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Sacramento probation sweep heralds return of supervision for some offenders

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The Sacramento County probation officer hunched over a sweating, erratic suspect in handcuffs and tried to get his attention.

"This is what is important," Casey Curry boomed to the 42-year-old probationer, who was easily distracted and sweating profusely in a tank top despite the chill in the morning air. "We're back in the probation business."

That means that upon his release from jail – where the man was headed for an outstanding warrant – he'd have to start regularly reporting to probation, a requirement he'd long had the luxury of ignoring thanks to the county's budget woes.

The message was conveyed to dozens of Sacramento County felony probationers this week as the Probation Department, emboldened by \$1.3 million in new funding from the county Board of Supervisors, sought to build back its caseload after years of staggering cuts.

In a three-day sweep that ended Thursday, officers fanned across the county in search of offenders who, on paper, have been on probation for years but haven't submitted to a drug test, reported to the probation office or found an officer on their doorstep for a surprise visit. The targets were 280 probationers with drug histories and a high risk of reoffending.

Officials said they focused on drug offenders because a high percentage of probationers have drug histories, and help is available for them. Drugs also tend to drive other crimes, such as burglaries, robberies and domestic violence.

The goal this week was simple: "Find 'em, get 'em back under supervision," supervising probation Officer Brian Casteel told a room of colleagues Tuesday morning. Those contacted were to be given a drug test to get a baseline – is the person using again? – and encouraged to visit the office next week, where they could be assessed and directed toward resources. Only the most egregious offenses were to end in arrest, Casteel explained.

Probation Chief Lee Seale said the emphasis on services rather than arrests – not the typical mantra for a law enforcement sweep – reflected his department's commitment to rehabilitation.

"We know that we can visit just about any one of our probationers and find some reason to put them behind bars. But we also know they'll get out from custody a few days later ... and they'll be right back in the same position – or worse," said Seale, who took the helm of the department in May. "This isn't a race. This isn't about cleaning up the streets for the weekend so we look good. ... This is about long-term durable change."

Seale took the job at a dismal time for the department. Staffing had fallen to about 620 employees – a 30 percent reduction from the 2008-09 fiscal year, reflecting the reduction in funding from the county's general fund. Added responsibilities stemming from the state's realignment plan, which shifts some supervisory duties to county probation rather than state parole, meant that watching traditional felony probationers dropped on the list of priorities.

Before this week's sweep, about 1,000 of the county's 21,000 felony probationers – 4.8 percent – were under active supervision.

Probation officials say it's not necessary to monitor every single felony probationer; first-time offenders with a low risk of committing the crime again, for example, rarely need intense supervision. Ideally, though, officials said they would be supervising all of their 4,200 probationers deemed to be at high risk of reoffending.

The department continues to actively monitor all of the nearly 1,900 probationers who are under county supervision as the result of the prison realignment plan. They also supervise a higher rate of their juvenile offenders – about 21 percent.

Half of the additional \$1.3 million influx from the county's general fund will allow for four new probation officers dedicated to traditional supervision. The other half will be used for services, such as mental health and drug counseling.

With an admittedly ambitious goal of assigning each officer a caseload of 50 probationers, the number of offenders being monitored won't increase dramatically. But Seale said the impact will be felt nonetheless.

"These are people who really will benefit from intensive intervention," he said. "There is more bang for the buck."

During the three-day sweep, officers made 215 home visits and succeeded in contacting 53 probationers face-to-face, Casteel said. They confirmed more addresses, but the probationers weren't always home. As many as 70 called into the probation office after returning home and finding business cards; 91 probationers not directly contacted during the sweep are expected to reconnect with their supervisors next week. A few probationers were discovered to be in custody elsewhere, or dead.

Officers also came across a steady stream of evidence of what happens when some probationers are left unattended.

By the end of Wednesday, officers had confiscated more than 60 pounds of marijuana, 115 grams of methamphetamine and 66 Ecstasy pills. They found two handguns and more than 400 rounds of ammunition. In one home, they found dozens of credit cards and a passport that officers suspect was tied to identity theft.

"When they haven't been supervised and they don't have the resources, then you're going to get crime," Casteel said. "We're not going to fix everybody, but every one you do keep out of jail, every one you keep out of a robbery, it helps ..."

Some officers ran into a few probationers who weren't eager to hear their freedom had ended. But Casteel said the officers were welcomed by a number of neighbors, family members and even a few offenders themselves who recognize they need services.

When officers came looking for her boyfriend, Crystal Seher appeared relieved.

"He needs that (supervision). I need that for him, too," said Seher, 29. "That's the only way he's going to stay clean."

Seher said her boyfriend, who has struggled with meth addiction, has been clean since being released

from jail less than a month ago. But she fears that the constant temptation, including from some of his friends, will cause him to falter. She said she needs him to be clean so he can help her raise the baby she's carrying.

"We'll get him in check," Casteel assured her.

"Yeah, please help me," Seher said. "I'm begging you."

Probation officials agree the agency is still a far cry from where it should be in regard to supervising traditional probationers. But they said they feel encouraged by this week's sweep and the promise of expanding their reach for the first time in years.

"It's nice to be able to come back and do probation work," Casteel said. "It's been awhile."

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