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Probation, Parole and Community Corrections: A Difficult Topic to Understand?

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Community corrections emerged in 1841 based on the concepts of John Augustus as a result of some very simple core values and expectations regarding what he hoped to accomplish with the individuals entrusted to him by the court.

Today, probation and parole are the most widely used supervision for the majority of offenders under some type of correctional supervision. With more than 4.5 million adults on probation or parole in this country, one would think there has to be some level of confidence in this business.

Probation, parole and community corrections have continued to evolve over the years, while the crafters have struggled to define a uniform purpose. Many questions have been asked, and we continue to wrestle with the concept.

An identity conflict has prevailed for some time about whether probation and parole officers are law enforcement personnel or social workers. The debate continues, as confirmed by statements such as: Probation and parole do not work; let's reinvent probation and parole; let's call it community corrections and re-entry; let's create drug courts because traditional probation does not work; let's decentralize and make it community-based so the communities will own it; let's make it a stand-alone state agency; and does it belong in the executive branch or the judicial branch of government? Just recently, I attended yet another legislative study committee that asked the same questions we have been asked for years — what is probation and what is

the role of a probation officer? Are these officers a law enforcement function or are they an arm of the court? Why, after more than 100 years, is there not a clear picture of what probation, parole and community corrections should be or what they really are?

I have now had the opportunity to work in two different branches of government that have the jurisdiction and responsibility for probation. There is nothing magical about where the services are administered from — there are difficulties in both jurisdictions. In these jurisdictions, history reflects that at the time of their creation, decisions were made that were determined to be the most effective at the time. However, probation and parole seem to evolve and continue to change as each matures. In both jurisdictions, the decisions made long ago have become outdated and need to be changed to meet the needs of the system.

Whether under the executive branch of government (which, for some jurisdictions, works well) or under the judiciary (which seems like the only natural place for probation to be in some states), the system will have problems and frustrations that will need to be addressed. Does that mean the systems are dysfunctional and need to be drastically changed? Usually not. Both branches provide leadership, policy establishment and the resources to fulfill their mission. Does it mean that probation is not working? Absolutely not.

Every day, thousands of dedicated community corrections and probation and parole professionals provide a ser-

vice to jurisdictions across the country. These professionals are grounded in the belief that what they do each day makes a difference in the lives of offenders, victims and communities. They are proud of what they do, and it is time others are proud of what they do, too. Probation, parole and community corrections comprise a great group of people who deserve to be recognized. At some point, the politicians and legislatures must support these efforts and stop trying to reinvent what is not broken, and simply invest the resources to allow us to function effectively.

The answer to this mystery is based on some very simple applications and solutions. Leadership, sound policy, guidelines and well-established direction for what is expected from supervision outcomes, coupled with dedicated resources, are the keys to the success of any probation, parole and community corrections application. An effective probation and parole system cannot be created without strong leadership, clearly defined missions and purpose, and the adequate resources to carry out the mission.

In this time of budget crises, it is critical for sound political decisions to be made based on proven practices. Agencies and jurisdictions must work together to achieve common goals and to survive in this difficult time. It will take strong partnerships that truly support the missions of all to be successful. These steps are common to probation, parole and community corrections. In that regard, should we not be the leaders and show others the way? ♦