As part of the Challenging E-Carceration project, the Chicago Community Bond Fund and the Center for Media Justice held a program at the University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration to change the narrative about electronic monitoring (EM) as an alternative to jail and prison. The nearly 100 people attended the July 17, 2018 program, representing the pretrial, parole, youth justice, and immigration sectors, united to develop concrete steps and strategies to work on ending the dehumanizing practice of EM.

The Smart Decarceration Project at the University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration, along with 20 sponsoring organizations, supported and hosted this first-of-its-kind event, which included two panels followed by small group sessions where attendees directly impacted by EM shared personal stories, raised additional issues and questions, and brainstormed strategies and next steps.

**Panel 1: Taking the Mask Off Digital Prisons**
Facilitated by Robert Agnew of JustLeadershipUSA, panelists representing the Chicago Community Bond Fund, the Education Justice Project Alumni, Precious Blood Ministry, and the Lawndale Christian Legal Center spoke about the emotional, psychological, and social toll of being monitored through an electronic monitoring device during house arrest. Panelists spoke about the difficulties caused by EM, including re-entry and finding a job with the time and distance limitations placed on them, the psychological effects of living in constant fear of going to jail, and the difficulties of raising children. While many people view EM more favorably than jail, panelists emphasized EM’s dehumanizing qualities, and how it violates the rights of those subjected to

---

**What is E-Carceration?**

- E-Carceration is the use of technology to deprive people of their liberty. Electronic monitoring (EM) combined with house arrest represent the most obvious, and likely the most punitive, form of E-Carceration.

- The most common usages of electronic monitoring are: as a condition of pretrial release (often with bail), as a condition of parole or probation, as part of a sentence (especially in DUI cases), as a condition of release from an immigration detention center while a person awaits judgement in a deportation or asylum case, or as part of a dispensation in a juvenile case. They are also used in cases of domestic abuse as a way of monitoring a suspect’s location in relation to past or potential victims.

- Common rules for people on monitors: house arrest, exclusion zones, daily two-hour charging, and in some cases, constant adult supervision.

Source: [http://centerformediajustice.org/](http://centerformediajustice.org/)
it. Panelists described how EM impacts not only the individual subjected to house arrest, but all family members as well. EM, they pointed out, is a way of moving jail and prisons into communities, which takes a great psychological and social toll on families and communities. The panelists’ personal testimonies raised a very different narrative that highlighted the harms and abuses of this “digital prison.”

Panel 2: Resisting Electronic Monitoring
Facilitated by Monica Cosby of Moms United Against Violence, panelists discussed the necessary next steps to lessen or eliminate the use of electronic monitoring in Illinois, in addition to short-term mitigations.

Panelists described various legal strategies to resist EM. James Kilgore, Director, Challenging E-Carceration, highlighted an EM Reform Bill that would ban use of EM for people on parole in Illinois, eliminating about 85% of people on EM. Cathryn Crawford, Litigation Director, Lawndale Christian Legal Center, spoke about the importance of educating, litigating, and legislating to address the abuses that occur to people on EM, the issue of sheriffs not respecting judge’s orders, and ways to deal with judges and attorneys that are broadly and indiscriminately applying the use of EM. She suggested such additional legal strategies as litigating individual cases, class action lawsuits, filing a complaint against the Cook County sheriff, and finding a judge who would create a general order that requires a “preponderance of evidence” that a person is a safety risk in order to be put on EM.

Panelists also noted the high tax burden for EM. Kilgore and Irene Romulo, Director, Chicago Community Bond Fund, pointed out that the Illinois Department of Corrections spends millions of dollars each year on EM without any research showing its effectiveness. Kilgore and Romulo proposed spending the same money on other proven methods that help people appear for their court dates, or fund much needed re-entry services like employment, housing, and mental health treatment. Emmanuel Andre, Attorney and Restorative Justice Practitioner, Northside Transformative Law Center, urged that at least as much should be spent on support services for people while they are being monitored electronically.

To most effectively resist the use of EM, panelists argued that priority should be given to certain populations. Its use should be eliminated for teenagers, mothers, and primary care givers, as well as with people of color, who are disproportionately impacted by EM.

Panelists also shared strategies to lessen the harmful short-term impacts of EM. Andre pointed out that electronic home monitoring assumes that all people have a home that matches the court’s definition. Thus, what is acceptable as a “home” should be expanded, and individuals should be able to be monitored in housing where services are available to them. Romulo also highlighted simple ways the experience can be approved in the short-term – ensuring that instructions describe restrictions while being monitored electronically, assuring that monitoring equipment works and fits properly (not too heavy and not causing burns), and providing clear instructions and contact information in the case of malfunction.

While mass incarceration is on a downward trend, the use of EM is growing. The number of people on EM has increased by 140% in the last decade. Today, 125,000 devices are in use in the criminal justice system and all 50 states use EM in some form. EM is an unacceptable alternative to incarceration and its impacts must be mitigated or eliminated to truly achieve smart decarceration.

To learn more about the event, see the blog post “Putting Freedom on the Table: A Chicago Forum on Electronic Monitoring.”

For more information about the Challenging E-Carceration project, visit www.challengingecarceration.org or contact James Kilgore, Director.

smartdecarceration.org Follow us on Twitter: @SmartDecar For information about future efforts: SmartDecar@ssa.uchicago.edu