

# ***POLICY BRIEF***

An electronic publication of  
The Allegheny Institute for Public Policy

---

October 7, 2002

Volume 2, Number 51

---

## **Regional Money Pits**

The County's Regional Booking Centers have recently come under attack in the budget war between County Executive Jim Roddey and Sheriff Pete DeFazio. Roddey claims that the centers are underutilized and placing an unnecessary burden of about \$1.5 million on County taxpayers and should be closed. Sheriff DeFazio claims that the centers provide an important service to the communities in which they serve and should remain open if not expanded.

Allegheny County's Regional Booking Centers (RBCs) are located in three communities: McKeesport, Hampton, and Penn Hills. The RBCs reside in the host community's police station, and their sole purpose is to assist local officers in the process of identification and arraignment of arrestees during the time when the local District Justice's office is not open (3:00 pm to 7:00 am Monday through Friday and 24 hours weekends and holidays). However, since March 2002, the McKeesport RBC has expanded its operations and is now open 24 hours on weekdays.

The idea behind the RBCs was that they would make the process easier for the arresting officer. The officers would no longer have to travel downtown to the Bureau of Criminal Identification (BCI) and Night Court for identification and arraignment. The RBCs were to expedite the officer's process so that they could quickly return to patrolling their neighborhoods. The officer could take an arrestee to a Booking Center and have the person identified and arraigned via video conferencing with the District Justice at Night Court. Then the prisoner would be turned over to the Deputy Sheriff on duty who would then take the prisoner to County Jail, and if bail were set, to await bail payment.

During the day if an officer makes an arrest, he/she takes the arrestee to be identified at the BCI or the McKeesport RBC, then to the local District Justice for arraignment, at which time the prisoner may be released on his or her own recognizance, released after bail is paid, or be remanded to a constable for transportation to the County Jail.

The problem seems to be that, with the exception of officers from the host and surrounding communities, the centers are not being utilized. According to data compiled by CONSAD from the Court of Common Pleas of Allegheny County, there were an estimated 17,000 cases processed in District Justice Courts in 2001. Local District Justices handled 10,400 (61.2%), Night Court processed 5,100 (30%) and the RBCs processed the remaining 1,500 (8.8%).

Data indicate that local police are not using the RBCs. One reason cited in the CONSAD report is that the RBCs are only convenient for a handful of municipal officers and that during the late hours travel into and out of Pittsburgh is not difficult. The road layout in Allegheny County is a “hub and spoke” system where all major highways lead into the City. However, travel to and from one municipality to another can be time consuming and inconvenient for officers.

Other than arraignment, there are two other uses for the RBCs: identification and issuing protection from abuse orders (PFAs). The Pennsylvania State Police estimate that the three booking centers identified and fingerprinted 2,586 people in 2001. That works out to about 72 persons per RBC per month. According to CONSAD “the average budgetary cost per person fingerprinted at the RBCs during that year has been \$467.33.” They further state that the sheriff’s deputies that were hired specifically for the centers, are overqualified and over paid to be fingerprinters.

Defenders of the RBCs claim that they facilitate victims of abuse obtain Protection from Abuse orders (PFAs). However, according to the CONSAD report over a 17-month period of 2000-2002, the three centers only issued 86 PFAs—about 5 per month. The Hampton RBC recorded 71, Penn Hills 11 and McKeesport 4. These numbers are indicative of the low usage that these centers generate despite their convenient locales.

In short, the County’s three regional booking centers are being operated at a high cost to county taxpayers while providing little service. When originally instituted, they were to be a short-term experiment that was to be funded with a federal grant that never came about, leaving County taxpayers to foot the bill. Instead of redeploying deputies to man the “temporary” centers, the Sheriff’s office hired permanent new deputy sheriffs.

Those who were to benefit most from the RBCs, namely municipal police officers, have expressed their opinion clearly by not using them. The experiment has failed. Tax dollars can be better used elsewhere. The County needs to close the RBCs.

---

**Frank Gamrat, Ph.D. Senior Research Associate**

---

*Listen to the Allegheny Institute Report with guest Tribune-Review Editorial Page Editor Colin McNickle, tonight at 7:05 p.m. on 1410 KQV.*

*Policy Briefs may be reprinted as long as proper attribution is given.*

*For more information about this and other topics, please visit our website:*

*[www.alleghenyinstitute.org](http://www.alleghenyinstitute.org)*

<p>Allegheny Institute for Public Policy 305 Mt. Lebanon Blvd.* Suite 305* Pittsburgh PA 15234 Phone (412) 440-0079 * Fax (412) 440-0085 E-mail: <a href="mailto:aipp@alleghenyinstitute.org">aipp@alleghenyinstitute.org</a></p>
---