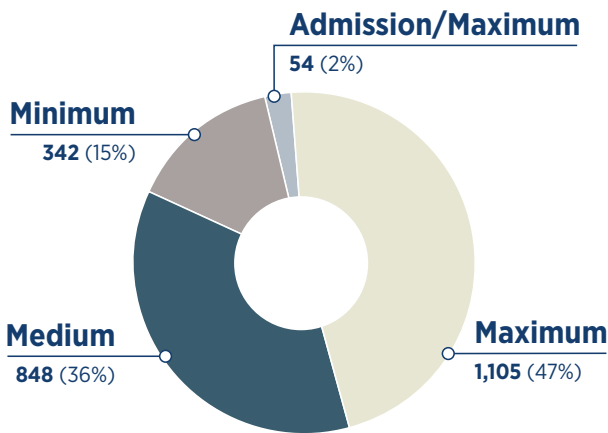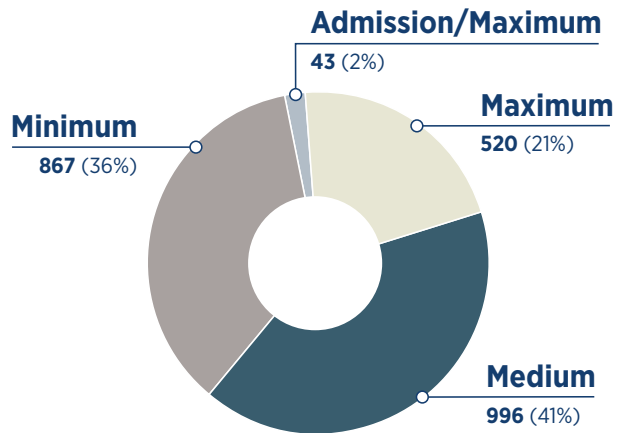FIGURE 1: **Security Classifications as of 12/16/2014**

Admission/Maximum
54 (2%)

Minimum
342 (15%)

Medium
848 (36%)

Maximum
1,105 (47%)

FIGURE 2: **Security Classifications as of 12/1/2015**

Admission/Maximum
43 (2%)

Minimum
867 (36%)

Maximum
520 (21%)

Medium
996 (41%)

CLASSIFICATION'S IMPACT ON THE ACJ

The new classification system has had significant secondary effects that reach far beyond the classification department. Warden Orlando Harper described some of the impacts by saying that "the revision of our classification system will enable the ACJ to more efficiently house and provide programming to our inmate population." He also added that "utilizing a scientific validated instrument will enhance the safety and security of our facility."

People with a maximum classification are not eligible for work or programming opportunities in the jail, and the increase in the medium risk and minimum risk populations has meant that opportunities have opened up for many more people. This has been a particularly important change for Chief Deputy Warden Warren, who said that the new system "gives us the opportunity to help more people." More inmates are now eligible to take advantage of the educational classes and specialty housing pods offered by the HOPE and Reentry programs.[3]

3 HOPE is a faith-based rehabilitation program working to help inmates increase their knowledge and well-being. The Reentry program is an initiative of the Allegheny County Jail Collaborative found by a 2014 Urban Institute evaluation to successfully reduce recidivism among participants.

The use of a scientifically validated tool has also improved fairness by reducing disparities that may have been caused by bias. Although complete demographic data are not available, the jail has been able to determine that the new system has reduced gender disparity. Higher risk classifications, previously assigned disproportionately to men, are now assigned at comparable rates to men and women.

A behavior-based approach to reclassification is another benefit of the updated system. With the more even distribution of classification levels, multiple housing pods that had been classified as maximum risk are now able to house medium-risk inmates. Along with access to work and programming, people on medium-risk and minimum-risk housing pods have different privileges than people on maximum risk pods, including later lockup times. This greater number of medium-risk and minimum-risk housing pods, in combination with the new standard of conducting reclassification every 60 days, has created opportunities for incentives for better behavior.

A person who is initially classified as maximum risk, but who displays good conduct, now has the opportunity to be reclassified as medium risk. "Knowing that they can get reclassified gives them something to work for and to look forward to," says Sergeant Thomas. Chief Deputy Warden Warren put it this way: "Imagine it's Super Bowl Sunday, and you're telling a man he can't watch the game because it's lockup time." She argues that an experience like that is motivation for inmates to do what they can to get reclassified. "Now we have ways to influence behavior both ways." The jail is even considering ways to expand the behavioral system through the creation of an honor pod for those with the best conduct.

The operational improvements put in place have also allowed for better usage of housing space. The enforcement of a 72-hour deadline for completing classification means that fewer people are waiting to be classified, and one of the pods that had been used for those awaiting classification is no longer needed for that purpose. This has allowed for more flexibility in the use of pods.

A FAIR AND TRANSPARENT SYSTEM

For Chief Deputy Warden Warren, the most important outcome of the change is having a system that is fair and transparent. Now that the jail uniformly conducts classification with a scientifically validated instrument, she now can feel confident in explaining how each classification decision is made. With policies and standards in place, the jail now has a system that "runs like clockwork."

The new system is an improvement not just because it is based on best practice, but also because it has had a tangible impact on the jail population. Criminal history more than seven years old is no longer held against someone who may have since made changes in his life, and decisions are made based on principles of risk rather than personal opinion. More ACJ inmates now have access to education and programming that may improve their chances to live crime-free lives when they are released.

Changing the way that classification was carried out has had repercussions throughout the jail and its personnel. Correctional officers on housing pods that went from being maximum risk to medium risk had to adjust to managing the pod in a different way. Classification decisions could no longer be made based on opinion, and officers had to adjust to new deadlines and standards. All of these changes required a shift in mindset on the part of staff at the jail, and Chief Deputy Warden Warren believes that their ability to rethink the way that the system works has made it a success. "We re-established the importance of classification."