

COMMENTARY

State's prison strategy tests probation officers

California's criminal justice system is changing. Our work as Ventura County deputy probation officers has never been more challenging. More importantly, the quality of services we are capable of providing for our clients and the community has never been more important to the county's overall public safety.

In October 2011, to comply with a federal court order to substantially reduce the number of state prison inmates, the California Legislature and Gov. Jerry Brown directed the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation to start redirecting "non-serious, non-violent, non-sex-registrant" offenders (called "non-nons") to local custody and supervision under the governor's Public Safety Realignment (AB 109) program.

Unfortunately, the non-nons were mischaracterized to the public by politicians and the media and have been found to be higher-risk, more sophisticated and more violent

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than ever before.

Locally, under public safety realignment, more than 600 of these "low-level" inmates have been redirected to the Ventura County Probation Agency for supervision. By the end of 2013, that number is expected to climb to more than 800.

While challenges are to be expected with any program overhaul of this magnitude, public safety realignment presents deputy probation officers with two primary challenges:

First is the sheer increase in volume of probationers.

Deputy probation officers' caseloads have always been an issue. There will always be too many probationers and too few deputy probation officers to provide the kind of one-on-one attention we prefer.

Nevertheless, deputy probation officers work

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hard to ensure the public's safety by providing the necessary tools, resources and support to help change probationers' lives around. We also hold them accountable when they choose to continue in their criminal behavior.

The second and more difficult challenge is the nature of a new category of probationer. While previously known at the state level as parolees, in Ventura County these parolees are now known as post-release offenders (PROs).

The deputy probation officer's profession has traditionally been a balance between the work of a police officer and the work of a social worker. To do the job effectively, many would say they must be 100 percent of both.

Entry into the profession requires a minimum of a bachelor's degree or equivalent experience, the

passing of a physical agility test, written and oral interview exams, medical, psychological and polygraph exams, and a successful completion of an extensive background investigation. That's just to get in the front door. Ultimately, only the best of the best are cut out to perform the full range of duties required by the profession.

The new demands of the PROs under our supervision present a particularly difficult challenge because we are required to supervise a much more sophisticated and dangerous category of offender. We are now dealing with many hardened individuals who are deeply involved in the criminal justice system.

As a result, there is certainly a need to provide deputy probation officers with the necessary tools and training to help keep

themselves and the public safe.

The necessity to arm some of our deputy probation officers may present a challenge to the balance between our functions as police officers and social workers. If our lower-risk, more compliant probationers perceive us predominantly as a police presence, we risk losing the kind of relationship that promotes trust and rehabilitation.

To its credit, the Ventura County Probation Agency has initiated an effort to increase its officer safety training and firearms programs to provide more deputy probation officers with additional tools to safely supervise these higher-risk offenders.

Nevertheless, the Probation Agency has a lot of work to do in the area of officer safety.

The rationale is this: If

state parole officers undergo extensive officer safety training and are provided with firearms and less-than-lethal weaponry for their personal safety and the safety of the community in supervising these high-risk offenders, then it stands to reason that counties would apply the same standards to their probation officers, who are now charged with supervising these same offenders.

The Ventura County Professional Peace Officers' Association is committed to supporting our agency in providing the very best public safety services possible for the residents and businesses of Ventura County.

We are also committed to continuing our efforts to ensure that county probation officers have the tools necessary to keep themselves, the public and our communities safe.

Please visit us at vcp-poa.org.

Don Douglass is president of the Ventura County Professional Peace Officers' Association.