



**COJ Journey Forward
Board Meeting Minutes
April 10, 2025**

1. Welcome and Opening Chairman Remarks

W.C. Gentry, Board Chair

Chairman W.C. Gentry called the meeting to order at 3:00 p.m. and welcomed everyone to the second meeting of the Jacksonville Journey Forward Board. Next, he explained that one of the critical areas that the committee will be addressing is crime prevention. While introducing Sheriff T.K. Waters, Mr. Gentry thanked him for his leadership in public safety and the work that his department is doing to curb violent crime in Jacksonville; specifically noting that during the last two years there has been a marked reduction in gang activity, homicides and other crimes.

Members Present: Betty Burney, James Ellout, W.C. Gentry, Octavius Holliday, Hilbert McDougal, Jr., LTG (ret.) Walter Piatt, Lawrence Schmitt, Dr. LaTonya Summers, Dr. Tes Tuason and Stephen Zona

Members Absent: None

Also Present: Charles Griggs, Director of Community Initiatives, Sheriff T.K. Waters, Dr. Cheryl Fountain, UNF, Maribel Hernandez, Chief, Grants & Contract Compliance Division, Larry Finkelstein, Grants Compliance Officer

2. Public Safety Presentation

Sheriff T.K. Waters

Sheriff Waters expressed his gratitude for the dedication of the 3,800 individuals who comprise the Jacksonville's Sheriff Office. As Sheriff, he thinks it's very important for the JSO to be transparent and share as much information as possible with the community. To that end, he has been intentional in developing a very robust public information office.

He also discussed JSO's violence reduction strategy which includes home visits, custom notifications, and the use of social media. JSO also works closely with the Urban League, Police Athletic League and local Pastors. These combined efforts have resulted in a 17% decrease in overall crime and a 10% reduction in violent crime. JSO also has a wealth of digital content which will be compiled and forwarded to the Board.

3. Presentation on Early Literacy

Dr. Cheryl Fountain, University of North Florida

Dr. Fountain's presentation was entitled Reimagining Literacy and Reading Opportunities to Build Brighter Futures. Dr. Fountain explained the correlation between third grade reading achievement and incarceration. Duval county school readiness rates in Fall 2024 included 15 schools where 75% or more were not reading on grade level. There were 64 schools where 50-74% of the children were not reading on grade level, 37 schools where 51-74% were reading on grade level and 10 schools where 75% or more were reading on grade level.

Several literacy programs are being supported by the Florida Institute of Education to improve school readiness rates including the Summer SAIL program which was developed by the Jax Journey Committee as a 3-year pilot program to improve reading proficiency for use during afterschool and summer programs. Jax SOARS is being funded by Kids Hope Alliance and draws on the lessons learned from the SAIL program. The Early Learning Coalition is funding a companion program targeting school readiness children known as the Jax Preschool SEEDS program. These programs are reliant upon family engagement and intensive literacy instruction.

Dr. Fountain summarized her presentation by acknowledging the important role that Kids Hope Alliance has played in funding and advancing literacy and reading proficiency among Jacksonville's children and youth. However, funding provided by KHA, through the American Rescue Plan, will no longer be available for Year 2 of the Jax SOARS Pilot Program. She respectfully requested that Jax Journey Forward assist in securing the funding needed to implement Year 2 of this program, which is between \$600,000 - \$800,000.

4. Review of Justice Assistance Grant (JAG)

Maribel Hernandez, Chief, Grants & Contract Compliance Division

Larry Finkelstein, Grants Compliance Officer

Ms. Hernandez and Mr. Finkelstein explained that the Edward Byrne Memorial Justice Assistance (JAG) program is the leading source of federal justice funding to state and local jurisdictions. Allocation amounts are determined by the prior years' crime statistics.

Jacksonville, Florida receives two annual allocations, one through the State as an eligible county (JSO) and one directly from USDOJ as an eligible Metropolitan Statistical Area (COJ). Grant recipients can use their JAG funds for state and local initiatives, technical assistance, training,

personnel, equipment, supplies, contractual support, and criminal justice information systems. This grant is for justice involved youth ages 16+.

As the Director of Community Initiatives, Mr. Charles Griggs provided a blueprint for including funding in this year's JAG application. The Mayor's Office approved the submission.

Mr. Griggs suggested that the Board form a subcommittee to determine the deliverables which should be included in future Grants and Compliance RFPs. Ms. Hernandez explained that the administrative costs associated with this grant cover staffing, supplies/equipment, and public service grants enhancement programs. These administrative costs (\$154k) were approved by City Council. The overall JAG amount is \$479k.

5. Public Comment

Chairman Gentry shared that the Board's subcommittees (Juvenile Justice and Re-Entry, Early Literacy and School Related Programs, Workforce Development) will determine how Jax. Journey funding should be allocated. He explained that future meetings will include discussions on how to augment funding for FIE/UNF and request increased funding from City Council.

Deshonna Buchanan shared her vision to create two initiatives *From out my Mother's closet* and *From out my Father's closet*. This initiative will uplift community members and promote dignity, identity and belonging.

Jonathan Marc, Literacy Alliance, spoke about the school to prison pipeline. He teaches incarcerated youths and noted that many of them (ages 12-15) drop out of school but restore their hope and pride when they continue their education, while incarcerated, and graduate. These graduates are excited about their improved options which include college and trade opportunities.

Robert Braswell, Director Justice Coalition, asked how victim's survivors are impacted by Journey Forward. He also provided an overview of their 2023-2024 results including having served 500 victims, delivered 3911 victim services and 7700 overall services.

Gabe Hambda spoke on behalf of small businesses in Jacksonville. He encouraged the Board to add more voices of small business owners to the Board. Chairman Gentry shared that there are two small business owners on the Board including himself and Betty Burney. Chairman Gentry ended the meeting by asking the subcommittee to provide more information on the \$154k administrative costs for the Justice Assistance Grant. This information will be shared in a future meeting.

6. Adjourn

The meeting was adjourned by Chairman Gentry at 5:00 p.m.