The second National Conference of the Smart Decarceration Initiative, held November 2-4, 2017, attracted more than 1,500 participants from across the country. Over three days, attendees – including government officials, persons directly impacted by incarceration, academics, students, policy makers, researchers, clinicians, legal professionals, program managers, nonprofit and religious leaders – shared innovative solutions to reduce incarceration rates in ways that are effective, sustainable, and socially just. The goal: to promote the integration of research, practice, and policy into building – and sustaining – smart decarceration approaches.

Entitled, Tools and Tactics: Promoting Solutions to Advance the Era of Smart Decarceration, the conference, led by Co-Founders and Co-Directors Matthew Epperson, Associate Professor, University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration and Carrie Pettus-Davis, Assistant Professor, Brown School, Washington University in St. Louis, included a range of forums designed to encourage and engage public and attendee perspectives and insights. Conference activities – including public events, keynote addresses, panel discussions and breakout sessions – challenged participants, inspired debate, and offered new ideas.

Guided by national experts, including people with lived experience, policy makers, and advocates, the Smart Decarceration Initiative is leading the research and guiding the national conversation to implement reforms to dramatically reduce incarceration rates and prepare the social work profession for leadership in decarceration strategies.
The Smart Decarceration Initiative thanks these generous sponsors for their support: Robert R. McCormick Foundation; MacArthur Foundation; Equitas; The University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration; The University of Chicago, Office of the Provost; UChicago Urban; Chicago Center for Youth Violence Prevention; The University of Chicago Pozen Family Center for Human Rights; The University of Chicago Center for Health Administration Studies; Washington University Brown School of Social Work; Center for Social Development, Washington University in St. Louis; Washington University in St. Louis, Office of the Provost.

Special guest speaker Senator Dick Durbin (D-IL); Carrie Pettus-Davis and Matthew Epperson, Co-Founders and Co-Directors of the Smart Decarceration Initiative; keynote speaker Karol Mason, President, John Jay College

Public events Kickoff event. Keynote speaker Susan Burton, in conversation with Reuben Jonathan Miller, Assistant Professor at the University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration, read from her award-winning memoir Becoming Mrs. Burton, and discussed her evolution from incarceree to advocate for the formerly incarcerated.

An Evening with Shaun King: How to Fight for Justice and Win. Writer, political commentator, and activist Shaun King energized a standing-room-only crowd at Rockefeller Memorial Chapel as he described strategies for organizing, planning, and driving social justice and change.

Special speaker “Most people believe in a world of second chances. Now it’s up to us.” Senator Dick Durbin (D-IL) addressed the conference describing the factors leading to “an era of mass incarceration that is unjust and fiscally unsound.” He spoke of ways to break the cycle of recidivism and movingly recounted the personal stories of individuals who had reclaimed and rebuilt their lives after incarceration.

Keynote speakers Karol Mason, President, John Jay College, a former U.S. Assistant Attorney General, described how the “involvement of formerly incarcerated leaders improved the work of the U.S. Department of Justice exponentially.” Marc Mauer, Executive Director, The Sentencing Project, reminded the attendees that “we have to change the conversation and we have to shift the public and media environment to create social change.” In closing the conference, Ronald S. Sullivan, Jr., Clinical Professor of Law and Director, Criminal Justice Institute, Harvard Law School, said, “justice does not just happen. Each one of us had to make justice happen.”

SMART DECARCERATION INITIATIVE CONFERENCE AT A GLANCE

1,500+ attendees
5 keynote speakers
23 presenters
8 lunch breakout sessions
5 expert panels on:
- Implementing Decarceration-Focused Policy Innovations
- Addressing Violence and Criminal Justice Reform in Chicago
- Driving Change: People Most Impacted by Incarceration
- Reducing Behavioral Health Inequities in the Criminal Justice System
- Organizing for Decarceration

1 community-wide event
18 session facilitators

Media coverage on CLTV, WGN, Fox, and WBEZ

Keynote speaker Marc Mauer, Executive Director, The Sentencing Project; panel members Charles E. Lewis, Jr., Kristy Pierce Danford, Marc Levin, and Katie Hill; keynote speaker Ronald S. Sullivan, Jr. Clinical Professor of Law and Director, Criminal Justice Institute, Harvard Law School

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