

Counties dilemma: how to use funds for inmates

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In a nondescript classroom one block from the San Francisco Hall of Justice, 10 men gathered on a recent night for a parenting class.

They went around the room, sharing the high and low points of their weeks. One man said he was relieved that November - the anniversary of both his brother's and father's deaths - was over. Another was excited and nervous about an upcoming job interview. The group - many of them ex-convicts, all of them there because of past involvement with the criminal justice system - responded with encouragement and support.

The parenting class, run by the nonprofit Community Works and sponsored by the San Francisco Sheriff's Department, is one of a host of programs offered both in San Francisco's jails and in the community to help offenders get their lives back in order. Supporters say that for someone with a criminal history, a program can mean the difference between rehabilitation and returning to jail.

And that's why many nonprofit community organizations around California have been lobbying hard to be included in the pot of money counties are receiving under the state's criminal justice realignment plan, which includes keeping more felons at county lockups instead of shipping them to state prisons.

But how that funding is spent varies by county. Some jurisdictions are spending the bulk of the money on law enforcement, including the hiring of police and probation officers, while others are choosing to invest in nonprofits that offer substance abuse counseling, housing, job training and other services to criminal offenders.

Experts say counties that choose to invest in services are more likely to reduce recidivism - and thus the number of people in the state's crowded jails and prisons.

Studies back that up. A recent report by the Pew Center on the States noted that the "largest reductions in recidivism are realized when evidence-based programs and practices are implemented in prisons and govern the supervision of (offenders) in the community post-release."

One of the participants in the parenting class at the Hall of Justice, a 38-year-old former drug addict, said he is proof that these programs work.

A year ago, he was living in San Francisco County Jail after 10 years of bouncing between sobriety, drug binges and run-ins with the law. Now, he is working full time, getting straight [A's](#) at City [College](#) and preparing to move back in with his girlfriend and 1-year-old son.

Last week, he graduated from the parenting class.

"I'm doing really well ... and I'm proud of myself for sticking with it," said Scott, who did not want his last name used because he is worried about future employment opportunities. "A lot of people don't know about drug addiction, the things we've been through. They think it doesn't work because statistically, it doesn't always.

"If no one else believes in you, and you don't believe in you, one person, saying, 'I do' - that's really all it takes."

Investing in solutions

Many Bay Area counties have embraced the idea of investing in services, with San Francisco, Alameda and Santa Clara each allocating one-quarter to one-third of their first year realignment budget to nonprofit providers.

"Our belief is that what's really going to help in terms of resolving recidivism and having a higher success rate is getting folks jobs and much-needed services," said Santa Clara Probation Chief Sheila Mitchell, who put 25 percent of the county's \$15.4 million into services. "Our funding plan mirrors our philosophy."

Some of the state's largest counties, however, have put just a fraction of their realignment budget into services.

One of those is San Bernardino County, which is second only to Los Angeles County in the number of inmates it sends to state prison every year. County leaders there chose to earmark about \$300,000 of their \$27.5 million budget to faith- and community-based organizations this year, a move that angered many advocates.

County probation Chief Michelle Scray said she believes community organizations can make the difference between incarceration and a productive, crime-free life for someone with a criminal history.

However, Scray noted that she must ensure the county probation department can handle an additional 2,500 former prison inmates over the next four years. That's in addition to the 19,000 probationers the agency already supervises.

So when San Bernardino County came up with a plan for spending its money, Scray and other county leaders decided to spend the lion's share on hiring probation officers, sheriff's deputies and other law enforcement officials.

Scray said she is training probation officers to do things like teach anger-management classes at one of the three reporting centers the county plans to open. But she said the state needs to give additional money for nongovernment services, which she believes are important.

Ill-equipped for influx

"The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results," she said. "California has a 67 percent recidivism rate because we only do things from the law enforcement side and there is no rehabilitation."

Those who run nonprofits and churches say that's exactly why counties should be investing in their services instead of waiting for money that will likely never materialize from the deficit-plagued state.

The Rev. Samuel Casey runs COPE, a network of African American congregations in the Inland Empire. He said San Bernardino County is ill-equipped to handle the thousands of men and women it will be charged with supervising under realignment. County leaders, he said, need to analyze where these offenders will be going, what they need and what resources are available to them - and then, they should invest in those services.

"Part of it is just cultural competency, being able to engage this population. These are some of our brothers, sisters, mothers, grandfathers and uncles coming home," he said. "Probation is not going to have the engagement with these individuals the way everyone thinks. They will barely see them. They barely see the ones that are on probation now."

Community leaders in Sacramento, Los Angeles and elsewhere are also angry and frustrated by the tiny amount those jurisdictions have decided to invest this year in community services.

Daniel Macallair, executive director of the Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice in San Francisco, said the discrepancies between counties mirror what was already happening in each jurisdiction prior to realignment. The center conducts criminal justice research and provides direct services, including a substance abuse program for adults who are released from prison.

'Counties not prepared'

"Most counties are not prepared to meet the challenges of realignment, and for many of them it's their own fault. They have engaged in bad practices and policies for 30 years," he said. "The counties that will have the hardest time are some of the Southern California and Central Valley counties that have relied heavily on the state prison system."

Macallair said probation departments need to change the way they approach their job and rely more on the community.

"What people don't realize is that even though we're the state of California and we have one set of criminal laws, you have 58 counties responsible for interpreting and applying those laws and essentially 58 different criminal justice systems," he said. "You're going to have well functioning

counties able to meet this challenge and a lot that are going to lag behind. There's nothing uniform about this."