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## California probation officers shift focus from punishment to collaboration

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Twelve Santa Clara County probation officers are standing in a circle, each twirling a rope with a noose at one end. They're pretending to lasso a criminal under their supervision.

Then an instructor tells them to untie the noose and hand one end of the rope to their "client."

"If you're working together," says the instructor to the skeptical officers, "the tension on the rope now is just right."

Hokey as the training exercise appears, it's at the heart of a serious effort under way across California and the rest of the nation to better prepare probationers for life on the outside and make them less likely to become repeat offenders. It all starts with teaching probation officers a less punitive, more collaborative approach to dealing with criminal offenders.

The technique, known as motivational interviewing or MI, is one of several nonconfrontational approaches coming back into vogue with realignment, California's recent overhaul of its criminal justice system. In October, responsibility for imprisoning and rehabilitating nonviolent offenders shifted from the state to counties. With such new responsibilities, local officials are hoping MI and an alphabet soup of other programs -- like CBT (cognitive behavioral therapy) and PCD (positive client development) -- will inspire more criminals not just to go straight, but to stay that way.

"Motivational interviewing is becoming more common than not," said Fresno County Probation Chief Linda Penner, immediate past president of the Chief Probation Officers of California.

The aim is for probation officers to use a counseling style that encourages clients to discuss and self-analyze their problems, their personal reasons to change and what they believe can help them succeed on the outside. That done, it's hoped probationers will learn to make positive decisions, guided by officers who use the sessions to build on their strengths, rather than focus on their weaknesses.

In Santa Clara County, a few adult probation officers got a taste a few years ago of MI, but now all 160 are taking three-day training sessions at a total cost of about \$45,000. San Mateo County trained its officers six years ago but is providing more sessions this year. Alameda County probation officers first learned MI in 2009 and are slated to get more lessons. Santa Cruz County has done some training and wants to do more.

After a role-playing exercise at one of those recent training sessions, one Santa Clara County probation officer noted a distinct difference between the mock meeting with a probationer and his usual style.

"It was more of a conversation instead of me as the P.O. doing all the talking, telling them what to do," said the officer, who asked for his name not to be used.

But not everyone is a fan. Some probation officers balk at what they perceive as a touchy-feely approach far removed from the reality they have long experienced.

"Some of these adults are at a place where a few inspirational words might make a difference," said another probation officer at the training session, "but for most, I don't see what MI would do."

Other officers are concerned that the new program comes at a time when they are dealing with more dangerous clients who used to report to parole agents under the old system. They wonder how they can manage their inherently

schizophrenic role as both counselor and mentor to the offender while also being a representative of the justice system who has the power to put the person back behind bars.

"Quite honestly, it seems like a double message," one officer said after the training. "I mean they're asking some of us to carry guns and at the same time to try out motivational interviewing?"

The probation department chiefs, who are enthusiastic about MI, are aware of the skepticism.

Santa Cruz County Probation Chief Scott MacDonald said, "We also need to use motivational enhancement on probation officers because this model requires us to engage in culture change."

The culture of probation is coming full circle, from focusing on rehabilitation before the 1970s, to punishment during the 1970s, '80s and '90s, back to a renewed interest in treatment, according to a recent research paper by the Judicial Council of California's scholar in residence, retired Judge Roger K. Warren.

"Back in the 1990s, I remember being told that I should clear everything off my desk and leave just handcuffs to show clients we're here to contain you and stop you," said Kevin Lynch, Marin County's director of juvenile probation, who is a proponent of MI.

Researchers have found MI extremely effective in the treatment of addiction. Scant research has been completed on its role in the criminal justice system, said MI's creator, clinical psychologist William R. Miller, though corrections agencies around the nation so far are reporting positive results. The chiefs don't see MI as a panacea, just as a helpful tool.

"Imagine going home to a loved one and spending a half-hour telling them what is wrong with him, and then a half-hour telling them what they need to do about it," said MacDonald, Santa Cruz County's probation chief. "How would your evening go? The fact is no one likes to be told what to do, and that method does not promote change."

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