



Probation And Parole: The Savior of Corrections

BY JUSTIN JONES

Blue twirling smoke rises then plateaus as an imaginary ceiling is met. Jeff creates artistic forms of smoke impressionism as he wrestles with boredom and awaits reporting instructions. He has been in this situation on several occasions. A three-time nonviolent offender with one prior parole revocation, Jeff knows the system. With his substance abuse addiction and a propensity to easily re-offend, his best odds have always been to waive parole, however, that option was not afforded. Jeff has been reading the newspapers and watching television news. The reintroduction of early release programs came as no surprise with a multimillion-dollar deficit, a conservative parole board, overcrowding and now, a post-election year. No inmate should be surprised with involuntary release programs being reinstated. Of course, during an election year, no one could get a break. Everyone, it seemed, went to prison. What type of electronic monitoring would they use this time? Who would his officer be? Do they still have intensive supervision and all those urinalysis drug tests?

Bob reviews Jeff's case file in preparation for a 2 p.m. orientation. Bob has supervised him on two other occasions — once on a parole case, which resulted in revocation, and another on a house arrest program in the late 1980s. That one was also a failure. Bob has been a probation and parole officer for 20 years. He still enjoys his chosen challenging profession, but he has recently become frustrated. The frustration generates from having limited resources and the knowledge that treatment resources, etc., improve supervision successes. Bob has witnessed the decline and the resurgence of parole. He has observed

the introduction and then elimination of other prerelease programs. Depending on the current political climate, these release mechanisms could last at least one gubernatorial term. In between prerelease programs, Bob's department has been training in "what works" concepts. The department has also been changing policy and redirecting resources based upon best practices, research and data. Bob reluctantly bought into results-driven, outcome-based supervision and is now an advocate. This adds to the frustration, as Bob believes all the progress that has been made will take a giant step backward. Simply defined, resources will not be available to complement supervision with best practices and what works concepts. Why expose staff and get their hopes up with what works, and then not fund it? Bob read that less than 5 percent of correctional budgets are spent on programs and less than that on community supervision, especially now that community corrections is en vogue again. And why would it not be en vogue again? According to the April 2002 *Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletin*, in midyear 2001, 1,334,255 inmates were in state facilities; simply put, most of these inmates will be released eventually, and they will be in need of some degree of reintegration assistance.

After orientation, which included Jeff's reporting instructions and placement on a passive electronic monitoring device, Bob reviewed the metamorphosis of the file. The previous time on supervision, Bob used a case management classification interview and Jeff scored out as a casework control offender. Now, using the Level of Service Inventory-Revised, a third-generation offender assessment instrument, Jeff scores in the moderate range, with sub-

stance abuse treatment as his greatest need. Jeff has never received substance abuse treatment of any kind in the community. However, he did attend Narcotics Anonymous meetings while in prison and participated in a 12-step program or two. A cognitive program in which Jeff had participated during his most recent incarceration appeared to have slightly increased his pro-social thinking process.

Budget Woes

The aforementioned officer and offender case profile is common in today's community corrections arena. Community corrections that includes probation and parole supervision has always played an essential role in the continuum of correctional services. A larger prominent role is afforded when there are budget problems and/or reduced revenues. Such is the case occurring for fiscal years 2001 and 2002, and the next few years do not appear to offer any budgetary relief. However, even in prosperous budget years, community corrections and, specifically, probation and parole, only receive a small fragment of funding compared with institutions. There are several reasons for this, one of which is the political correctness of expanding funds for incarceration. No political candidate has ever been less tough on crime than the opponent. This usually translates into more incarceration and longer sentences. Other reasons include the expense of maintaining large facilities compared with the affordable economy of scale offered by large probation and parole caseloads.

Community corrections that includes probation and parole supervision has always played an essential role in the continuum of correctional services.

So, in difficult budget climates, the least-funded aspect of corrections, the probation and parole system, once again becomes the savior — a savior that, in most areas of the nation, is traditionally underfunded. Probation and parole are underfunded in the sense that if correctional facilities are the country's largest alternative schools, then what does that make probation and parole services with their larger populations? It makes probation and parole the most economically feasible form of corrections.

The Savior

In part, a savior is defined as a rescuer from harm or loss. When there are budget shortfalls, it makes complete economic sense to move offenders from the most expensive environment of prisons to the least expensive: community supervision. As reported in the September 2001 Urban Institute's *Crime Policy Report, Vol. 3*, nearly 600,000 offenders are released on parole each year. This is expected to increase due to budget-pressured releases and expected releases simply due to the incarceration binge of the 1980s

and 1990s. Only in rare instances have probation and parole agencies or departments received additional resources to address prison releasees. In most areas of the country, caseloads increased with no corresponding boost in resources. The parity is simple: Probation and parole as the savior must, once again, bear the load of being the economical and social outlet for the current budget crisis and must do so without additional resources.

The ebb and flow and even the irony of the popularity of parole and forms of inmate prerelease programs were never more evident than in the early 1990s, when many states were exploring or acting on parole abolishment. Myths surrounding the initiatives to abolish parole or any type of prerelease programs were appropriately exposed in the 1995 American Probation and Parole Association publication, *Abolishing Parole: Why the Emperor Has No Clothes*. Among those myths were that abolishing parole will stop high-profile crimes and that no community supervision will be tougher on crime, offenders will serve their full sentences and, in general, crime will be reduced. For corrections professionals, these myths are obvious. Mandatory sentencing, structured sentencing, truth in sentencing and many other forms of creative sentencing began to replace or at least chip away at the parole process.

Also in the mid-1990s, the country was experiencing plausible economic growth, so one could draw the conclusion that parole and prerelease programs, and to a lesser degree, sentencing restructuring, are directly related to the economy. The sharp increase in incarceration rates and the corresponding decrease in releases now have an inverse relationship. Other than the fact that a vast majority of the 1.3 million incarcerated offenders will eventually return to the community, the U.S. economic climate necessitates an economic approach to sanctioning offenders. The economic approach to corrections creates a much different road map than the most recent downturn of the economy in the early 1980s. According to an August 2001 BJS press release, there were 3,839,532 people on probation and 725,527 on parole. The average daily cost of this supervision is \$1.50 to \$5 per offender, depending on supervision location and jurisdiction. With resources not keeping pace with caseload sizes, the economy of scale has actually reduced the cost of supervision. However, now armed with data, research, validated third-generation assessment instruments, best practices, outcome measures and history, community supervision can assume more than an economic savior role. Supervision, coupled with treatment for those offenders with identified substance abuse needs, further reduces recidivism. Team approaches to supervision such as drug courts also have shown to reduce recidivism. Of course, there are many other best practices and outcomes that should now come to the forefront as community supervision receives renewed attention, either because of economics or because of emphasis on reintegration and aftercare.

Whatever the reason, the timing is right to place emphasis on community supervision. With all the resources that can be available to probation and parole officers, the country can start to address the factors that contribute to continued criminal behavior and stop "patching" the symp-

toms. To do this, agencies that provide supervision must be allocated a fair share of resources to address treatment and sanction needs. Of course, some of this cost can and should be offset by offenders paying for portions of the services they receive. However, a majority of offenders, by any definition or matrix, are indigent. But consider the cost savings of one substance-addicted offender if he or she is treated and does not re-offend. The savings of the yearly incarceration costs alone are enough to justify treatment programs, not to mention savings on services to the offender's family, potential victims, prospective employers, courts and the community. Under the current community corrections act in Oklahoma, called Community Sentencing, a community-supervised offender in intensive substance abuse treatment costs an average of \$1,800 per year. This not only is much less expensive than incarceration, but it is more effective for many offenders. Call upon the savior again, but this time, armed with resources, the savior will be more than an economic trend.

Conclusion

Jeff exited the probation office after spending approximately two hours with Bob. Jeff felt somewhat confused, as no probation officer had ever spent this much time with him in one meeting. Jeff exhaled as he walked toward the bus stop. "Maybe Bob was right," he thought. "If I continue with my cognitive behavior courses now offered by the probation department and concentrate on that thing called my 'criminogenic need,' my destiny may not be prison again. At least my officer seems to understand my issues and shows genuine concern toward my successful reintegration."

Jeff and Bob may both be successful with their encounter this time around. Jeff may actually receive the type of supervision and treatment that will address his identified criminogenic needs. Bob may be successful in his use of training and new tools of the trade to make referrals and supervise Jeff in the most effective, efficient manner. If current research is correct, they now have increased odds for a successful outcome.

Justin Jones is deputy director of the Division of Community Corrections for the Oklahoma Department of Corrections.