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## *Abby Walsh*

Director, Council on Criminal Justice

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**A**bbby Walsh is the director of the Council on Criminal Justice (CCJ). Before co-founding the Council on Criminal Justice, Walsh led state engagements for the Pew Charitable Trusts, where she spent more than five years partnering with policymakers to enact data-driven solutions that safely reduced prison populations, improved outcomes for youth in juvenile justice systems, and expanded treatment for substance use disorders. Earlier, she worked to modernize court practices and data collection in the federal judiciary. Walsh is a New Leaders Council Fellow ('17) and a graduate of American University's School of Public Affairs (BA '07) and the Trachtenberg School of Public Policy and Public Administration at the George Washington University (MPA '12). In February 2020, Thomas Rachko interviewed Walsh for *Policy Perspectives*.

*This interview has been edited for clarity and brevity.*

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### **Policy Perspectives: If you can, tell me what were you doing prior to pursuing your master's in Public Administration?**

**Abby Walsh:** In all honesty, for a good bit, I was hiding out from the economic recession. I had the “good fortune” of graduating from undergrad in 2007 as things were starting to go sideways. I had been here in DC for undergrad and had an opportunity to work alongside the federal government and federal contractors on programs that focused on drug courts. I knew the justice policy field was of interest to me, but I also realized I had to get a graduate degree. But things were getting tough out there.

I went home to Boston and sidetracked for a little bit by working in higher education. At the time, I wasn't quite sure where it was going, but it led to five years of working within the administration of two major universities: Boston University and then George Washington University. Through that, I got a crash course in nonprofit administration but also this other side of the world that I didn't know about as a student so focused in justice policy.

Of course, then it led to a great opportunity for me to get to know GW's graduate program even better. GW really stood out as a place where I could gain the skills that I needed while remaining embedded in the network of DC and having the opportunity to apply those skills every day.

### **PP: You touched on this a little bit, but what drove you to the Trachtenberg School in particular? What stood out to you about the program? And why did you decide on pursuing a master's in Public Administration?**

**AW:** I did my undergraduate degree at American University so I had already spent a couple of years in DC and really gained an appreciation for how applied you could make a degree program in DC – that there were opportunities to intern. If you were interested in working on public policy or administration, you had an opportunity to see that and experience it every day. I knew that when I did my graduate program, I wanted a similar opportunity.

I wanted to be able to apply what I was learning. I wanted my graduate education to feel like part of my career and not a pause in my career. I thought that GW gave me the best opportunity to do that - to be building skills, learning with a supportive faculty, with the support of the program but still be putting myself in the thick of my field. Especially for me, where I was trying to transition back from working in non-profit administration and higher education to my chosen field - justice policy.

### **PP: What was it like serving on staff at GW while you were pursuing your degree? Did it help inform your studies and your future career path?**

**AW:** First off, it was great that, by the time I started my program, I knew how to navigate GW. That meant both geographically – I knew where everything was on campus – but I also knew how to navigate this big school - big schools are always bureaucratic - and how to function in that setting. That was really fortunate.

But the biggest thing that I gained by being an employee at GW was a better perspective on faculty and on relationships with faculty. Every day at work, I led recruitment for the graduate program of the school of public health, working with faculty as peers and as colleagues. Naturally when

you walk into a classroom, you view your faculty and professors and instructors as somewhat removed. They're experts, they're someone who is here to teach you, and there's a natural teacher-student relationship. Having a relationship with other faculty at the university helped me break down barriers and approach faculty as colleagues as much as instructors. That helped me to forge good relationships and learn from our faculty in a different way at Trachtenberg.

**PP: Speaking about some of the faculty members, they like to say that their classes are meant to help expand our “toolkits” – were there any professors or courses in particular that taught you lessons that you use in your work day to day?**

**AW:** There are so many classes that I go back to in my head over and over again. Some of them were classes that really changed my perspective. I took a class with Michael Wiseman on the economics of welfare programs. For me, coming from a place of privilege where I didn't have to take advantage of the welfare programs that are available in the United States, it put me in a position to much better understand not just what families are up against in gaining access to these programs but what states, governments, and communities are up against in trying to provide for people in the policy decisions that they make. That was a big perspective shift for me.

I also did an independent study with Hal Wolman. At the time, I knew I wanted to focus on justice policy but there weren't too many courses on that at Trachtenberg. So, I did an independent study that looked at urban policy and how cities and communities were addressing justice issues. That taught me to fearlessly put my ideas out there – that I had something to say in the justice policy field.

The most critical thing I come back to every day is that Trachtenberg taught me to be a strong policy writer. I can write clearly and succinctly about policy and analyze it in a way that is useful. I go back to our “Policy Analysis” class over and over again.

Last year I started a nonprofit. There were classes that, at the time, didn't stand out to me as being the most useful to me at that moment in my career. But you better believe, in the last year, I have been reaching for my nonprofit budgeting textbook and dusting off logic models. That is what I live and breathe now in my current career. The program was clearly designed well to serve me over the years.

**PP: Following graduation, you went on to work at the Pew Charitable Trusts. After working in higher education and the federal government, what drove you to want to work at a nonprofit, nongovernmental organization?**

**AW:** Pew is a fantastic organization and has such a strong reputation in the field. Naturally, it is a great place to want to be for your early years in policy. As a result, many GW Trachtenberg alums can be found there. I went there specifically to work with the Public Safety Performance Project. This project seeks to assist states with enacting evidence-based criminal justice policy that reduces prison populations, controls corrections costs, and protects public safety – those are the three pillars of their work.

Knowing that I wanted to dedicate my career to justice policy, going to work at a place like Pew meant that I would have exposure to many different states that approach policy differently

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and manage this issue differently. Over the years, Pew has helped dozens of states shift their direction on criminal justice policy. Through that, I have gotten exposure to how justice policy and criminal justice reform can look in a rural, frontier state like Alaska, where I worked. But then also in Maryland, where they are facing very different problems of urban density. Working at Pew gave me the broadest lens to gain an understanding of the issues that are facing the field and that are facing states and communities.

**PP: Are there any particular projects at Pew that you feel have prepared you for your current role?**

**AW:** At Pew, we would come in and help states to assess their whole system, identify the drivers of growth in their prison population, and to match those to evidence-based programs or policies that were shown to have better outcomes. Then, we'd help them to translate these policies for their own system – their own reality – and put them into place. What that meant is, every single year, we were starting from scratch with a new state.

Now, in my current job, where we are starting from scratch and building a new organization – I've had exposure to that feeling before, of coming in and seeing an end goal down the line, needing to understand how you lay a foundation for success, and also be humble and learn from those around you. That has absolutely helped me.

I think the greatest thing I gained from my time at Pew is perspective on being here in DC – of being among people who care very much about policy from an analytical perspective, who are experts and have a broad, nationwide view of what policy works and how we can “do better.” But there's a big difference between policy that works well on paper and how that translates to reality in a community, how it feels to a community to have that policy recommended and to pursue it. I think we have to think carefully about the individual lives that these policies can touch – both victims and community members who are looking for crime to come down, but also the thousands of people in the United States who are touched by the justice system through incarceration, community supervision, and interactions with police. Being able to work in states and communities and feel more directly how these policies play out has given me the most valuable perspective on my career in justice policy.

**PP: What do you think the importance is of centering directly impacted persons when we are talking about or devising policy? How do you make those people feel engaged or actively participative in driving new reforms?**

**AW:** It is so vital that directly impacted voices are not simply consulted at moments throughout these processes but included in the conversation throughout. You cannot understand what victims are needing and looking for, what people who are becoming engaged in the system and seeking to reenter their community need to be successful, unless you are consistently asking them and have them there to advise. I think this is something that, thankfully, the field is coming around to. You are seeing it inform more and more of the work.

We take it very seriously at the Council on Criminal Justice. To that point, we have ensured that we engage people who have been touched by the system, people who are formerly incarcerated, people who they or their families have been victims of crime, people who advocate for victims and for restorative justice programs and doing things differently, as well as law enforcement officers. People who have a direct and tangible experience in the system are serving on our board of directors, they're

servicing on our board of trustees who advise all of our work, and they're servicing on our task forces. And, we still can do better. But it's encouraging to see the field moving in that direction to create more space for directly impacted voices.

**PP: Now, you're the Director at the Council on Criminal Justice, what was it like starting up a new organization? Can you tell us about your job and what it entails?**

**AW:** It's almost easier to tell you what my job doesn't entail, because it is a short list.

After Pew, I teamed up with my former boss, Adam Gelb, who led the Public Safety Performance Project, to set out on this mission to found the Council on Criminal Justice. We identified that criminal justice policy has become central to American policy and American democracy, but where many other fields have an organization that acts as an anchor or center of gravity, criminal justice didn't have that.

Criminal justice policy has so many wonderful organizations that bring particular perspectives or expertise to the field, but it can feel siloed. You'll see organizations for law enforcement, organizations for the left, organizations for the right; we have Right on Crime, we have Smart on Crime, we have REFORM Alliance, but we lacked a table where they could all meet to come together, share experience and expertise, and provide an infrastructure to the field. We saw an opportunity to do that with the Council on Criminal Justice. We know there's a great network and wonderful resources out there in the field, but we had to find a way to bring them together.

So now it is my job to think about how we best define ourselves in the field, how we best select policy issues that can drive the field forward and fill knowledge gaps, and achieve our mission. On a day to day basis, that can look like a lot of different things. One day, I might be strategizing with experts in the field on a task force asking where the federal government should go next on criminal justice reform. The next day, I might be hooking up wireless internet for our new office space. All of those things are equally important to us achieving our mission. Being the director of a new, small organization, that's just my reality. It keeps me humble and it keeps me on my toes.

**PP: I guess no task too small and no task too big. That goes into the next question – what was it like transitioning from working in more of a junior, analyst role to now serving as a director – do you have any advice for Trachtenberg students who are hoping to make similar leaps in their career?**

**AW:** I will say that the path wasn't always linear. As I look back at many sidetracks or lateral moves that I took, in the long run, they were steps forward. Especially for me, where I had to make a field shift back from higher education into justice policy. One thing that I like to remind folks is that it is all part of that path. Had I not taken some lateral moves, I wouldn't have worked in the pack on justice policy work, and I wouldn't have the perspective that I need now to effectively do my work and build this organization.

One thing that has been so integral to my success is mentorships and networking. I know that is something that GW takes very seriously. I found my job at Pew because I spoke to someone in my class about how passionate I was about drug courts at the time. They said, "Hey, I actually know someone else who is passionate about this." It was someone who worked at

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Pew and, about a year down the line, there was an opportunity there for me. So keep speaking up and putting out there what you are passionate about and seeking out other people. Their experiences can open doors for you later.

But mentorship doesn't have to be so directly matched to your field. Some of the most important mentorships for me have been far more informal and have been about all facets of my professional life. Around the time that I made the switch to leadership and a director-level position, I also became a parent. Shortly after, I started working remotely. Those are two fundamental changes: from being responsible solely for my life and my career, and from working in a well-resourced office every day. I have sought out people where I admire their approach to balancing work and family. I have sought out women who have made a shift to leadership roles and how they have approached it – it is still the reality that there's an underrepresentation of women in leadership positions – and asked them how to best define yourself in that setting. I look to people who are “digital nomads” and how have they been successful positioning themselves and their teams. All of those things combine to be a helpful model of how I can do my job better and lead effectively. It would be hard for me to find any one mentor out there who can advise me on all of that, so I feel I have put together a patchwork of a mentorship.

**PP: Speaking of relationship building, throughout your work experience there seems to be a common thread of coalition building and partnerships, can you tell us why you think that work is important?**

**AW:** In my work now, I think that the strength of our organization is so many different perspectives and ideologies speaking with one voice. And sometimes not with one voice! Sometimes there's an opportunity to give a platform to the dialogue and that's also critically important. What we hope through the Council is that by bringing together experts from so many different areas of the field, when they agree and when those forces align, that's incredibly powerful and can provide helpful guidance to people on the ground who are trying to do good work.

**PP: In the field of justice policy and the criminal justice system, what are some of the biggest challenges facing the criminal justice system and how does the Council plan to address those challenges? I recognize that is probably a lot and a big question.**

**AW:** It is. We do not lack for challenges in the justice field. There's lots of great work that's left to do, even though we have had a tremendous amount of progress in the last ten to fifteen years.

I think all you have to do is look at the presidential campaigns, so far, to see that criminal justice policy is very much in the spotlight. Candidates are being assessed on their positions on justice policy in a way we haven't seen in a very long time. Obviously, you can go back to other presidential campaigns and see them talking about justice policy. But it was often more in the lens of the Willie Horton situations – of attack ads – as opposed to really debating the merits of particular positions on criminal justice policy. That's really important. We are seeing that criminal justice policy is something we need to take on every day and continually. This is a system that touches so many lives and it deserves our attention. But there is also a risk of re-politicizing the issue. Once you start debating this at a campaign level, it is not far until attacks are possible.

One vital way that CCJ can assist the field through this moment is by trying to be a voice based in fact, based in evidence, based in expertise, based in research so that we can have a common denominator in this conversation; we can lift up what works and what we know to be true – and what we don't know – in the field, what might be promising. We can help the conversation stay in a constructive area where we are trying to find the best path forward. But that is going to be a challenge as criminal justice policy goes through this moment and certainly the campaigns, so far.

**PP: The Trachtenberg School's motto is "doing good and doing it well" – there has recently been some bipartisan momentum on criminal justice reform – are there any examples of "doing good and doing it well" in the realm of criminal justice reform that you can point to?**

**AW:** I think the greatest trend that I have seen - and you can see it in states that have taken on criminal justice reform, you can see it in the recent federal FIRST Step Act – is looking at criminal justice policy and reform efforts as not a one-and-done scenario. These issues require ongoing commitment. With the FIRST Step Act, some of the first things you heard people saying – it's right there in the name of the act – is that this is a first effort and there will be a second and there will be a third. We need to keep coming back to this issue. We aren't in a world anymore where you can pass a large criminal justice policy and then not touch it again for twenty-five to thirty years. Instead, we are recognizing that we need to continually come back to this issue.

We have seen this in the states, like Georgia – who through their state legislatures and government, in general, have come back year over year to look at different facets of their criminal justice system. They looked at the adult system, then they came back and looked at the juvenile, and then they came back and looked at reentry. Then they took opportunities to look at mental health. Other states like Kentucky and many others have done similar things – I think that is a great example of "doing good and doing it well." This recognition that you can't simply do good one time – you need to commit to it, analyze it, assess it, evaluate it, and keep coming back to shore up your efforts.

**PP: I wanted to follow-up on drug courts in particular – why were you interested in drug courts? Is that a source of your initial start in justice policy work? What were lessons learned from insights and research into drug courts?**

**AW:** Over the decades, the system has learned that substance use disorder or substance misuse is an ongoing challenge for many people in their lives and we can't incarcerate our way out of that problem. People will continue to cycle back if we are only using a criminal justice approach. Drug court programs spoke to me because it was this interesting example of the system approaching a problem fundamentally differently. That you could apply the tools of the system in a smart way that also factored in what we knew and what we were coming to know about substance use in the 1990s and early 2000s. We were coming to better understand substance use, treatment, behavioral health and the challenges that have led so many people to be involved with the system.

Like many people, I have people in my life who have struggled with substance use disorders and I know that a purely criminal justice approach wouldn't have been effective for them. That made me interested to watch drug courts catch on like wildfire. I was interested to see an innovative idea that had its start in Miami take off across the country, with important federal supports

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and grants. It was expanding because A) it was effective, and B) because so many communities were seeing these particular individuals coming back to our system over and over and over again. From a human element, that's not working. From a policy element, that's not working. From a community resources and costs perspective, an incredible amount of resources are going to incarcerating and controlling this person. Imagine what we might be able to do if those resources were being shifted? Or if, instead, those energies were being redirected toward behavioral therapy and toward treatment?

Through drug courts, we saw how you can innovate. The federal government and governments in general are, for good reason, not designed to be nimble. It's interesting to see innovation happen in real time and now, you would be hard pressed to find a community in the United States that doesn't have accountability courts to some degree. We have seen drug courts – that model – expand to mental health courts generally, to veterans' courts, to homelessness courts, and others.

The criminal justice system ends up being the frontline for communities in facing very complex and difficult problems that don't necessarily have their start in the criminal justice system. Drug courts were an example of the system adapting to work differently. I think now, what we have learned in drug court programs is making its way throughout the system to how we supervise people after their release and how we structure probation in many communities. It's an important moment in criminal justice history.

**PP: I am interested in drug policy generally, so I thought learning about drug courts but from the perspective of law enforcement was interesting too.**

**AW:** For a law enforcement officer, if you are getting called to address an issue with an individual or many individuals who are struggling with substance misuse – I am fairly certain that many law enforcement officers didn't get into the field for that. But, it gives them a view of just how challenging these issues are. Alternative approaches allow our law enforcement officers to redirect their energies toward other public safety threats.

That's the important point: oftentimes, people who are coming into our criminal justice system due to their substance misuse are not, necessarily, a public safety threat; or, they are a public safety threat due to issues going on with substance misuse and behavioral health. If we are able to address those at the core, we are doing better for our communities and we are better using our law enforcement resources.

**PP: There is debate in the criminal justice field about law enforcement budgets and the way that they are used – this idea that law enforcement should not be solving community level issues whether they be public health – that there might be people other than law enforcement that are better equipped to respond to issues like substance use disorder or mental health crises. Is that something that you have encountered yourself? Is that something that you think should be changing in the way that we approach those issues?**

**AW:** Whether we intended it to be the case or not, law enforcement and the criminal justice system often ends up being our first-line response to these issues in our communities. When you call 911, you're going to get an ambulance, a fire truck, or a cruiser as your response. That's just how our emergency system is built.

So, I think the more our criminal justice system can incorporate and learn from behavioral health responses, the better. Behavioral health and treatment professionals are a really important part of that response. The law enforcement and treatment communities are going to have to work hand-in-hand as we deal with all that we are seeing with the opioid epidemic now.

**PP: For current Trachtenberg students and those that will be graduating this year, what are two or three key takeaways from your graduate studies or any advice that you would give to fellow students as they move forward in their careers?**

**AW:** At Trachtenberg, you have a unique opportunity to think of your grad school experience as part of your career, and not a pause or offshoot of your career. For students who want to pursue public policy and public administration, the Trachtenberg School positions you to apply what you learn every single day. I don't speak about my time in graduate school as being different from other times in my career development. It was an opportunity that I had to accelerate my career and still be a part of my field - embedded in it - and I love seeing other GW students take advantage of that.

I think one of the best ways to do that is reaching out to alumni. People love sharing their experience. I have had an opportunity to speak with many Trachtenberg students who are interested in justice policy. If you reach out and ask people to share their experience, especially alums, they will – and so will other professionals in the field here in DC. It's a great way to find opportunities.

Don't be afraid to make the program your own. When I was in the program, we didn't have a lot of course work that was specific to justice policy – but every opportunity that I had to write a paper or evaluate a program, I was able to bring that home to my own interests. I found a lot of support from the faculty to do that, including an opportunity to do an independent study. I am grateful that the program gave me that flexibility. The program has a lot of respect for its students as professionals, which I think is vital.