

Opinion: Probation has important role to play

By Brian Richardt

By proclamation of the Board of Supervisors, El Dorado County celebrated probation services July 17-21.

As the chief probation officer in El Dorado County, I would like to take the opportunity to reflect on the critical work probation does in our criminal justice system and say thank you to all the men and women of my department who work tirelessly to protect our communities, reduce recidivism, restore victims, promote healthy families, and live the vision of our department: Safe communities through changed lives.



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Even though probation has for years been the most frequently used sanction in the criminal justice system, the reliance on probation services in California has increased significantly in the past few years. For some, probation can have a singular connotation that does not accurately represent the multifaceted mission and work of probation departments across California. The work of a probation officer is a highly technical and ever evolving profession focused on behavior change in individuals, leading to positive impacts in all the people they touch.

Probation is committed to a research-based approach to public

safety that promotes positive behavior change. In other words, research has proven that communities are safer when we give offenders the tools to succeed, during and after incarceration, all the while holding them accountable for their actions. These tools can be anything from appropriate counseling, to addiction recovery or job skill training with a focus on changing "criminal thinking" patterns. This is a proven way to lower recidivism and thereby preventing the next victim.

Our multi-dimensional approach to community safety includes holding people accountable through community supervision. Investment in services and evidence based rehabilitation is critical to lowering recidivism, but equally important is ensuring those we supervise are accountable for their choices and behavior.

A critical part of rehabilitation is educating clients on how their choices impact their lives and those around them, including and especially victims. We do this by providing the tools to change criminal thinking. Thinking for a change and moral reconnection therapy are two of the many evidence-based programs that are integrated, cognitive behavioral change (how thinking effects actions) programs delivered through our probation department to assist individuals in better understanding the process of their decision making and how to change decision-making norms that have led to past criminal justice involvement.

This approach and the work probation does helps restore victims and prevent future victimization. The best thing we can do as law enforcement officers is prevent a future crime from being committed and prevent future victims. Research and evidence shows us that these strategies and practices do just that.

Consistent with probation's role as an evidence based and data driven decision maker, we also have a lesser known but

critical function in providing detention services for youth. Probation is responsible for the operation of two county juvenile detention facilities as well as a long-term commitment program operated in our South Lake Tahoe facility. The staff in our facilities are intensely trained and steeped in the latest scientific research about what works to change behavior. Our staff work tirelessly to safely supervise these youth, to prevent them from hurting themselves or each other, and to provide comfort and resources for them when the youth are confronted with the realities of the trauma many have experienced. Probation prepares these youths for transition back into their communities as they either return home or are placed in foster care in the community for a limited period of time, continuing to supervise and rehabilitate the youth during their term on probation, all while holding them accountable for actions leading to their detention.

We are a law enforcement agency that touches almost all aspects of the criminal justice system and we have a unique, innovative, and multidimensional approach to community safety. When we are successful, the payoff is immeasurable. From the prevention of future victims to the value of saving a life and helping regenerate a contributing member of our community. Beyond the personal and public safety impact probation makes, there are enormous and obvious cost savings for the entire criminal justice system when we succeed in our mission. In a recent report from the Public Policy Institute of California it was shown that of the average annual cost of the four corrections options in California, probation was by far the least expensive option to taxpayers. The annual cost of probation services statewide per offender was \$4,400 as compared to parole services (\$10,000), jail (\$38,600), and prison (\$60,000). Probation services are simply put, a bargain for taxpayers and an effective means of reducing recidivism.

This is why probation is so critical to our county and state and will continue to be the linchpin of the criminal justice

system. Myself and all probation officers in El Dorado County take great pride in the work we do and appreciate the community support we receive. The continued investment in probation will be critical to the future of California and the societal approach to public safety Californians want to see.

Brian Richardt is the chief probation officer for El Dorado County.