



media alert

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Options in sentencing to probation can provide widespread benefits

At a time when Colorado's and the nation's prison populations are surging and government budgets continue to decline, a recent report by the Pew Center on the States highlights the importance of probation and other alternatives to prison in Colorado's criminal sentencing structure, state probation officials say.

The report, "One in 31," states that tougher sentencing laws enacted in Colorado and other states in the 1980s and 1990s have led to the highest incarceration population in history, with 2.3 million people in prison or jail. For the first time, the country's prison population has hit 1 percent of overall population. The title of the report is an allusion to the fact that one in 31 adults in the United States is under correctional control, either on probation or parole, or in community corrections, jail or prison.

Across the country, the vast majority of funding for overall correctional programs goes to prisons. In Colorado, probation – which is managed by the Judicial Department – accounts for the largest number of people in the overall correctional population. At the end of the 2008 fiscal year, Colorado Probation was providing community supervision for more than 50,000 adult and juvenile offenders, and monitoring more than 18,000 adults convicted of DUI or DWAI. The Department of Corrections had about 23,000 adults in prison and about 9,000 on parole according to its latest statistical report.

It costs more than \$27,000 per year to house an offender in a state prison in Colorado, while it costs about \$1,100 per year to supervise an adult on regular probation. According to the Pew report, the cost of one day of prison equals the cost of 21 days of probation supervision.

More than 95 percent of incarcerated offenders are released back into the community. The Pew report suggests a better return on government investment could be achieved with a more judicious use of full-time incarceration and increased reliance on evidence-based practices in the community: treatment and supervision applied with individualized case plans. Studies have shown such practices can reduce recidivism.

"Public safety is always foremost in our mind," said Tom Quinn, Director of Probation Services for the Judicial Department. "But we must be careful stewards of the tax dollar as well. If we are

too quick to incarcerate, it can be costly and may not ultimately accomplish the law-abiding behavior we all seek.”

For more than a decade, Colorado probation officials have made increasing use of evidence-based practices, with a significant push in the past three years to train staff and change policies to improve results.

Some success is apparent by looking at the number of people on probation being sent to the Department of Corrections for technical violations of the conditions of their probation terms. From 2004 to 2007, the number of clients on probation increased by several thousand, yet the number of probationers sent to DOC for technical violations dropped by 342. The improvement was credited to an increased use of intermediate sanctions such as more frequent office or home visits, additional drug screens or use of electronic monitoring.

“We reduced those numbers while increasing successful completion of probation in most categories of offenders we supervise,” Quinn said. “We can and will do better, but it is heartening to see dollars saved thus far as a result of better practices.”

Other factors were at work as well. Colorado Probation was given the legislative authority and funding to hire more probation officers, and it received more resources for drug and alcohol treatment, enabling some offenders to be stabilized outside of a cell.

The agency is working to make additional progress toward successful completion of probationary sentences and reduction of recidivism, especially in rural areas.

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