

# Jail Operations in the Coronavirus Era

## Voiceover

00:00

Welcome to *The Beat*—a podcast series from the COPS Office at the Department of Justice. Featuring interviews with experts from a varied field of disciplines. *The Beat* provides law enforcement with the latest developments and trending topics in community policing.

## Jennifer Donelan

00:16

Today's episode of *The Beat* is being conducted virtually. Hello, everyone. I'm your host, Jennifer Donelan, and welcome to *The Beat*. Today, we are speaking with Peter Koutoujian. He is the sheriff of Middlesex County in Massachusetts and he is the president of Major County Sheriffs of America, which is an association representing the largest elected sheriffs' offices in the nation. He's a lawyer by trade. He served as Middlesex County prosecutor before being elected to the Massachusetts legislature in 1996. He remained a member of the legislature through 2011 when he was appointed by the former governor of Massachusetts to fill the term of sheriff in Middlesex County that had been vacated by his predecessor.

Sheriff Koutoujian has also served as president of the Massachusetts Sheriffs' association and is a founding member of the law enforcement leaders to reduce crime and incarceration. That's a group of nearly 200 police chiefs, attorney generals, sheriffs, and agency leaders that are committed to reducing rates of incarceration. Sheriff, thank you so much for joining us, and welcome to *The Beat*.

## Sheriff Peter Koutoujian

01:20

Great to be with you, Jennifer.

## Donelan

01:23

Listen, before we get started, I wanted to ask you a little bit about your extensive background. I'm really excited to be speaking with you today, but tell us about what sort of went through your mind when you decided to accept the position of sheriff of Middlesex County.

## Koutoujian

01:37

Well, Jennifer, as you stated from my work history, I've had my entire career take place in public service. It's something about which I was passionate. I was drawn to it probably because of my mom and dad. My dad was a city clerk in my hometown of Waltham for 30 years and my mom was a teacher and I really just kind of came into public service, which I considered to be a blessing. And so I, really, I'd been doing this for many years and as you know I was a prosecutor for a number of years and the state representative, but I never thought about ever serving in the role of sheriff. It was never something that

I had considered at all. When my predecessor was initially resigning from his position, a few people asked me, “Would you be interested in being sheriff? You should put your name in for consideration.”

And my first reaction was it’s not really something that I thought about, just never, never occurred to me ever. Instead of saying no initially, I started thinking about it and think, “Geez, you know, I wonder what it is.” I started looking a little bit more to the role now. I sent plenty of people to jail as a prosecutor but I never truly understood the role of sheriff, and once I really looked into the role of sheriff, I became the most ardent self-advocate in the hopes that the governor would initially appoint me and now I’ve had the chance to run twice and to be elected as sheriff since that point as well.

## **Donelan**

*02:49*

That is such a unique transfer, you know, to go from being a prosecutor now to being a sheriff in dealing with those who you worked hard get off the streets and now they’re being housed in an area that you’re in charge of protecting and maintaining. That must have been a heck of a jump and I’m sure you brought a large amount of your experience to that.

## **Koutoujian**

*03:10*

Yeah. You know, it wasn’t as much of a jump as one would think because as a prosecutor you’re really supposed to seek justice, you’re not just supposed to be throwing people into jail and it’s so trying to find the right balance in finding justice for victims of crime, for the public, for the perpetrator, for their actions as well. And, quite honestly, I found this really an extension. In this role, I don’t sit as judge or jury or executioner. I simply hold them while they’re with me and try to address the criminogenic factors that brought them to a life of criminal justice involvement and jail and see if I can actually help turn their lives around in a positive way, thereby making our community safer, as well as making their lives more enriched and hopefully enriching the lives of not just them, but their families and their communities. Here, we do mostly corrections. We have a number of warrant app teams and SWAT units and other things too. So it’s a really nice blend of the ability to do some real patrol work but also really focus on the corrections here in Massachusetts.

## **Donelan**

*04:12*

That’s wonderful. Can you—and keeping with the sheriffs—can you tell us a little bit about the Major County Sheriffs of America membership?

## **Koutoujian**

*04:20*

Yes. The membership for Major County Sheriffs of America is over 100 of the largest sheriffs’ offices in the entire country. We represent about 120 million people across America. We do all forms of law enforcement for our communities and they can range from full law enforcement duties, including patrol and special ops units and detectives’ bureaus, we could be running large correctional facilities, we can be providing courtroom security or operate coroners’ offices or forensics offices or manage Homeland

Security fusion centers. So a wide panoply of offerings that we have across this nation. And what's also great about it is while we tend to be the largest in our areas, we are so diverse just because of the areas from which we come and the populations that we serve, that there is a range of diversity in our discussions and our experience that make us all the richer for that.

## **Donelan**

*05:12*

I was going to say that's just an ample opportunity there to learn from one another, considering that all, you know, you've got such an extensive amount of experiences there, which is going to bring me to a topic that I really want to talk to you about in your position as sheriff of Middlesex County and the fact that you were one of the first to really have to deal with this. And then also from the perspective as your role with the Major County Sheriffs of America.

Let's talk about COVID, coronavirus, and all of the challenges presented to law enforcement across the country. Jails, much like nursing homes, those have been headline-making events. Those—you guys—have gotten a lot of attention throughout this in terms of how you are responding to the unprecedented challenge of coronavirus. How are you keeping those that you've been charged with protecting, ensuring their health and safety, while they're within your custody? It's just been, I'm sure, an extremely busy past two months.

So let's start at the beginning, describe your experience specifically there in Middlesex County with coronavirus.

## **Koutoujian**

*06:18*

So at the very beginning of this pandemic, the threat itself was enough to be worried about. But during that threat, before you're touched by the disease, your preparations are interesting and academic, you're planning out all sorts of possibilities. But I'm telling you, I remember the day that we got our first positive and the cellmate that seemed to be symptomatic and thinking that was probably another positive, which it was. And I remember looking into the eyes of the entire staff at the Middlesex Sheriff's Office and it was a very different institution once that happened.

## **Donelan**

*06:54*

Describe that for me. What do you mean? Was it fear? The unknown?

## **Koutoujian**

*06:59*

It was fear. It was fear. It was worry. It was the uncertainty. It was all academic until that point. And so suddenly when it touched inside and suddenly everything that you've been preparing for, you're now engaging with but you see the human toll. You see the staff being worried about themselves. You see

them being more worried about their families. You see that the way that they suffered for this. And as many first responders while there is an incident going on inside that jail, they're coming to jail every day to perform the tasks that they are assigned.

The nobility of those efforts was something really special to watch, but I still remember that look of worry and fear, not just for themselves but for their families, was something that will last for me throughout my entire career.

## **Donelan**

*07:46*

The headlines that you were going home, you're watching the news, you've got all of these people that you have to protect—your staff, the people who are in your custody—you're hearing how this disease is ravaging people, people are dying, and the fear such a massive factor. How did you... and I understand you were one of the first correct? One of your institutions was one of the first to be struck by COVID and you had eyes on you as you were dealing with all of this.

## **Koutoujian**

*08:16*

Yes. We were the first Sheriff's Office in the state to be stricken with coronavirus, and with that, all the eyes moved directly towards the Middlesex Sheriff's Office. They were not looking anywhere else except for us—what was going on, how we were handling it. And I think to the credit of our officers and staff and leadership in this office, we stepped up in such a strong way. We could have hidden, we could have tried to distract, we decided to take this head on and be completely transparent and honest about every single thing that happened.

## **Donelan**

*08:48*

Let me stop you right there, Sheriff, because I think that's a really important piece that you know in considering, you know who we have listening, just taking them through that exercise of making that decision. Because I think that institutions across the country were faced with the question: Do we publicly announce the number of COVID positive? Either employees or inmates or whatever it is, right? The number of police officers, the number of firefighters, the number of nurses, the number of doctors—do we go public with that?

And there were some who decided against that, and there were others who said, "Yes, we have to." What was your decision-making process and how would you describe that to folks and why did you land on what you landed on?

## **Koutoujian**

*09:30*

We decided to be as transparent and accountable as we could. We knew that we could do a good job with this. We also knew that if you try to hide the truth, eventually we will come to be known and you will not have the credibility that you would have had, had you been honest about things at the very

beginning. And so, when these first couple of cases hit, we were the first to initially—by the way, this is important—initially we did a roll call informing all of our officers of what had happened. And then shortly thereafter, probably within a matter of a half hour or less, we then let the press know exactly what had happened. What was also important was as we let the press and our staff know what happened, we also let them know of the myriad of different steps we had taken to mitigate and to stop the spread of coronavirus.

So all of the high level of professionalism and all the preparation that we did, we had employed. And now when we were telling them about these cases, we were able to tell them probably about 15 or 20 extra steps that we had taken to protect our staff, to protect the inmates, and to protect the public. And, quite honestly, what had happened from that was many of the publications that were using this information we gave, then just really just almost put in our press release as the data that they had received.

And so it really made us look like we were on top of it and aggressive and affirmative and strong. Also what's important is we also didn't have to deal with as many media inquiries of many different and diverse questions because we gave so much information. They really could pick and choose what they wanted and they could use anything that we gave them and in every case, except for the fact that we had positives, it was all something that spoke very highly of the work that we had done.

## **Donelan**

*11:08*

I think there are many who will agree that you pinned the tail on the donkey, so to say, but it had to be at the time not very comfortable. Was it? I mean, you now know the payoff looking back at it, you see great results that produced, but at the time not too comfortable, was it?

## **Koutoujian**

*11:23*

No, it was not comfortable at all. It hurts to be first—at least the first that admitted it, right? There are many other places in this country that probably had cases that never acknowledged them or admitted them. I didn't think that was the right thing to do for our shop. I think that it was... it was not just difficult at the beginning, but it was difficult as it went through the process for the first week or two as well because every time we had an update of a couple of more cases, it was one of those moments where you were just saying, "Do we really need to continue this?"

So even if you've made the decision, you do tend to question whether or not you still need to continue. Almost as if I'd been honest so far, do I really need to continue to be honest? And just through our leadership group, we decided, no, we're going to stay the course, and when someone weakened, the rest of us propped them up and we stayed the course. And, quite honestly, what was also great as you could see the increase through our transparency and then you could see the way that we had managed them in all the elements of the management that we had put in place that was all public, and then you could see the continued decrease as it continues now.

And now we're almost to no cases and now the real concern that we have is not the cases that we have from the inside, but those individuals that are still being arrested that were now coming into our facility that are actually positive for COVID-19.

## **Donelan**

*12:34*

You bring up phenomenal points. And you know, let's be honest with it, I think that the nation is weary, right? They're tired, it's a lot of stress, it's been a lot of fear that weighs on you and, you know, we're only human, right? And we're two months—it's now May as we're recording this and we're fast approaching June—you have different parts of the country having opened up, planning to open up, and then you have many who are saying prepare for the second wave. So that, you know, this is unlike an event that has a beginning, middle, and end. Many would argue that we are far from the end, and that having been said, I think that there's a lot to learn and still to learn. And I think that a lot of what you're sharing, people may be able to rely on if we head back towards, you know, shutting down and staying at home if we, God forbid, see a second wave.

That having been said, let's dig into some of that experience then with you. Talk about the stay at home and the quarantine. How did that affect your operations?

## **Koutoujian**

*13:35*

Well, that affected us a great deal because we have a number of what are considered by the government to be non-essential services. But when you consider that during this period of time you have to pay your bills, you have to purchase supplies including PPE—when you consider that you still have to pay your staff an account for their time—there's really no such thing as a non-essential service in these facilities.

And so what we had done was we had actually been, I think, a little ahead of the curve in making sure that everyone had the ability to access the systems remotely from their homes. So when suddenly the day came, when everyone was having to be sent home, our plan was already executed so that they could all do their work from home. So where a number of offices throughout the country have had furloughs and layoffs and things like that, we actually didn't have to lay anyone off, and we didn't have to furlough anyone because everyone was doing their job, they were just doing it from home. And if anyone, by the way, knows what it's like to work from home, it's not so easy. And I'm not sure if you actually do more work while you are at home or if you did more work when you were in the office. Watching my wife work from home, I think she's working harder from home than she did in the office. And I think that a lot of people are seeing that there's high level of productivity.

The other part is even with the essential employees, you know, jails are not fortresses on hills, right? We're part of a community. And so Middlesex County is one of the largest in the country, it also had the largest number of COVID-positive cases in the entire state. So when you have that, you are going to also have that as part of your staff issues as well. And so we saw a high number of our staff that were

symptomatic and then also testing positive for COVID-19. We also saw that because we had those first few cases inside the facility, that those staff that came in contact in any way with those individuals also now had to be dealt with precautionarily.

So at some points we've had almost up to 300 people in our workforce actually put out precautionarily, right? Because they had the chance of being positive. And so they were back home on quarantine and then maybe getting tested, and if being tested then returning to work. So this has been a cycle that we have seen where we've put a lot of people out and then a lot of those people came back. In fact, we now had 52 staff members that had been positive, all of whom have now returned to work.

We now started a program where we have offered them the opportunity to donate plasma to the Red Cross blood banks so that their blood that had once been positive for COVID-19 now could be used to treat those that were suffering terribly from COVID-19.

### **Donelan**

*16:16*

That is phenomenal. I mean, I'm sitting here in awe. That is phenomenal.

### **Koutoujian**

*16:21*

Isn't that a great story? I love that story. But see, that's the thing about first responders, they give and they give and they give, and this is a great example. They suffered and they use this suffering in order to give back. It's something very special to me and I'm really proud of that. And what they're actually doing is they're giving for at least up to three people for every donation they give that sometimes are on their last legs, they're on the ventilators, they're struggling, they're in the ICUs, and they're giving them what might be their last chance at life. Pretty powerful when you consider their experience and what they're now doing for others as well.

### **Donelan**

*16:52*

I've got to tell you, I mean my jaw's on the floor, first of all, how heartwarming is it that 52 of your employees who tested positive for COVID are all okay? Not only okay, they're back at work. And not only are they back at work, they've turned around and turned what was likely a nightmare for some, when you hear the stories about the reality of surviving that, and they're turning around and saving lives.

### **Koutoujian**

*17:14*

That's right. You know, this is something I say, and again, I'm speaking about our correctional facility here. I consider corrections officers. A lot of times they're forgotten about, right? We think about police, we think about fire, we think of other first responders, but we don't usually think of corrections officers. At least the public doesn't think about them. I call them the silent guardians of public safety. They work

24 hours a day, seven days a week, they work on holidays, they work the third shift. They suffer, you know, corrections officers like police have higher rates of alcohol abuse and drug abuse and divorce and suicide because of this job.

And yet, no one knows to say thank you to these amazing men and women that are protecting us 24 hours a day, seven days a week. And here, once again, it's not just the fact that they're doing their job, they're going above and beyond. Corrections officers don't get the due that they deserve, and I'm just here to say thank you to corrections officers and corrections professionals for all that you do along with the rest of our first responders, police, and fire, and others as well.

## **Donelan**

*18:10*

Well, they're certainly lucky to have you as their head cheerleader. Absolutely. May I offer my thanks to them? Was that a voluntary program you worked in partnership with the Red Cross? How did that work, in case others might want to mirror something like that?

## **Koutoujian**

*18:22*

So when I first heard that this might be a possibility, it was probably about two weeks prior to the fact that it became an opportunity. So we'd already done our research and we reached out to a number of different providers in the area and we're working hand in hand with an infectious disease specialist and we let her lead us into this. So yes, we were able to come to an arrangement with a Red Cross and other providers, quite honestly. And now we have sent all that information to these individuals and their families can give too if they'd like to, if they were struck positive by COVID, and then they just go in and they take care of it on their own.

We've already had a few people that have returned. It's really, it's not even like a blood draw. They are actually taking the plasma out as you sit there. You walk away, you don't have any blood missing from your body, so you're not woozy, you don't have to worry about driving home. And they treat you like kings and queens because you're doing some amazing work, so that you're really treated well with great appreciation. And then you go home and you feel pretty good about what you've done.

## **Donelan**

*19:19*

Yeah, I would say so. Well, I hope that's an idea that I think people might find extremely attractive, and thank you for sharing that with us. Let's move from your staff to your population. How do you social distance in a jail, considering space is an issue?

## **Koutoujian**

*19:38*

So that is one of the great quandaries. What's also something that has been happening over these last number of years is that there has been a lessening of the rates of incarceration generally across the country and more particularly so here in Massachusetts.

So what you found was a population that was too large to really manage well. And then once this pandemic hit and government agencies and ourselves began to address the issue about overpopulation and the potential spread, especially among those that were elderly or chronically ill, those numbers started going down. So one point, when I started being sheriff, we had about 1,200 or 1,300 individuals in our care.

Recently, as of March, it was about 800 and indeed yesterday it was down at 578, over 200 fewer than just two months prior. And these are a number... this is the result of a number of efforts. You know, our own efforts to put some candidates that were appropriate onto a bracelet. There were fewer arrests on the streets and fewer court cases resulting in fewer admissions. And the district attorney and the courts have also worked to put people out, and then there was a natural attrition through end of stay.

This reduced the population in such a way that we were actually able to close down some dormitory-style units that prohibited us from creating appropriate social distancing. So now, with the lesser number, we were able to empty four of our five dormitory units, putting them into individualized tier cells and pod cells, thus creating greater social distancing. That's something that has worked really well so far and it's allowed us to get a hold along with a number of other initiatives we've undertaken to reduce the spread of COVID-19 in our facility.

### **Donelan**

21:28

You actually touched on something I wanted to talk to you about, especially from your perspective as a prosecutor and as a sheriff. The move where offenders were released early in an effort to create some more space. Some might have said it's controversial, what were your thoughts on that when that became a reality to include as part of this effort to keep people safe?

### **Koutoujian**

21:53

Well, first, I was very clear that our populations had reached historically low levels here in Massachusetts. People don't seem to understand that and they think that there's a lot of population in our facility that are there for non-violent drug offenses, which is not the case.

### **Donelan**

22:10

Why do you think people assume that, or mistakenly make that jump?

### **Koutoujian**

22:13

I think that people just don't understand what's going on in our criminal justice system and what's going on in our houses of corrections. They don't really understand who we're dealing with. They don't understand, quite honestly, that you know, 80 percent of our population have a drug or alcohol addiction, that 42 percent of our population that steps in off the streets have to be medically detoxed for drugs or alcohol. They don't understand that 50 percent of our population have a history of mental

health from the streets. They don't understand that our population is chronically ill and sick and cycling in and out of our facilities and not getting the resources that they need back out in their communities that would help them stay out of our systems. That's what society doesn't understand.

## **Donelan**

22:55

You laid that out beautifully. So, in keeping with that, when you're somebody who really truly understands that, you understand the nature of who's coming in, you're dealing with the mental health issues, the drug and alcohol abuse and addiction, the just overall physical health challenges, the chronically ill, and the fact that those are just ongoing societal issues that you know are being addressed well in some areas and not so well in others or not across the board at all—you see the real result of that. So I know you could speak on that in an expert way. Does that help you understand, or do you use that to help people understand that, "Hey, this is why this particular segment of people who we released really that, that was okay to put it plainly," that their issues were such that putting them out back into society did not pose a threat to society and the benefit of doing that in an effort to save lives was really, truly necessary?

## **Koutoujian**

23:51

Well, I think that when the courts and the district attorneys are making these decisions, something that I have felt very strongly about is number one, you need to consider public safety. And whether or not that person will be a risk to public safety or not. Secondly, as we put people out, we have to consider where they're going to go and how will they do and do they have plans in place. What I get frustrated about is that there are a number of advocacy organizations that are simply advocating for releasing everyone that's over 60 years old, or anyone with a chronic illness, or wide swaths of populations. Some of whom can be very dangerous individuals that you would not want out on that street. So I think that's something that people have to understand—public safety is number one. But, number two, we have to have a plan in place for individuals, and the advocates that want to get people out onto the street, they're really not mindful of the fact that where does that individual go. Their goal is to get them out of a facility, it's not necessarily to come up with a plan for them and it could be as simple as housing, but it could be a maintenance of their medically-assisted treatment plan for opioid disorder or alcohol. It can be their mental health treatment, or it could be just their medical treatment.

And the fact is we're putting a lot of people out on streets, and then there was the assumption that they'd go to shelters, and the shelters were full up, or the shelters had high levels of COVID-19 in them and there was no place for these individuals to go. And now what you can see is some of these individuals are returning, some for terrible crimes, and a number more that are just not able to cope on the outside.

And what concerns me is that we have people that are now victimizing the public on the outside, but we also have individuals that are failing, that we're putting on the street that are failing, because we have not put their plans in place to make them successful. And number one, they're re-offending in some way or even worse, number two, they're dying of overdoses and we've already known of a number of those types of cases as well. And that to me is something that society needs to do a better job on.

## **Donelan**

25:45

Have you seen that with those that were released as a result of the plans that occurred with COVID?

## **Koutoujian**

25:50

We have already seen a number of cases of re-offenses, sometimes terrible ones. We've seen, you know, death, we've seen devastation. I think what's really important is that doesn't mean that this idea of decarceration to a certain level is not the right thing to do, but we have to understand who we're putting out and what their needs are. And we have to put them out in a way that will make them successful.

## **Donelan**

26:11

Sure. You can't just say, "All right, get them out. Good luck. Don't let the door hit you on the way out." You have to have a plan.

## **Koutoujian**

26:16

That's right. And if we have a plan and then there's failures, then we have to look a little bit further upstream. I think what will be interesting is after this experience of these decarceration efforts, I think it will be interesting to take a look at the data because right now it's a little bit too early and you don't have much quantitative data, but you have some qualitative data. But you can't rely upon qualitative data except to tell a little bit of a story to consider.

As this time goes on, I think it will be really important to see how many of those that we put out re-offended, how many of those that we put out have died as a result of overdose, how many of those that we have put out have just not been successful in their reentry in any way and then where have they gone. Have they gone to a family member that is elderly and is concerned about COVID-19 and the contagion that they might bring in? Have they gone to the street? Have they gone to shelters? Have they gone out and become ill with COVID-19 and returned to a facility as we have seen here in Middlesex?

These are the things that we need to understand in a sophisticated and complex way so that we can take a look at this experience if you will, about decarceration, and say, "Okay, maybe we went too far, where was the right place to be, and what do we need to do to make that more successful in the future?"

## **Donelan**

27:29

Do you feel now—end of May moving into June as we record this—that we’re at a point where we can start to do some of that, given that things feel like they’re starting to slow down. Do you have the opportunity even to do that right now? Because if you once again plan—looking ahead, if we do see a second wave—is there time now to sort of take that moment to pause, take a look at how things went, and make changes if necessary? Or do we not have that luxury right now?

## **Koutoujian**

27:57

I don’t think we have that luxury right now because we’re going to need more time to see how people fare on the outside. Right now, it’s only been 60 days and I’m sure there’s a number of people that are offending and not being caught. We know that there are a number of people that are offending and getting caught. And we know that there are a number of people that have died as a result of overdose. So we know that right now, but a mere 60 days is not enough to make a judgment about how well this is working and if we can fine-tune what we’re doing to protect the public while also protecting those in our care.

## **Donelan**

28:29

Well at least you know you’re conscious, right? You’re cognizant of what’s going on and I think that that in many ways is half the battle, right? Just to be aware and kind of keeping tabs, you know. Moving back to your staff, you know, you do get a sense—and you see it in organizations, you see it in communities, you hear it on the news—you kind of do hear this sort of weariness, right? This sort of people are just tired, I think.

How do you deal with that with your staff? Is everyone still on as high alert as they were before this thing hit? How do you keep them on task? How do you keep them focused? How do you do that?

## **Koutoujian**

29:04

That’s a great question, Jennifer. The fact is that we have highly trained professional officers and staff in our facility, but everyone gets a little tired of the same routine. And this goes not only by the way to staff, but those in our custody, because they have been willing to have reduced recreation, reduced visitation, reduced programming, but at some point that can also become an issue and then, quite honestly, become a public safety issue inside our facility.

So everyone has a breaking point. We are now seeing in working with our infectious disease specialist, we are now making decisions along with the Department of Public Health where we are starting to lift some of the restrictions slowly but measuredly in order to start to give a little life, to see a little light at the end of the tunnel, and to slowly bring us out of where we are right now.

And I don't know if we ever go back to the old ways of much more movement within a facility by officers and by staff, but we will get closer to there. So we have already gone from almost no movement during points in this pandemic to movements of five people at a time inside units, to eight people at a time, to 12 people at a time. And just yesterday with our physician and with Department of Public Health, we made the decision we're going to move it up to 20 people at a time.

So as we continue to bring ourselves out of this in a responsible and steady way, I think people will see that there is light at the end of the tunnel and we'll respond in an appropriate way.

## **Donelan**

*30:34*

When you say movements of 20 people, you're describing something like lunch in the cafeteria? Like what would be something that would involve 20 people in the same room?

## **Koutoujian**

*30:42*

Yeah, it can. It can be meals, it can be recreation, it could be phones. One thing that's important to note too is that this is a public health emergency and crisis. But inside a correctional facility, it can quickly turn into a public safety crisis. And that if you don't manage the population in there well and don't understand what they're going through, you will miss things and then you will have a disturbance and you might have your officers injured. So you have to stay on top of this and so we did a number of things as we had to shut down programming, as we had to shut down visitation from family members. These are lifelines for these individuals and things that keep them steady and mentally healthy.

And if you take those away from them, they start... it's not a good situation, it can become a significant public safety issue. So initially when this happened, we've started moving into offering four free phone calls of 20 minutes each per week, just to give them a little something to show that little bit of respect, like we know what you're going through, but here we're giving you four calls.

We started offering more tablet opportunities and we started doing things like that. We offered a special meal the other day. Part of this is a way to manage the populations, like you're going through a difficult time, we understand this, here's a small sign of respect and appreciation for what you're going through with us. And again, I'd rather give these guys up there a special meal as a treat than have them rolling around on the ground with my officers and hurting my officers. That makes it a better environment up there and a much safer environment. So my officers can do their shifts and then return home to their families.

## **Donelan**

*32:13*

You know, the tablets, the four 20-minute free phone calls, that's all creating moments of connection and that, that's really been the real challenge with the COVID-19 and the stay at homes, the isolation, disconnecting from everyone, from your families, from your friends, from life as you know it. That

sounds genius. And your role with the Major County Sheriffs of America...I know you've been, you've had to be hyper-focused on Middlesex County, but have you been able to idea share, information share, across the country?

## **Koutoujian**

32:44

So during our meeting, our annual meeting in February, we had a session where sheriffs were sharing ideas and we spoke about, you know, potential opportunities to learn. And you know, a lot of times it'll be about drugs, drug interdiction, medication-assisted treatment, many of the other issues, you know, cameras... And I actually brought up because of my background in the legislature as the chairman of the committee on healthcare, the idea of pandemic. Should we discuss something about this? Because COVID-19 was going on in Asia at the time and you could see that it might come here.

And so we actually spoke about that briefly at that time, but when the pandemic really hit, Major County Sheriffs of America teamed up with the National Commission of Correctional Healthcare to provide a series of webinars. So every single Friday at 1:00 p.m. for ten Fridays, we offered a webinar with experts giving advice and counsel with other sheriffs, with epidemiologists and physicians, and then allowing questions.

So each week we brought that and we probably had 4,000 – 5,000 individuals listening in through those, you know, those several hundred each time, through those weeks. We were reliable, we were steady, we were offering good information, and the results were pretty incredible as far as our membership and then not just our members but other members participating in listening in on these.

We finished our last one because we're starting to come out of here and we thought it would be good just to maybe now do something in a few more weeks to check in. And then of course, if it does rise again, we'll be willing to step in there. But that has been something that the Major County Sheriffs of America has done, which has really been the go-to source for information for law enforcement and corrections across the country, something of which I'm very proud.

## **Donelan**

34:29

I was going to say, we humans are pretty resourceful, aren't we? As horrible as this whole thing has been, and that is an understatement, the creativity and the resourcefulness that we've witnessed that you know, everything you're describing, it really speaks to the human condition, I think, and the fact that, you know, we will get through this, but you know, that's been a mantra. We'll get through this, we'll get through this together. And that sort of innovation really speaks to that I think, really does.

Before we wrap things up, we talked about a number of phenomenal things that I think people are going to really appreciate learning about and perhaps taking home and implementing on their own. What thoughts would you leave with people about—and again, 60 days in at this point of the recording—what

would you leave with them about the response to COVID-19, the innovation, the creativity, the programming, the enhancements, the changes as they move forward, things that you've learned, things that you kind of want to leave with people?

## **Koutoujian**

35:22

I would say that throughout law enforcement and corrections, we stepped up. We rose to the occasion. As you said, there's an incredible amount of nobility in what I have seen in these great men and women across the country that are involved in these fields. I would say that we should take this experience and learn from it and apply what we think is good and save what maybe we didn't think was so good or that we can use for later should something really arise.

And then as we consider what the next steps are, what the new normal will be after this, think about where that should be and how we want that to be, and use the experiences we have gained and the lessons we have learned to prepare ourselves not just for a pandemic or a natural disaster or a manmade disaster or any other crisis, any other types of crisis, but just to do our jobs. I think we'll be better off for this experience in the long run, no matter this difficulty.

It has been a tragic, terrible situation that has led to devastation and death and fear, but I think as you said, humans are noble inherently and we have risen to this occasion and we will learn from this in a way that will make us better in the future.

## **Donelan**

36:37

Well, you said that beautifully and you've given me great hope and I know you have with our listeners as well. It has been a pleasure, Sheriff, truly a pleasure and an honor to speak with you and I'd like to check in with you later too, when we can actually put a period on the end of this sentence and say that this thing is over, and we wish you the best of luck as you continue through this. A great thank you to your staff and the service that they perform for their communities.

If one of our listeners wanted to get in touch with you, how might they do that?

## **Koutoujian**

37:05

They could easily reach out to Middlesex Sheriff's Office right here in Massachusetts. Reach out, email us. If you reach out we will respond. I think we've gone through a lot, we've learned a lot, I'd love to share it. And, quite honestly, this is another thing, Jennifer, if you learn something that you can teach me, please give me a call.

## **Donelan**

37:21

I absolutely will, I definitely owe you after this, that's for sure, because you've given me a lot to think about. What email should they use, Sheriff? And if you could spell it out for them.

## **Koutoujian**

37:31

So they can write to me at P-J-K-O-U-T-O-U-J-I-A-N-at-S-D-M-dot-state-dot-M-A-dot-U-S.  
[pjkoutoujian@sdm.state.ma.us]

## **Donelan**

37:45

Thank you so much and thank you to our listeners for joining us for this episode of *The Beat*. Be safe out there.

## **Voiceover: *The Beat* Exit**

37:53

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## **Voiceover: Disclaimer**

38:50

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