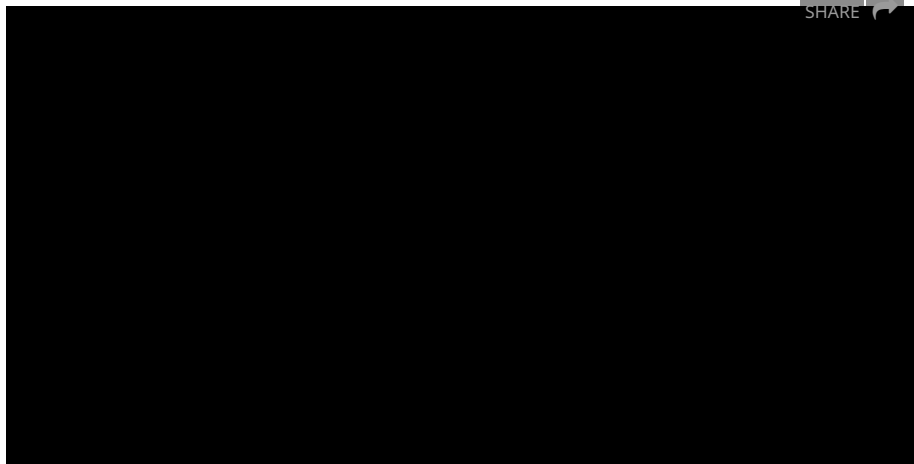


LOCAL

# The staying power — and unrelenting police conflict — of Charlotte’s jail support

BY PRAVEENA SOMASUNDARAM

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Mecklenburg County Sheriff’s Office deputies have arrested an unknown number of people who have been stationed in front of the jail in uptown Charlotte for weeks. BY JOSHUA KOMER

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The community members and supply tents still hold space outside the jail, long after nightly marches and vigils have ended.

For almost 75 days, jail support volunteers have been outside the Mecklenburg County Sheriff’s Office, providing food, water, clothes, cigarettes, medical supplies and other assistance for people released. Initially, activists organized jail support and a supply/medic station to help people who were arrested, participating in demonstrations or injured during protests in Charlotte. Now they’re serving anyone released from the detention center.

“Jail support in Charlotte is our response to the police continuing to lock people up,” said Ash Williams, a core organizer of activist group Charlotte Uprising.

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Most of June was consumed by [protests in Charlotte](#) after the death of George Floyd. Since then, the jail support station in uptown has proved to have staying power.

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Still, it's not been without controversy.

Tensions between law enforcement and volunteers have boiled over several times over the past two months. Sheriff's deputies have forcefully arrested dozens of activists who refused to relocate the jail support station further away from the jail.

Mecklenburg Sheriff Garry McFadden has accused the group of blocking bus lanes, harassing deputies and defecating and vandalizing property around the county jail. Activists say they're being unfairly targeted and that the community care they provide should not be criminalized.

In a meeting just this week, county commissioners discussed the relocation or removal of jail support. Chair George Dunlap cited damage to county property and the "attitudes and behavior" of jail support volunteers, who he said were "clearly violating the law" by not wearing masks and intimidating others.

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department Deputy Chief Jeff Estes said there is a meeting scheduled Friday to discuss complaints.

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Williams and others with jail support, though, vow they're not budging or stopping their services.



Volunteers with Jail Support and Charlotte Uprising restock drinks and other food items to distribute to those who are released from jail in Uptown Charlotte, NC on Monday, July 20, 2020. A large police presence was in front of the jail after the Charlotte Uprising group confronted Sheriff's Os arresting a man outside the jail Monday afternoon. Joshua Komer *THE CHARLOTTE OBSERVER*

Jail support organizers who spoke with the Observer recently say the resistance and near-constant threat of removal of the station from city and county leaders has left them more determined.

"It just shows that law enforcement and these people who don't want jail support to be there are afraid of community support because that's all we're doing, is providing for the community," Ashley Muldrow said.

"So if that scares them, that's a problem because that's their job. That's what they should be doing."

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#### WHAT IS CHARLOTTE JAIL SUPPORT?

The jail support program operates as part of Charlotte Uprising, which began in 2016 after the police shooting of Keith Lamont Scott. The group advocates for "defunding" police and reallocating tax dollars currently spent on law enforcement toward efforts like mental health services, affordable housing, and more.

Williams described jail support as "essential," particularly because they provide supplies such as face coverings during the coronavirus pandemic. Jail support operates 24/7 outside the county jail, often offering transportation or temporary housing for people who are released with nowhere else to go.

Some people leaving the jail are released without proper clothing, jail support volunteers say. The sheriff's office, though, has denied that.

Mecklenburg County operates a voluntary Re-Entry Services program for those released from jail or with a history of incarceration. According to the county website, the program offers assistance for participants in employment stability, service engagement and continuing education. The city has other programs such as Communities in Schools' Re-Entry Program for youth in partnership with the sheriff's office and Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools and the Reentry Housing Alliance.

However, Williams said jail support is different. Jail support is there in the middle of the night when inmates who are homeless or have no family waiting for them are released.



Volunteers with Jail Support and Charlotte Uprising distribute clothes and basic items to those who are released from jail in Uptown Charlotte, NC on Monday, July 20, 2020. After dozens of arrests and tensions with the Sheriff's Office the group moved from in front of the County Jail to across the street behind the Mecklenburg County Courthouse. Joshua Komer *THE CHARLOTTE OBSERVER*

Jail support has existed in various forms over time. The Charlotte group itself has been doing bail support for years. Organizations like Philadelphia-based Up Against the Law Legal Collective and national group Popular Resistance also encourage jail support.

Activists have challenged racism through the criminal justice system for decades in the U.S. In 1961, Black students in Rock Hill, South Carolina, began the anti-segregation "Jail, No Bail" movement, demanding to be arrested after sit-ins rather than paying fines.

A 1961 Charlotte Observer article obtained from the Robinson-Spangler Carolina Room of the Charlotte Mecklenburg Library stated the Black student leaders in Rock Hill hoped the "Jail, No Bail" tactic would "bring larger numbers of demonstrators to Rock Hill to fill the jails and thus increase the pressure for desegregation of luncheon counter in the South."

Modern movements see activists not refusing bail but instead forming well-organized efforts to track who has been arrested, crowd-source bond money through online fundraising and await both fellow protesters and others as they're released from custody.

According to Williams, the group has made contact with over 500 people since the physical presence of jail support began on May 29, aligning with the beginning of

[George Floyd protests in Charlotte](#) against police brutality.

Aside from direct supplies, volunteers have also arranged transportation and temporary housing and offered their phones for additional calls outside the jail. Volunteers from the Social Justice Emotional Response Collective also do shifts to provide mental health support and help de-escalate situations.

“It’s been really wild to try to help someone in the middle of the night when there are no other resources open for them, but that is essentially what we’re doing,” Williams said.

Jail support currently has about 19 leaders and even more volunteers.

Williams, who identifies as transgender, said organizers are primarily Black and transgender, white cisgender women and Black cisgender men who are homeless.

“I’m really proud of what we’re building and I could not have dreamed it up even back in 2016 when I was hoping for a jail support situation that looks something like what this one looks like today,” Williams said.

“But also I couldn’t have imagined that we would have been so supported and that we would continue to be going this long.”

Volunteers said that people released from the Mecklenburg Detention Center and who walk to jail support often need reassurance that the services are free for them.

“There’s not hoops to jump through,” said Winston-Salem resident Kaki Metcalfe. “They’re human and they’re worthy and that’s enough.”

Metcalfe coordinates supply drops for jail support. As a single parent with a 10-year-old daughter, she said the supply drops are a good way to be involved and avoid arrest risk outside the jail. Local businesses like the Common Market in Plaza Midwood have allowed space for community members to drop off supplies.

Muldrow recalled one man she met while volunteering at jail support. He said that people in jail had told him to go to jail support.

“We do it for them,” Muldrow said. “We want them to know that we’re there for them, that we’re here. When he knew that, that was beautiful to me.”

Jail support volunteers fundraise collaboratively using online platforms like Venmo and Cash App, with requests for donations through Charlotte Uprising social media. They also post online when interacting with sheriff’s deputies, asking supporters to come to the jail or holding press conferences for Mecklenburg District Attorney Spencer Merriweather to drop protest-related charges.

Before the order to disperse and arrests on June 18, McFadden cited the harassment of law enforcement officers as one of the reasons behind his request for jail support to leave the sidewalk in front of the jail. Jail support organizers and volunteers are intentionally vocal toward officers.

“Jail support is and always will be an anti-police space,” Metcalfe said.

“People who are there may hear things like ‘F--- 12,’ but also other types of things being said to officers. I love that.”

(The “12” in the phrase refers to police.)

These tactics, though, have drawn ire from McFadden and others.

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### **BUILD A 'BRIDGE'**

Since the beginning of June, law enforcement response to jail support has ranged from relocation orders to mass arrests. As tensions have continued escalating, both the sheriff's office and jail support have held press conference addressing their concerns.



A Mecklenburg County Sheriff officer apprehends a protesters who was holding a tire iron as demonstrators clash with law enforcement in Charlotte, NC on Thursday, June 18, 2020. Sheriff Gary McFadden instructed the jail support station outside the county jail to disperse by 2 p.m. The support group handed out supplies and help get transportation to those who just left jail. The group had been there in some form for the past two weeks around the clock. Joshua Komer *THE CHARLOTTE OBSERVER*

On June 18, sheriff's [deputies arrested 43 people](#) after jail support volunteers refused to leave the sidewalk in front of the jail. Earlier in the day, Charlotte Uprising organized a sit-in after McFadden had given the group four hours to vacate. A [Twitter video posted by Charlotte Uprising](#) shows McFadden saying he'd provide movers and a truck to help.

After the four hours were up, a crowd of community members had gathered with volunteers at the jail support station. At around 2:15 p.m. deputies gave an order to disperse and then began making arrests, many after physical struggles. After these arrests, jail support moved their supplies to the sidewalk across the street from the jail.

The next week, [activist groups held a press conference](#) demanding prosecutors drop nearly 200 protest-related charges, including those from the 43 jail support arrests.

Last month, conflict between local officials and protesters continued.

On July 12 — after inmate [Michael Daniel Mangan died in his cell](#) early that morning — a small group of people tore down a Black Lives Matter banner hanging in front of the sheriff's office. McFadden has tied that incident to jail support.

In a press conference eight days later, McFadden said officers had witnessed when the sign was torn down, but no arrests were made. He also said officers were not

involved in Mangan's death, but said protesters created an "agenda" based on it and threw red paint on the front of the sheriff's office.

"We understand the dynamics between law enforcement and the community now," McFadden said. "I would love to build that bridge, but if you're not willing to help me bring the material to build that bridge, and you constantly want conflict, then we have to move to other measures."

McFadden said he believes in re-entry and jail support, but disagreed with certain activists' approach. This sentiment has been echoed by some county leaders.

"I have no problems with what they're trying to do, but where they're doing it is a problem for me," Commissioner Vilma Leake told the Observer recently.

"And I'm thinking about the safety of my citizens of Mecklenburg County and the health problems there."

According to McFadden and Chief Deputy Rodney Collins, the jail support station could be removed on the grounds of public safety and occupying county property without permission.

"I don't have an issue with being called names or things like that," Collins said. "What I do have a concern with is when it interferes, or others that have to work and be around this area or access these facilities don't feel comfortable."

Both he and McFadden say they believe crime victims have been avoiding criminal justice services due to jail support being nearby. They both also took issue with a recent incident where deputies allege volunteers from jail support interfered with an arrest being made near the jail.

On July 20, a young woman was being assaulted outside the Mecklenburg County arrest processing area and a deputy who had witnessed the assault was going to arrest a man involved, according to McFadden. He said members from jail support then intervened, blocking the deputy from making the arrest.

"This is serious because it's going to get out of hand more than it is now," McFadden said.

McFadden said "the door is always open" for jail support members to talk with him. He said he also is upset about violence against Black people.

"As a law enforcement officer, I am first a Black male. I will die a Black male," McFadden said.

"When I retire, (I can say I spent) 40 years in law enforcement, but I was 60 years a Black male ...

"You don't think these things upset me every night? You don't think kids dying in the street every night upset me?"

### **'ABOLISH THE POLICE'**

During a Mecklenburg Board of Commissioners meeting Wednesday night, Estes told commissioners that a meeting is scheduled to discuss a response to complaints about jail support. Estes said the decision to remove jail support would have to be made collectively by all local governments.

"I believe that some of them, quite frankly, want to be forcibly removed so that they can share that virtually for their cause," Estes said.

Commissioner Trevor Fuller said elected officials should decide.

"We cannot let that situation continue to persist," Fuller said. "It's unsafe."

According to Collins on Thursday, no official decisions have been made about jail support's removal. He said the sheriff's office has been tracking issues with jail support over the past few weeks. The Friday meeting will involve the sheriff's office, some local officials and CMPD.

During the July 20 press conference, McFadden cited his efforts for re-entry, including job fairs, voting registration, digital literacy programs and church services held at the jail. He said he is willing to collaborate with jail support to "make a difference in a city that is very tense."

Yet the tension and disapproval have not shaken the mission of Charlotte jail support. Muldrow said there is no bridge to build, when jail support believes in abolishing prisons and defunding police.

"There's no common medium at all. It will never be because genuinely what we want ... (is to) abolish the police," Muldrow said.

If police weren't on the job, she said, jail support wouldn't even be necessary.

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Volunteers with Jail Support and Charlotte Uprising provide basic items to those who are released from jail, July 20, 2020. Jail support in Charlotte, Mecklenburg NC, now faces threats of removal by police. The sheriff's office wants activists to relocate away from the detention center. JOSHUA KOMER *THE CHARLOTTE OBSERVER*

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