

1-Year San Francisco Parole Reentry Court Report Card: 87% fewer “Return to Prison”

California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) data for the 10-month period that the San Francisco Parole Reentry Court (SFPRC) was fully operational (Dec. 2010-Sept. 2011) established that the SFPRC "return to prison" rate was 1/7th the rate of regular San Francisco parolees (a reduction of 87% over 10 months). SF's parolee population had 1365 “return to prison” out of its 1,686 parolees (81% of the SF parole population). The SFPRC had 8 out of 70 parolees return to prison (an 11% rate).

The SFPRC was planned as a stand alone program, built from the ground up, to best respond to the needs of a challenging population; high-risk parole violators with serious substance abuse and/or mental health issues. It’s mission was to reduce the parolee “return to prison rate” by immersing participants in an intensive court-based rehabilitation community, while using minimum custodial and court resources. The court relied on evidence-based practices, to engage participants in a minimum level of structured activities; including weekly interactive court sessions, intensive supervision and counseling, drug testing and treatment, cognitive behavioral therapies, mandatory education and job training, and community service (local housing and residential treatment, hard to come by resources, were provided as needed).

The SFPRC team and participants created a rehabilitation community that was a driving force for participant change. The court team encouraged and often joined participants in pro-social activities, treating participants as individuals worthy of respect. The court became a friendlier place; where strangers became friends and sometimes mentors, coffee and pastries were served, rehab sessions and counseling, honor roll meetings and award ceremonies, and other pro-social activities occurred. Participants were also expected to engage in the larger community via volunteerism and other activities (i.e. organizing family picnics).

The SFPRC embraced a true paradigm shift, pioneering the use of positive reinforcement in reentry courts; using awards, rewards, and positive, and negative incentives to recognize accomplishments. A tangible example: The courtroom bulletin board displayed the SFPRC Newsletter, awards and certificates, letters and poetry, photos of graduation and awards ceremonies, family and friends, court picnics, and newly inducted Honor Roll members.

Minimum sanctions were used as necessary, almost to the exclusion of custody. This is especially relevant under new state law, where parole sanctions are often statutorily limited to 90 days county jail. SFPRC sanctioned just 14 participants for a total of 105 days in jail. SFPRC's 70 participants achieved a 93% attendance rate, though required to attend weekly court sessions (approximately 1200 hour-long court appearances over a 10 month period). [A six county statutory pilot program, gave the SF Superior Court authority to determine parole conditions, including rehabilitation and supervision as well as sanctions for parole violations.]

Over it’s 15-month life (planning and implementation), SFPRC modeled "a minimalist reentry court for recessionary times"(see: reentrycourtsolutions.com). SFPRC limited itself to part-time judge, court coordinator, case manager, defense attorney, parole officer and clerk. It used minimal incarceration. It achieved an 87% reduction in “returns to prison”. It engaged long term prisoners, recently returned to society, in community. On all counts, SFPRC delivered.

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