

## New Program to Help Inmates In Full Swing

*Critics wonder if it will be truly effective.*

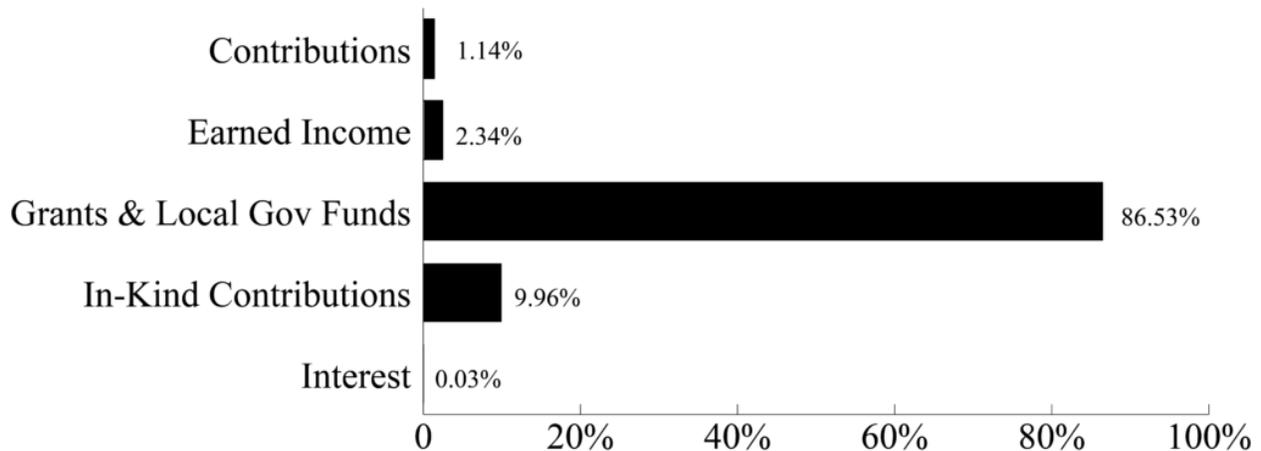
For Journalism 202: Digital Journalism

More than half a million dollars was given to two local jails in 2021 to give inmates a second chance at life and reduce overcrowding in jails. Advocates continue to hope new programs funded by the grants can finally solve long-standing problems in the criminal justice system.

The Rockbridge Regional Jail and the Alleghany County Jail partnered with the Total Action for Progress (TAP) in 2021, a private nonprofit “anti-poverty organization” that offers direct services to assist people to “overcome their problems and improve their lives.”

TAPs received \$552,095 in a grant from the Department of Justice during the fiscal year 2021, as a part of the Second Chance Act of 2007, to provide assistance to inmates returning into society. That grant makes up a small portion of the nearly \$22 million worth of grants that TAPs receive.

Total Action for Progress (TAP) Annual Income



*Data for this graph was found from the TAP Annual Report 2021 – 2022*

The \$552,095 in grant money is being used to provide weekly support groups with participants, one-on-one case management, transportation assistance, substance abuse and mental health treatment, educational services, and “direct services” including securing employment and housing for over 120 individuals.

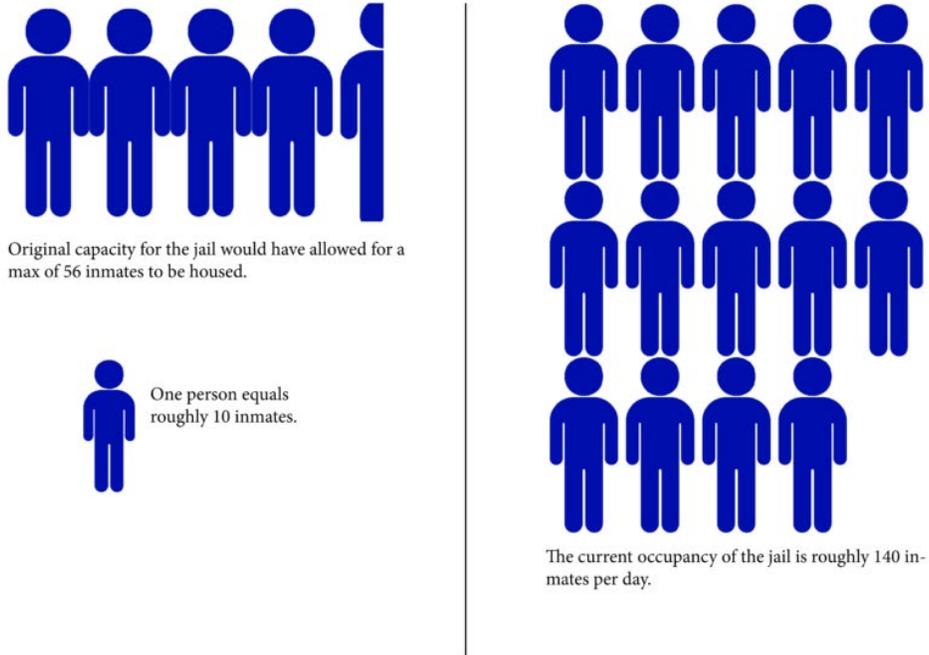
James Wall, a TAPs case worker, cited how many individuals lack a driver’s license or it is suspended when they leave jail. A TAP reentry program provides “the financial support for the formerly incarcerated to cover transportation because they need a job in order to get housing and other necessities.”

Brian Javins, an administrator for the TAP Covington office, went on to outline that “when someone goes to jail, they get taxed on sorts of things that have nothing to do with their original charge... It is our job to make sure that a person can have a clear path to services that they need in order to be successful once released.”

One issue TAP reentry programs are trying to solve is prison overcrowding. When built in 1987, the Rockbridge Regional Jail was supposed to only hold 56 inmates. Today the jail houses over 130 inmates.

In addition, the jail typically sends approximately 20-30 more inmates to other jail facilities due to a lack of space.

### Rockbridge Regional Jail Overcrowding



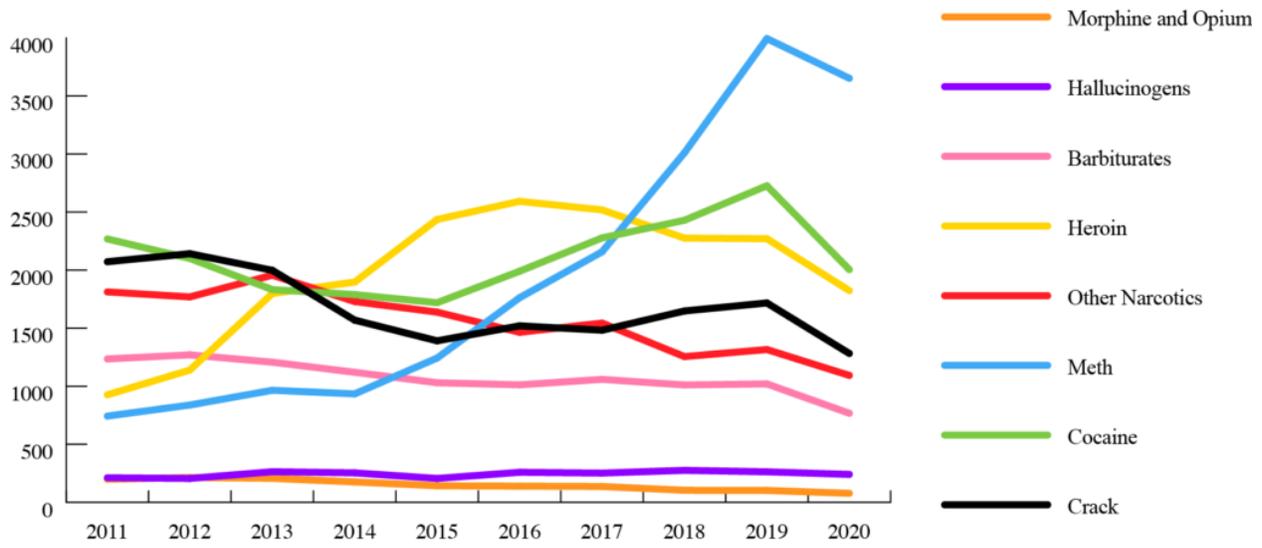
*Data for this information was found from internal police data from the Rockbridge Regional Jail*

That overcrowding is driven largely by the high number of repeat offenders.

Internal prison data shows that 85% of inmates housed in the jail today have previous criminal records, many of which are for drug offenses, most often using and/or distributing methamphetamine, according to Chad Hamilton, chief of inmate services.

The Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services reported this year that from 2011 to 2022 the rate of drug arrests decreased by 29% in the state. However, the rate of arrests involving methamphetamine increased by nearly 391% while arrests for cocaine and crack decreased.

Number of drug arrests by drug type (excluding marijuana), 2011–2020



Data for this graph was found from the *Virginia Crime Insight by Beyond 20/20*

Rockbridge Circuit Court Judge Christopher B. Russell, said drugs have been a consistent problem in the area even when he was a prosecutor 18 years ago.

“We have had significant substance abuse problems in this area since I was a prosecutor 18 years ago and a few years ago meth came back to the forefront,” Russell said.

The partnership between TAPs and the Rockbridge and Alleghany county jails to combat issues plaguing the criminal justice system is new. Neither jail has ever worked with outside group working trying to make reentry into society easier for inmates.

“This is our first shot at actually making a positive impact in this particular area and if we do that, I feel confident that we will have positive results,” said Derek Alamarode, superintendent of Rockbridge Regional Jail.

TAP officials believe reentry programs are off to a good start despite some challenges.

“Only about 25% finish the program,” Wall said. “The retention rate is a little low because some people just are not ready. A lot of our people have an addiction and they’ll come in wanting to change but can’t change.”

Wall and Javin hope to increase the completion rate to bolster their application to renew their current grant funding during 2023.

“The bottom line is we try to keep people from going back to jail,” Javin said. “If we can keep that recidivism rate low, then the government is looking at it and can hypothetically say, well, okay, you guys are doing a great job here’s some more money.”

However, some involved in the criminal justice system worry that programs offered by TAPs will become like “every other reform program.”

“Programs come along all the time that attempt to provide the support necessary for reentry that transition from a jail or a prison back into the community,” Peter Boatner, the head public defender for the Rockbridge area, said.

“There’s been just a long series of attempts to find a way to do that and in my 20+ years in the criminal justice system, I have never seen one that did a great job... over and over good initiatives start and stay in existence for a little while and then peter out.”

All impacted by TAP programs from inmates, judges, jail officials, and public defenders expressed their hope that the program will be successful. Only the future will tell.