

# Colorado Probation Research in Brief

## *Probation Officer Roles: Surveillance Versus Treatment*

Clear, T. and Latessa, E. (1993) *Probation Officers' Roles in Intensive Supervision: Surveillance Versus Treatment*. Justice Quarterly, 3:441-462.

**Key Words:** officer roles, typologies, treatment, surveillance, role integration, supervision philosophy

### **The Officer's Role and Response**

#### **Summary/Conclusions**

This study was undertaken to explore the idea of role conflict experienced by probation and parole officers. The article notes that previous researchers had regarded "role conflict" as inherent in probation and parole work and is often attributed to inconsistencies in the way offenders are supervised. This study noted that there is little empirical data regarding role conflict. In an effort to explore officer roles, this study looked at agency philosophy, officer role orientation, and supervision tasks, using the categories of "authority/enforcement" to represent a more law enforcement philosophy, and "assistance" to represent the case worker philosophy.

#### **Limitations of Information**

The sample is limited by the small number of participants, and results should be generalized cautiously. The study included all of the intensive supervision (ISP) officers in one location and only 25% of all ISP officers in the other location. Also, this study focuses on two philosophical roles (law enforcement and case worker). Colorado Probation is using a three-role model: law enforcement, case worker, and resource broker.

**Caveat:** The information presented here is intended to summarize and inform readers of research and information relevant to probation work. It can provide a framework for carrying out the business of probation as well as suggestions for practical application of the material. While it may, in some instances, lead to further exploration and result in *future* decisions, it is not intended to prescribe policy and is not necessarily conclusive in its findings. Some of its limitations are described above.

Although the study indicates that officers tend to assume a certain role in approaching their work, there is little research to indicate that probation officers (PO's) operate exclusively out of a "law enforcement" role or "case worker" philosophy.

This study was designed to determine how an agency's philosophy and a PO's role impact the approach to supervision. The researchers purposely chose programs in two states that supervise higher risk probationers on intensive supervision programs (ISP) using clearly differing philosophies: Georgia was known as a "get tough" program and Ohio was known to have a treatment philosophy. A non-random sample of 16 ISP officers were selected from Ohio and 15 ISP PO's were selected from Georgia. Each PO completed the Authority/Assistance questionnaire to determine their attitude toward authority, enforcement, and assistance. They were then provided five cases in which they had to assign supervision tasks. They could choose from "control" tasks (e.g., EHM, jail) or "support" tasks (e.g., talk with client's family, assist client in recognizing problems) to manage the offenders' behavior.

The PO's responses to the measures, as well as the philosophy of their agency, were analyzed. Regarding attitude, the researchers found that the Georgia officers scored significantly higher on authority and enforcement measures than the Ohio sample. Also the Georgia sample selected more control-oriented tasks for the supervision of the five cases than the Ohio officers. However, they noted that a PO's preference for the case worker role does not

inhibit their selection of "control" tasks and vice versa. In other words, most officers were not 100% control or 100% support; they employ both tasks. The researchers also discovered "an organizational philosophy of treatment and service seems to be more instrumental in producing support tasks with clients than is the officer's personal role preference." In other words, role identity is important but doesn't influence supervision approaches as much as the agency's philosophy.

#### **Practical Applications**

- √ Review your department's philosophy. Does it reflect the type of supervision the district wants to provide? Does your mission or vision statement need to be updated to include EBP?
- √ The ability to seamlessly use control and support can be difficult but very effective. If you tend to rely heavily on one style over another, try partnering with a peer that is more closely associated with a different role. Staff cases together, discussing how supervision responses might be used from the law enforcement, case worker, or resource broker perspectives.
- √ Strive to match your role and response to the clients' risk/needs.
- √ Expand your pool of possible behavior responses by reviewing the lists developed for the TVBC project. Also, network with other districts to discover additional ideas.
- √ More information on supervision roles and Colorado Probation can be found on Judicialnet in "J/AISP Officer Survey & Interview Summaries & Recommendations."