



# The pivotal role probation officers play in enhancing public safety

BY JOE WINKLER

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John Augustus  
"Father of  
Probation"

**J**ohn Augustus, a Boston shoemaker, is widely acknowledged as the "Father of Probation" and is esteemed as the inaugural genuine probation officer (Dressler, 1970). Augustus embarked on an 18-year journey as a dedicated volunteer probation officer, extending his support and guidance to individuals until their subsequent court sentencing. His unwavering conviction centered around the idea that the law's primary objective should be reforming criminals and preventing further criminal activity. He firmly believed punitive measures alone did not address criminal behavior (Dressler, 1970). The individuals most often assisted by Augustus were those grappling with alcohol abuse or minor infractions, often unable to settle their fines (Taxman, 2012). Augustus played a pivotal role in helping these individuals secure gainful employment and subsequently provided progress reports to the court during sentencing (Allen, 2015).

Probation remains a testament to being one of the most effective investments in rehabilitating individuals who have committed crimes. It is plausible to assume Augustus would have been highly impressed by the evolution of probation and the diverse responsibilities probation officers now undertake. Across the nation, probation officers proficiently oversee individuals under supervision, ensuring they adhere to the stipulated conditions. Florida, too, exemplifies this trend. As of January 2020, Florida had over 163,000 adults with felony convictions under community supervision. To gain a deeper understanding of probation officers' profound impact on public safety and community well-being, let us delve into their pivotal role in enhancing public safety.

## Introduction

While the role of probation officers has evolved, their primary mission of ensuring public safety has remained constant. Contemporary practices necessitate probation officers to juggle various responsibilities. Adapting to these diverse roles is crucial for the success of individuals under supervision.

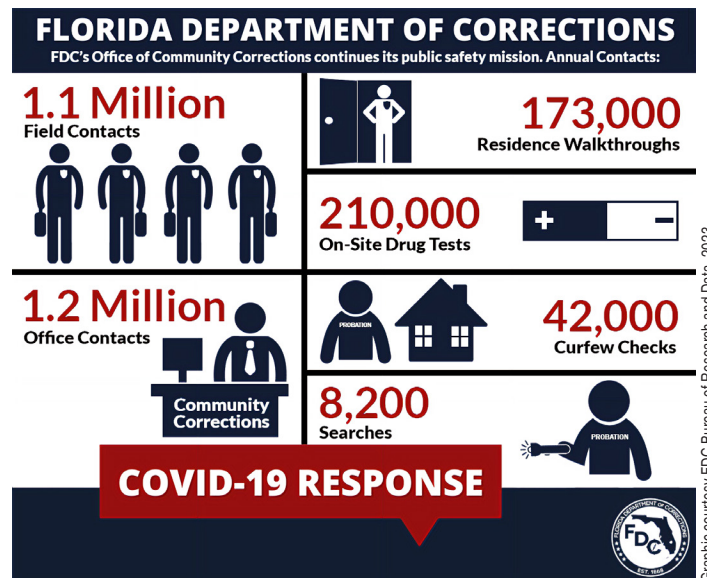
If Florida's probation officers were asked to summarize the crucial role of a probation officer in just a

few words, the majority would likely place "protecting the public" at the top of the list. This response aligns seamlessly with the Community Corrections Mission Statement and mirrors the mission statements of probation agencies nationwide.

However, the complexity arises when probation officers are asked to elaborate on how they fulfill this duty of safeguarding the public. In Florida, probation officers employ four distinct techniques to achieve this goal:

1. Monitoring and enforcing the conditions of supervision,
2. Providing individuals under supervision with tools and resources to facilitate successful completion and encourage productive citizenship,
3. Utilizing incentive programs when appropriate, and
4. Exercising discretion when reporting minor technical violations.

The foremost responsibility in safeguarding the public involves monitoring and enforcing the conditions of supervision, followed by reporting deliberate non-compliance in a manner deemed most suitable by the probation officer and their supervisor. In Florida, probation officers diligently execute this duty, conducting numerous interactions with individuals under their supervision each year. Every contact is deemed essential, representing another opportunity to ensure compliance with the terms of supervision.





From the field, there are frequent examples of how probation officers play a crucial role in protecting the public. Recent instances of their work should instill pride in probation officers across the country.

## Condition compliance

In March 2019, probation officers from the Inverness Probation Office conducted a planned search at an individual's residence under supervision. During the search, the probation officers discovered a small quantity of marijuana within the premises. Sensing something was wrong, the officers sought assistance from the Citrus County Sheriff's Department to continue the search under a duly authorized warrant. Subsequently, the officers uncovered a significant cache of illegal substances, including 167 grams of methamphetamine, 100 grams of cocaine, 1,000 prescription narcotic pills, 60 ecstasy pills, and a staggering 34 pounds of marijuana.

Consequently, the individual was arrested on multiple charges, including a violation of probation. Citrus County Sheriff Mike Prendergast hailed this operation as the most substantial drug bust in the history of Citrus County, with the seized illicit drugs valued at over \$970,000 (Prendergast, 2019).

Another noteworthy instance of Florida probation officers safeguarding the public occurred in July 2020. During a warrantless planned search of a residence by officers from the Titusville Office, suspicions were raised regarding the activities of an individual under

supervision. Initially, the probation officers encountered this individual sitting on a couch, eating a hamburger meal from a take-out restaurant box. As the probation officers commenced their search, each attending to a different area of the dwelling, they discovered a partially consumed hamburger resting on the offender's bed, within the same take-out box used by the individual on the couch. Subsequently, a noise emanating from a closet in the room being searched drew the probation officer's attention, revealing an underage child in hiding. The adult on the sofa, designated as a sexual predator, was consequently arrested for violating conditional release.

Furthermore, the mandate of protecting the public encompasses ensuring the welfare of individuals under supervision. A recent example underscores the life-saving actions a Florida probation officer took during a home visit conducted in April 2020. A probation officer affiliated with the Ft. Myers Probation Office visited an individual's home under supervision. Upon arrival, the mother informed the probation officer that the supervised individual had become unresponsive in a locked bathroom. The probation officer promptly accessed to the bathroom, where she discovered the individual unconscious on the floor, alongside a syringe, a pill and a spoon. The probation officer instructed the mother to call 911 while administering cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR). By the time Emergency Medical Services arrived, the probation officer had successfully revived the individual.

## Providing resources

Florida's probation officers play a pivotal role in public safety by offering support and resources to individuals on their caseloads to help them complete their supervision and become more productive members of society. Many individuals under supervision, recently released from prison or jail, require assistance in various areas such as employment, education, housing, transportation, obtaining identification or driver's licenses, healthcare, food, clothing or counseling.

While providing resources can be challenging due to budget constraints, Florida's probation officers utilize resource and employment fairs as a viable option to aid individuals under supervision. Gainful employment is critical to an individual's successful reintegration into



Photo courtesy Florida Department of Corrections

Items seized during a search in Citrus County, valued at over \$970,000 – the most substantial drug bust in the history of Citrus County.

society. Resource fairs hold particular significance for individuals under supervision, allowing them to engage with employers directly, potentially sidestepping any negative information that might hinder a typical job application. These events also give them a clearer understanding of available jobs and the necessary requisite skills.

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## Gainful employment is critical to an individual's successful reintegration into society.

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Each Judicial Circuit in Florida regularly organizes resource and employment fairs to assist those under supervision. Employment Specialists play a crucial role in helping individuals find meaningful employment, and local partnerships with stakeholders in each county further enhance the support system. Offering these resources significantly contributes to public safety, aligning with evidence-based research that underscores the importance of employment as a key factor in an individual's success. Regular reviews of cases terminating supervision in Florida reveal impressive outcomes, with many individuals gainfully employed at their release (Winkler, 2021).

A recent addition to Florida's supervision resources is the Mobile Probation Unit (MPU), introduced in response to overcrowding issues at the Palm Beach County Jail. An assessment of the jail population identified many of individuals held for Violation of Probation. Many of these violations resulted from individuals failing to report to the Probation Office as instructed. To alleviate overcrowding and enhance compliance, the MPU was implemented.

The MPU is a 24-foot vehicle equipped with a staging area, tents, folding tables, folding chairs and designated areas within the bus for probation officers to meet with individuals under supervision. Specific reporting sites have been established to centralize the MPU's operations, providing access to public facilities, ample parking and resources for officer safety.

The MPU has proven to be a resounding success, offering a valuable resource to those under supervision. Bringing services directly to the community enhances the prospects of success for individuals under supervision, especially those with limited or no access to a vehicle, ultimately contributing to public safety.



Photo courtesy Florida Department of Corrections

*The 24-foot Mobile Probation Unit (MPU) is a recent addition to Florida's supervision resources.*

## Incentives for individuals under supervision

Per section 20.315 of the Florida Statutes, Community Corrections is responsible for providing suitable supervision for individuals released on community supervision, considering public safety risks and individual needs. Collaborating with the judiciary, public safety agencies, and local communities, the aim is to develop secure, community-based alternatives. Over the past decade, empirical evidence has highlighted the efficacy of Evidence-Based Practices (EBP) in supervising individuals, resulting in reduced recidivism rates, successful completion of community supervision, fewer prison commitments, and, most significantly, a decrease in victimization.

This evolving body of evidence and budgetary pressures necessitating streamlined and efficient operations have spurred a vision focused on strengthening

supervision strategies. This vision emphasizes using technology and implementing proven programs and processes to achieve desired outcomes. EBP emphasizes that supervising low-risk individuals can lead to increased supervision violations (Fox, 2022).

Community Corrections has devised incentive programs tailored to specific individuals under supervision in response to these considerations. The Interactive Offender Tracking System (IOTS) represents a reduced reporting level for individuals categorized as low risk/low needs on probation and pre-trial supervision. This program holds these individuals accountable for adhering to supervision conditions with minimal oversight. The IOTS program has been available since June 2019 and features a telephone reporting system employing voice biometrics for individual identification. Additionally, it includes a web-based management system that assists officers in managing their caseloads more efficiently. The IOTS program's core is to promote individuals' success while removing as many barriers to success as possible. Simultaneously, it allows officers to allocate more time and resources to those with higher risk profiles. This program positively impacts both individuals under supervision and officers, laying a robust foundation for safer communities (Winkler, 2021).

Another successful incentive program targets individuals sentenced to community control, a form of highly supervised custody within the community, including weekend and holiday surveillance. It is an individualized program that restricts an individual's freedom within the community, home, or non-institutional residential placement, with specific sanctions imposed and enforced. Individuals under community control must provide a weekly account of their activities. They can only leave their residence for approved purposes such as employment, treatment, self-improvement classes, public service work, religious activities and personal needs. The success rate for community control supervision is approximately 28%, notably lower than the statewide average of 60% for all supervision types.

In alignment with EBP principles, the Merit-Based Activity (MBA) Program was established for individuals under community control. This incentive program enables individuals who have completed rehabilitation programs to participate in pre-approved activities as determined by

their supervising officer. The MBA Program encourages and motivates individuals to comply with the conditions of their supervision and take responsibility for their personal growth and change.

Since its inception in 2017, over 3,100 individuals have participated in the MBA Program, achieving a remarkable success rate of over 81%.

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**In Florida, Community Corrections has taken proactive steps to incorporate Evidence-Based Practices into its supervision strategies, aiming to enhance public safety, provide improved services and yield positive results.**

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### **Reduction of revocations and admissions for technical violations**

Like many other states, Florida has faced a prolonged period of rising costs within its criminal justice system, primarily driven by the adoption of stricter penalties and sentencing practices, leading to an increase in the prison population. Probation violators have contributed to this growth.

Over the past few years, significant research efforts have been dedicated to addressing this nationwide challenge, aiming to find solutions to break the cycle and achieve the best possible outcomes by reducing recidivism and changing the behavior of individuals under supervision.

In Florida, Community Corrections has taken proactive steps to incorporate Evidence-Based Practices into its supervision strategies, aiming to enhance public safety, provide improved services and yield positive results. One of the initial measures taken was to grant



probation officers discretion when reporting willful non-compliance with technical violations to the sentencing or releasing authority. Creating the Alternative Sanctioning Program (ASP) has effectively addressed minor technical violations. The ASP, developed by Florida Community Corrections, was officially established in statute in 2018. It offers a streamlined administrative approach for addressing specific technical violations committed by non-violent offenders, circumventing the need for the formal violation hearing process. Since its inception, more than 8,300 individuals have participated in the ASP program. This diversionary approach has resulted in these individuals being diverted from the traditional court process, effectively reducing the number of revocations for technical violations by over 2,000 annually.



## Conclusion

In 1841, John Augustus boldly decided to blaze a new trail rather than follow the established path. He charted his course, and for nearly two centuries, probation officers have been safeguarding the public through various methods (Reinemann, 1941).

The progression of probation in Florida has witnessed a growth in the supervised population, driven by a shift in philosophy toward providing individuals under supervision with the necessary resources to successfully complete their terms and become more productive members of society.

The “Father of Probation” would likely find modern-day probation highly impressive, as the role of today’s

probation officers has become multifaceted. Their primary objective remains to ensure public safety, and they achieve this by vigilantly monitoring supervision conditions, offering tools and resources to assist individuals in completing their terms while promoting productivity, employing incentive programs judiciously and utilizing alternative methods to address minor technical violations.

Modern probation supervision strategies have yielded significant success, with Community Corrections proving to be a viable alternative to incarceration. Roughly 60% of individuals under community supervision complete their terms. Among those who do, approximately 90% avoid returning to the Department’s custody, either in prison or under further supervision, within three years. This remarkable achievement is attributable to the pivotal role played by probation officers in enhancing public safety.

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