

Headline: From stage to sheriff's office: John Q. Williams' journey to make a difference in his community

Ethan Wright | Contributor

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Sheriff John Q. Williams sits at his desk on Wednesday, April 19, to discuss his upbringing and journey into public service and his passion for the arts. Williams has been serving as sheriff for Athens-Clarke County since 2020. (Photo/Ethan Wright)

[Sheriff John Q. Williams](#) remembers a time growing up when his family and neighbors would leave their doors unlocked all day and night.

"We didn't even think about it," he said.

That is until things changed; crime took over, there were drugs, growth in gang activity, and discrimination. Within five to ten years, [Gary, Indiana](#), Williams' hometown, made its way into the [top ten most crime-ridden cities](#) in America during the '90s.

"Once I got involved in law enforcement, I started drawing back to those memories of how things were," Williams said.

Those memories now serve as fuel for Williams to make things better for the youth to come.

[In 2020, Williams ran for sheriff](#) on a platform that would [increase reform in the criminal justice](#) system and make the Clarke County Sheriff's Office [more accessible and transparent](#). He won the election, becoming the first Black sheriff in Athens-Clarke County.

According to the Prison Policy Initiative, [Georgia's incarceration rate is 968 per 100,000 people](#), one of the highest rates amongst all democratic nations at 30%. Moreover, the state has a high recidivism rate, with [nearly half of the released inmates](#) ending up back in a cell.

Williams says he understands how addressing the root causes of crime and improving the support for re-entry into society is imperative to break the cycle of incarceration and recidivism.



The Athens-Clarke County Courthouse stands on East Washington Street in Athens, Georgia, on Friday, April 28, 2023. The courthouse houses the Sheriff's Office and other public services available to the community. (Photo/Ethan Wright)

Williams didn't dream of becoming a law enforcement officer, though. He wanted to be an entertainer, reciting his favorite poets [Langston Hughes](#), [August Wilson](#) and [Paul Laurence Dunbar](#), in school shows. A mentor's guidance led Williams to the arts, which opened the door to public speaking and theater. It was a talent that helped Williams excel in communications when he stumbled into law enforcement.

[Serving as a dispatcher and law enforcement officer for over 20 years](#), Williams realized many people often misunderstand the law. As a dispatcher, he never learned the end of the story or what happened during the call. However, he realized that his work as a law enforcement officer could make a difference.

As sheriff, one of his primary goals is to reform the jail system and improve the conditions and outcomes for incarcerated people.

He said, "I think the biggest thing is this concept of in the jail, we try to keep this person-first language. So we try to call them 'jail residents' or 'incarcerated people' because how you refer to somebody a lot of times affects how they behave."

His goal is to help inmates turn their lives around, which requires viewing them as people who made mistakes rather than criminals. He started a [reentry program to help jailed people transition back into society](#). The program offers drug treatment, mental health treatment, job services, GED programs and more to prevent recidivism.

Williams knows that the environment is a critical factor behind [recidivism](#), recognizing the environment shapes the person, so he tries to improve it.

[Shane Sims](#), program coordinator at [People Living in Recovery](#), a non-profit organization that supports individuals seeking recovery from addiction, says Williams takes preventing recidivism very seriously. Since Williams entered office, they teamed up to facilitate an eight-week recovery support program at the Clarke County Jail.

Williams takes pride in providing services to everyone who comes through the [Athens-Clarke County community](#), regardless of race, gender or political affiliation.

"I'm a sheriff, not just the sheriff for the people that voted for me or the Republicans or the Democrats or the Blacks or whites; it's anybody that comes through this community," Williams reassured.

Williams also puts emphasis on his "[Principles over Passion](#)" initiative. Apart from the usual drug recovery assistance, the program provides suits to underprivileged high school seniors for graduation. Williams says he believes image and self-perception are critical. Williams says he believes that when people look sharp, they feel sharp and are more likely to do things that sharp people do.

Though Williams never made it to the big screen or won a [Pulitzer](#) for his poetry, he says he feels that being sheriff is the best chance he has to make a change in his community.

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Transcript:

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