

ALERT TOP STORY

Justice in Action group draws more than 1,000, gets commitments on their priorities

Margaret Reist

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First Baptist Church Rev. Joy Martinez-Marshall (right) gives the opening introduction to over a thousand individuals of faith during the annual Nehemiah Action Assembly at St. Mark's United Methodist Church on Thursday, May 1, 2025, in Lincoln. Justice in Action, an interfaith coalition representing 27 faith communities, will gather nearly 1,500 people at St. Mark's United Methodist Church for the event. The assembly focused on three major issues: mental health, jail overcrowding, and eviction.

KENNETH FERRIERA, Journal Star

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Leaders of “Justice in Action,” a coalition of 27 faith communities, asked three guests at its annual assembly Thursday to commit to specific goals on three of its priorities — increasing mental health access, reducing jail overcrowding and avoiding evictions.

The format was similar to last year's gathering — both of which drew more than 1,000 people and nearly filled the first floor of the large St. Mark's United Methodist Church sanctuary — but the presence of one guest this year was particularly notable.

Lancaster County Attorney Pat Condon had been invited last year but couldn't be there because of an annual conference he was attending out of town. His absence prompted more than 100 people to gather outside the Hall of Justice the next morning. They returned some months later for another rally and presented a scroll with 300 signatures inviting him to attend this gathering. They gathered again in January outside the Hall of Justice in recognition of Martin Luther King Jr.'s legacy.

The first two guests Thursday — Lutheran Family Services President and CEO Chris Tonniges and Casey Karges, executive director of the Mediation Center — answered “yes” to the “asks” of the group.

In an effort to reduce evictions, the group held a summit earlier and determined that one way to avoid evictions was to create a mediation process before an eviction notice is filed, which in other communities has reduced evictions.

Justice in Action leaders proposed a two-year pilot program and asked Lutheran Family Services to work with them and other partners on implementing the pilot program.

Karges agreed, then made a pitch for the audience to volunteer as mediators.

“We need you if we’re going to take on a project like this,” he said. “We need mediators to step forward.”

The group asked Tonniges if Lutheran Family Services would partner with Justice in Action to create a mental health navigation system for Lancaster County by exploring and securing funding, then developing and implementing a plan and timeline. They also wanted him to agree to regular meetings with them.

“Heck yes,” he said, and then referred to the difficulties a woman earlier in the evening described having trying to get help for her nephew, who died by suicide. “I promise, Sara, we will get this figured out so no one has to live that story.”

The group had more “asks” for Condon, which resulted in some back-and-forth between him and the Rev. Tobi White, co-president of Justice in Action. She excused herself from the podium a couple times to confer with other leaders.

The group didn’t get Condon to agree to eliminate the 90-day application deadline for pre-trial diversion programs, an effort they said would give people more time to arrange for participation. Condon said evidence shows the faster people show up, the more successful they are, so he didn’t want to change the policy.

White also asked him to eliminate fees for pretrial diversion and problem-solving programs, something Condon said would have to be a decision by the Lancaster County Board, not him. He also said fees don’t impede people from participating because they can be waived.

Condon also said he couldn’t commit to specific increases in the mental health diversion program because, he said, there isn’t sufficient staff or providers to provide services.

He did agree to establish a data dashboard that tracks participation in the programs; and to explore the idea of an external review board for those programs.

Justice In Action was created in 2022 with seed money from the Great Plains Conference of the United Methodist Church, which is working with national experts to build a network of nonprofit justice organizations across Nebraska and Kansas.

White said the spirit of Thursday's gathering was to "stand together across our differences. . . . Justice isn't just an idea, it's the work we do, side by side, to ensure every neighbor has dignity, opportunity and hope."

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