

KNOW YOUR SHERIFF

SHERIFFS: A BRIEF GUIDE

WHAT IS A SHERIFF?

Sheriffs are elected law enforcement officials. There are 14 sheriffs in Massachusetts—one for every county. They serve terms of six years, which is the longest term that state officials can serve in Massachusetts.

WHAT DO SHERIFFS DO?

Sheriffs play an important role in the criminal legal system. They have several key responsibilities that have profound effects on community safety:

- **Overseeing county jails and houses of correction**, where over 6,000 people were housed in March 2022—more than half of the state’s incarcerated population. This includes people held on bail, and those serving sentences of up to two-and-a-half years. Sheriffs can also decide to hold immigration detainees for the federal government.
- **Providing necessary services for incarcerated people**, such as physical and mental health programs, drug addiction treatment and emotional support; skills, education and vocational training; and reentry services.
- **Controlling multi-million-dollar budgets** allocated by the state legislature.

HOW CAN SHERIFFS HELP WITH THE OPIOID CRISIS AND PUBLIC HEALTH?

Disproportionate numbers of incarcerated people live with substance use disorder. While incarcerated, they face significant risks of overdose and death. Sheriffs oversee the implementation of programs to help people get the addiction treatment they need. Sheriffs can also help to limit outbreaks of infectious diseases like COVID by following the guidance of the CDC and other public health experts, and providing easy access to both preventative care and medical treatment.

HOW CAN SHERIFFS HELP LOWER RECIDIVISM RATES?

Sheriffs decide whether they focus on punishing incarcerated people or trying to assist them through education, substance use programs, and mental health services. As studies show, the latter approach helps people reenter society and stay out of jails, houses of correction, and prisons.



ARE SHERIFFS INVOLVED IN IMMIGRATION ENFORCEMENT?

Sheriffs generally play no role in federal immigration enforcement. Some sheriffs in Massachusetts have voluntarily used their resources to help Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) enforce federal immigration laws, despite not being required to do so. This has split families apart and makes undocumented immigrants and their families afraid to report crimes or abuse.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN SHERIFFS' ACTIONS ARE LEFT UNCHECKED?

Despite being state employees, sheriffs have no day-to-day supervision. As a result, some sheriffs have mistreated people in their care, including one instance in which a sheriff used brutal tactics like dogs and pepper spray to subdue people in his custody. There are very few ways to hold sheriffs accountable if they abuse their power or resources—aside from elections.

WHO DO SHERIFFS ANSWER TO?

Like all elected officials, sheriffs answer to their voters. However, most voters are unfamiliar with sheriffs and their responsibilities. A recent poll shows that only 17% of voters can correctly name their local sheriff, 90% of voters do not know that sheriffs serve a six-year term, and 41% do not know that sheriffs are elected at all. In 2016, not a single incumbent sheriff lost his seat, and only four out of 14 faced any challengers at all.

HOW CAN WE HOLD SHERIFFS ACCOUNTABLE?

Voters can move sheriffs to adopt and implement policies that make our communities safer and more just for all. We have the power to elect sheriffs who are committed to transformation and healing—not punishment, retribution, or cruelty.

WHEN IS MY SHERIFF UP FOR RE-ELECTION?

All 14 sheriff seats in Massachusetts will be on the ballot in 2022. Here are the important dates:

- **Primary election: September 6, 2022**
- **General election: November 8, 2022**

HOW CAN I GET INVOLVED?

Help us spread the word! **Know Your Sheriff** is a public education campaign by the ACLU of Massachusetts to build voter awareness about the life-changing decisions that sheriffs make.



For campaign updates and volunteer opportunities, go to aclum.org/KnowYourSheriff