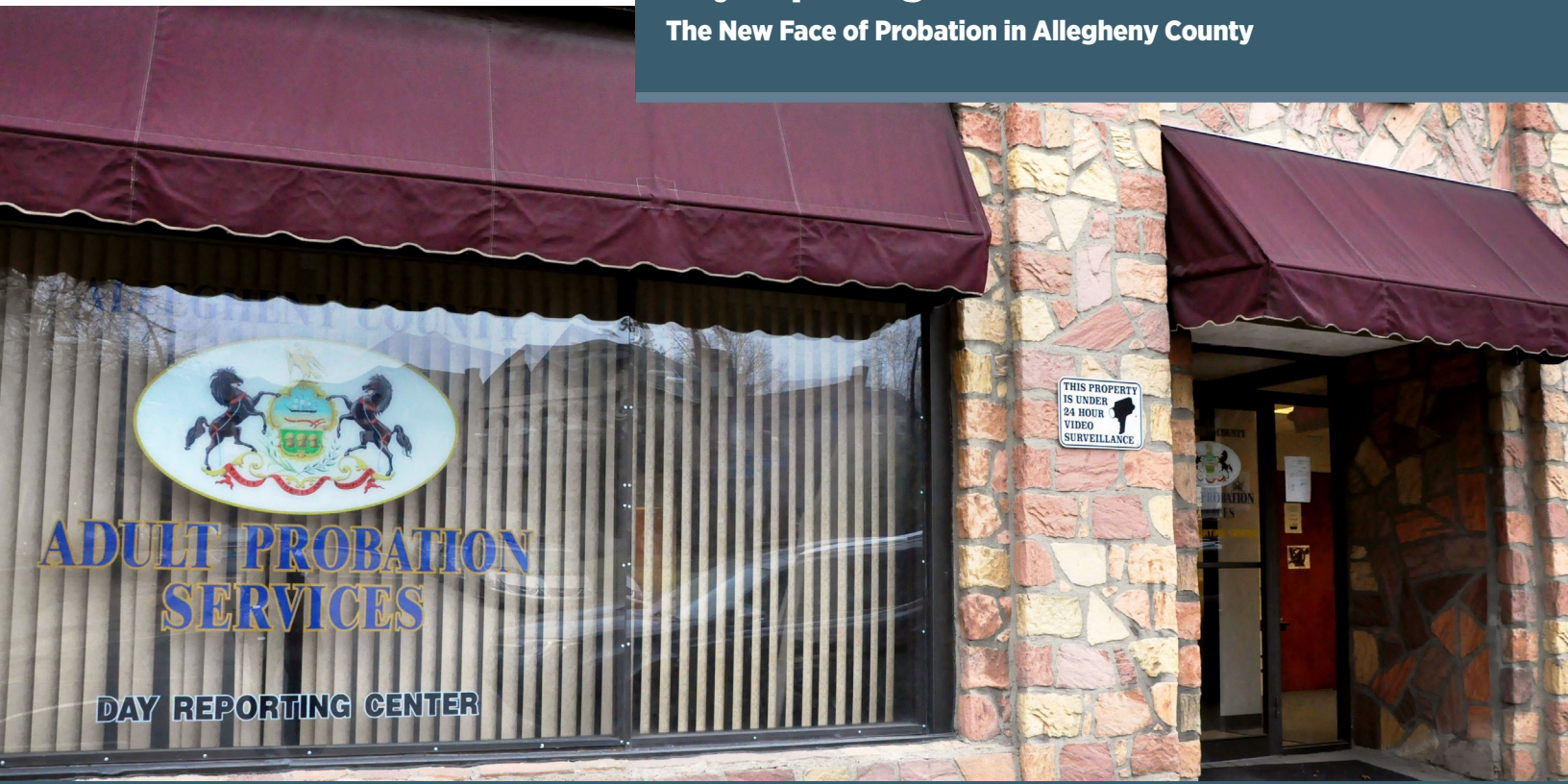


Day Reporting Centers: The New Face of Probation in Allegheny County



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DAY REPORTING CENTERS CONTRIBUTE TO RESTRUCTURING OF MONITORING AND REHABILITATION

Frank Scherer stood in the parking lot of the Allegheny County Probation Office's Day Reporting Center in Pittsburgh's Arlington neighborhood. Pointing across a field to a row of houses one block away, he said, "That green one is where my parents live. The bedroom on the second floor is where I slept growing up."



Scherer hasn't strayed far from his roots, but the Day Reporting Centers that he has helped to create are part of a major transformation in the way in which Adult Probation in Allegheny County manages offenders on probation. Through these centers, Adult Probation, part of the Criminal Division, Fifth Judicial District

of Pennsylvania, has placed rehabilitation front and center, efficiently packaging and highlighting the services that help offenders to move in a positive direction.

THE RECONSTRUCTION OF PROBATION

Allegheny County's Day Reporting Centers (DRCs) have added a new twist to a familiar program. Many U.S. jurisdictions have established similar centers as pre-release facilities for jail inmates nearing the end of their sentences. Allegheny County, however, is a pioneer in applying the DRC concept to the probation context. In doing so, it has inverted the traditional model of probation, in which officers (when not tracking down a violator or in court) worked mainly in their offices, waiting for offenders to report in on their fulfillment of probation conditions, and were quick to apply the "nail them and jail them" solution to those who did not comply. Now the probation officers are mobile, and the office primarily serves the offenders.

With startup funding assistance from the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency and strong support from Allegheny County President Judge Donna Jo McDaniel and Criminal Division Administrative Judge Jeffrey Manning, the Arlington DRC opened in 2009, followed by a second facility in East Liberty two years later. A nearby, traditional-style regional probation office was closed in each case, and other offices were consolidated in order to shift funds to the new centers.

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Both DRCs are open from noon to 8:00 p.m. so as to better accommodate work schedules.

Upon entering the Arlington DRC, one sees a wide-open room with banks of computers, available for use by people on probation as they compose resumes, conduct job searches, or complete educational requirements. Classrooms at the center host a regular schedule of GED coursework and life skills instruction. Drug and alcohol assessments, treatment programs, anger management classes, batterer intervention programs, cognitive behavioral therapy, parenting classes, and Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous meetings also take place on site.

“The initial vision was a one-stop shop of services to work on the issues that we recognized as coming under our supervision,” explained Probation Office Director Ron Seyko. Each offender’s risk of recidivism is assessed using three factors that have proved to be highly accurate in predicting the likelihood of re-offending: age at first arrest, total number of arrests, and current age. Those classified as medium- or high-risk receive a needs assessment, resulting in development of an individualized case plan. Low-risk offenders are shifted onto an administrative caseload and have minimal, routine reporting requirements as long as they stay out of trouble.

INVESTING WHERE IT MAKES A DIFFERENCE

Seyko cited research showing that tighter supervision of low-risk offenders can actually be counterproductive, as it causes them to have more contact with high-risk peers. Citing them for violations and throwing them back in jail makes their peer group even more infectious. “It’s like grad school for criminals,” said Tom McCaffrey, Allegheny County’s Criminal Division administrator and former probation director.

To invest its resources where they can have the greatest impact, Allegheny County restructured the caseloads of its 128 probation officers (POs). Administrative POs have up to 700 people on their caseload, but, after an initial meeting, have no further face-to-face contact requirements unless a problem arises. Grouping low-risk offenders into large caseloads has enabled the Probation Office to substantially reduce caseload sizes for everyone else. Seyko said that only four percent of those in the administrative caseloads are re-arrested while under Probation Office supervision, demonstrating the effectiveness of both the office’s new strategy and its classification of offenders.

Jill Fielder, one of the POs with an administrative caseload, temporarily managed close to 1,400 cases recently while a colleague was on maternity leave, and she still wasn't complaining. "I meet with them once, in a group setting, and tell them that if they do well they won't hear from me," Fielder said. "In this time of limited resources, you have to pick and choose. Some people still like to check in occasionally to make sure everything's okay."

IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

DRCs faced two significant early challenges: community relations and PO adjustment.

NIMBY (Not in My Back Yard) concerns can be expected with virtually any community-based center for offenders. Pointing out that the DRC was not an extension of the county jail helped to allay concerns. So did the fact that Scherer, the original Arlington DRC manager and now deputy director of probation, felt comfortable recommending a location within sight of his parents' home.

The biggest change in attitudes, however, has resulted from what those on probation have contributed to the community.

"People were concerned about offenders coming into their community," Seyko recalled. "So we pointed out to them that these offenders are already here" — that is, they are not relocating to Arlington or East Liberty, because their homes are already in the vicinity.

The biggest change in attitudes, however, has resulted from what those on probation have contributed to the community. The Arlington DRC has mobilized offenders to maintain two adopt-a-highway sites, remove graffiti, manage a community garden, clean up local eyesores, and unload trucks for Meals on Wheels and the Southside farmer's market. In the DRC's first year alone, 136 participants completed 2,157 hours of community service in south Pittsburgh neighborhoods.

Southside City Councilman Bruce Kraus, an early skeptic, now holds constituent meetings at an office in the Arlington center and sponsored an October 2012 city resolution honoring the DRCs. Supervisor Nicole Ballard, a Southside native and former PO with a background in social services, organizes the community service activities, which have deployed as many as 60 offenders for cleanup days and have included full-day shifts as volunteers at a neighborhood festival.

THE NEW LIFE OF A PO

For the POs, the new concept meant saying farewell to established daily routines. "Initially, we had a lot of people leave who were accustomed to sitting behind their desks, grabbing detainees [for probation violations] and putting people in jail," Seyko said. We brought in national leaders to talk with our POs about evidence-based supervision and case planning. We have trained them in motivational interviewing and in using cognitive behavioral therapy to change how offenders think."

Lynn Lewis, a mobile PO whose caseload stretches from south Pittsburgh neighborhoods to Findlay Township in the county's southwest corner, uses two municipal buildings and the DRC for meetings and also visits offenders in their homes. She said the new arrangements make for a fast-moving job but are also more effective. "My frequency of arrests has gone down

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because I can respond to issues quickly rather than waiting for the next office day," Lewis explained. In addition, her mobility has enhanced her ability to coordinate with local law enforcement in ensuring offenders' compliance.

Lewis indicated that the DRC provides valuable support by offering convenient drug screening and regularly scheduled classes. In addition, she feels that she is more consistently aware of how her caseload is doing than in the old system, under which offenders who came to the office when she was away were seen by another PO. Her caseload size has been reduced by 20 percent and should drop further in the future.

Offenders have responded positively to the new approach — once they have gotten past their initial surprise. As Scherer explained: "The PO was always a bad guy in their minds; now the PO is working proactively to help them get a GED, find a job or get off drugs. What used to be a threat — if you go down this path, you'll go to jail — is now about finding a way to help someone get off drugs and get on with a positive life."

YOU'VE GOT A FRIEND IN EAST LIBERTY

At the East Liberty DRC, two generations of probation management share in leadership. Adult probation manager Charlene Christmas started with the agency in 1974, before field offices even existed; DRC supervisor Dante Works began as a PO in 2003.

Works was attracted to the chance to make rehabilitation opportunities available to offenders rather than just threatening them with jail terms. "I'm an East End native, so a lot of my peers and friends come through here," he said. "It's good to offer them something more than a handcuff. Before, we were just like guards at the gate with badges; now [offenders] relate to us more as regular people trying to help them. At first they didn't take it seriously, but once word got out that we were offering services instead of sentences, the place started filling up."

Christmas, who experienced the old style of probation for decades, doesn't yearn to go back to it either. "When the country favored building more prisons and giving maximum sentences, we were caught up in that too," she recalled. "But we realized that warehousing people was not a solution. Research has shown that we get more bang for our buck by rehabilitating people and showing them other options besides prison. It's an idea whose time has come."

To make the premises as inviting as possible for the 30 to 45 offenders who come through the front door each day for rehabilitation activities, all arrest bookings occur in the rear offices and probation violators are led out a back door, out of sight of those engaged in activities in the front

of the building. As at Arlington, the main feature is a large open area equipped with computers. At East Liberty, this room also has four desks around the outside, occupied by monitors who schedule and verify completion of drug testing, classes or treatments for about 100 offenders each. Christmas said that the use of monitors has enabled POs to spend more time in the field and to get faster information regarding offenders' fulfillment of their obligations.

PO Christy Bartosh started out as a monitor when the East Liberty DRC opened in 2011 and quickly discovered its value to those served. "Transportation is a huge issue," she noted. "About 95 percent rely on public transportation. They were amazed at the amount of services here at their disposal." Monitors arrange appointments to help offenders complete multiple activities in a single visit whenever possible.



Local developers come to the DRC for employees, having found that it is a good place to find skilled workers for building projects. Convincing offenders to take entry-level jobs when they used to earn far more as drug dealers can be a challenge. Christmas tells them, "It may not be as profitable, but you don't have to keep looking over your shoulder."

The East Liberty DRC faced similar early resistance to that in Arlington, but City Councilman Ricky Burgess became a strong supporter once he saw the services that the DRC was bringing into his district.

FROM PROBATION TO RESTORATION

"They have made me a whole person again," said Pam Cenci-Sparte of Whitehall, a middle-aged widow who came to the Arlington DRC while on probation for a DUI offense.

"Probation can be intimidating," Cenci-Sparte admitted. "I had to go through lots of hoops to visit family members in Florida. I was afraid to do anything lest I do something wrong again. But Nicole and the DRC staff were wonderful."

A DRC staff member helped Cenci-Sparte set up an email account, showed her how to use it, and assisted her in developing a résumé. He then recommended her for a cleaning position at PNC Park, where the employment managers trusted DRC referrals enough to look beyond applicants' criminal records.

Hired for the 2009 baseball season, Cenci-Sparte seized the opportunity — so well, in fact, that she was named employee of the month almost immediately, in May 2009, and again in 2011 after her promotion to event staff supervisor. She personally oversees the cleanliness of key facilities such as the guest relations area and the lounge reserved for players' families.



Pam Cenci-Sparte, middle

“I hope other people on probation can learn from my experience that opportunities are out there for them and that the DRC can help them.”

“I hope other people on probation can learn from my experience that opportunities are out there for them and that the DRC can help them,” Cenci-Sparte said.

DRC staff “are concerned about me as a person, not a statistic,” said Sherri, a middle-aged East Liberty woman who secured a landscaping job while on probation. “They look at who you are, not what you did.” Sherri especially values the DRC’s proactive approach to helping offenders maintain compliance with therapy regimens and court cost payments rather than waiting for a violation to occur. “They make sure that you are accountable,” she stated. “That is good for me so that I stay in therapy and don’t relapse.”

Following an arrest for drug use, Ray Sabo of Wilkinsburg thought that probation would be harsh and “a bad thing,” but he soon found otherwise. DRC classes helped Sabo understand that “there are better ways to make friends and have fun than getting high” and the impact of being in the “wrong crowd”; as a result, he changed his phone number and broke free from the drug scene. Now his manager at Giant Eagle sees Sabo as a positive role model, and Sabo plans to attend community college in business management.

SPEEDING UP REHABILITATION

Among their most important benefits, DRCs have streamlined aspects of offender rehabilitation that were harder to carry out previously.

“In the past,” Scherer explained, “you might refer someone for a class, and it might take awhile to get started. Now the officer can say, ‘You’re in a class starting here, tomorrow.’”

Having a wide array of DRC-based services at the PO’s fingertips has dovetailed nicely with another strategic reform: the placement of five POs inside the Allegheny County Jail to work with offenders preparing for release.

“Historically, people would be released from jail and we in probation wouldn’t know they were released for six to eight weeks,” McCaffrey stated. “And those first weeks are when the offender is at the greatest risk of failure. Now we catch them before they come out. Our POs participate in case planning within the jail, and when people are released, they are in contact with a PO and the DRC.”

The PO positions in the jail were originally created using federal Second Chance Act grant funds, but the success of this innovation has caused the Fifth Judicial District of Pennsylvania to commit to retaining these positions beyond the grant period.

TURNING THE CORNER ON RECIDIVISM

A preliminary comparison study by the Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS) indicated that medium- and high-risk offenders referred to a DRC have had a significantly lower re-booking rate than those served by traditional probation methods. Technical violations, on the other hand, are more common, due primarily to the more frequent contact between these

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offenders and POs. As Ballard stated, “We make them come here [for classes and counseling] because it’s a controlled environment, and we know right away if they don’t show up.” The higher number of technical violations, McCaffrey stressed, reflects not case failures (after all, they are not resulting in more re-bookings) but better processes to ensure compliance.

Administrators in the Criminal Division of the Fifth Judicial District are encouraged by these early results, but they point out that this change is driven by philosophy as well as by a commitment to implementing best practices.

“This is not just a fad, or Probation doing a nice project,” McCaffrey declared, “but part of a permanent change in how we deal with crime in Allegheny County. At the same time, in today’s evidence-based environment, we have a huge responsibility to measure our effectiveness and make changes if necessary.”

Seyko and McCaffrey agreed that this systemic change in how their department operates could not have happened without strong countywide vision and collaboration. McCaffrey said that key leaders such as the sheriff, district attorney, jail warden, director of human services and president judge don’t just send representatives to meetings, but invest significant personal time in planning reforms and working out problems. He especially credited President Judge McDaniel for thinking progressively about ways to improve the system. McCaffrey added that Judge Manning has been equally supportive and was instrumental in securing a location for the East Liberty DRC.

With grant availability drying up, the administrators have constructed a fiscal model, relying in part on new court costs and fees charged to offenders, in order to sustain the DRCs without needing outside funding for staff. DHS has committed nearly \$300,000 per year to fund DRC-based supportive services. “The DRCs are a wonderful collaborative project and an excellent delivery mechanism to get services to the clients who most need them,” said DHS Director Marc Cherna.

DHS funds are supporting a further expansion of DRC services that began in November 2013. Enhanced offerings include funding for online GED testing; job readiness assessment and instruction; a housing referral service; six downtown apartments, available to offenders needing emergency housing for up to 90 days; contracting with an additional drug and alcohol assessment provider so that more assessments can be given immediately; and means-tested assistance with the cost of attending batterer intervention programs.

“We’ve spent 30 years keeping our heads down,” McCaffrey said of the career that he and Seyko entered together in 1980, “because if the probation office ever made news, it was bad news.” Now, perhaps for the first time, the DRCs have given them something to talk about publicly, reaffirming Seyko’s simple motto about what probation should be: “We want the offender to leave probation better off than when he or she came in.”