

Santa Cruz Sentinel

County braces for more on probation: Probation chief seeks progressive approach to reduce recidivism

[By Stephen Baxter](#)

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SANTA CRUZ - County probation officials say they are tackling the changes to the state's justice system by adding probation officers, electronic monitors for lower-level offenders and programs in jail that try to dig out the root of criminal behavior.

In the next 12 months, roughly 140 new probationers are expected to be added to the county's 2,000 people on probation.

Scott MacDonald, the county's probation chief, said this week that the overall aim is to reduce recidivism - or the rate that criminals reoffend - which now stands about 70 percent in the county.

"What we're shooting for is a 30 or 40 percent reduction in recidivism," MacDonald said.

The plan is a product of a committee that includes leaders from the District Attorney's Office, judges, the Sheriff's Office, public defenders, health services and Watsonville police. They produced a document that is expected to be approved by the county Board of Supervisors on Tuesday.

Because of new sentencing rules enacted with state law AB109, more people convicted of non-serious crimes will be eligible for County Jail sentences rather than prison. More people also will be eligible for probation rather than jail.

On top of that, offenders are expected to be released from County Jail more quickly because of new credit rules for days in jail, and those released often go on probation.

To oversee those new probationers, MacDonald said he plans to add three to five more probation officers to the roughly 40 probation officers who work in the county now.

As it stands, probation officers provide closer supervision to more serious offenders, and probationers are ranked as high, medium and low risks, MacDonald said.

A probation officer might monitor 20 people if some of them are more serious offenders. If a probation officer's portfolio includes less serious offenders, the officer could oversee double that number or more.

Overall, MacDonald said he expects to have one probation officer for every 35 people on probation with the new plan.

ELECTRONIC MONITORING

There also will be a big increase in the use of electronic monitoring for low-level, non-violent offenders, which county studies have shown to be successful in terms of avoiding new offenses, MacDonald said.

The county now has 20 to 25 people on electronic monitors, and county officials expect to buy about 125 more devices.

"Electronic monitoring is very successful. There's a swift certainty that if you step out, you're going to be caught," MacDonald said. "They've got a lot to lose. They don't want to go back to jail."

There are several different kinds of monitors. If a person is on house arrest, for instance, the device records if a person has left the house and creates a report for a probation officer. Other electronic monitors have GPS devices that can track a person's location. Still others can measure a person's sweat to determine if they consumed alcohol against a court order.

A competitive bid process will determine the overall cost of the new monitors, according to the county report.

PRETRIAL SERVICES

MacDonald said that the "pretrial services" in court also have had a positive impact on saving space in County Jail for more serious offenders.

When a person is eligible for a probation release and appears in court, someone in pretrial services uses a laptop computer to give the judge a recommendation as to whether the defendant should be eligible for release and on what terms.

The recommendations are based on factors like people's prior offenses, whether they have a family or other support system in the county, and their job and living situation.

Not all counties in the state have pretrial services, and its success in Santa Cruz County has actually drawn representatives of about a dozen other counties to look at Santa Cruz's model, MacDonald said.

The service also has been useful for defendants who have jobs. If a person stands to lose their job if they serve jail time, it might make sense to release them to return to their job, MacDonald said.

"If you lose those stability factors (like a job), you're at a higher risk to reoffend," MacDonald said.

Recently in Santa Cruz County, 95 percent of people who were given supervised release per the recommendation of pretrial services finished their probation time without reoffending, MacDonald said. About 88 percent of those granted supervised release also made all their court appearances, he said.

More people on probation rather than jail also has made room for about 90 more inmates in the County Jail each day without compromising public safety, MacDonald said.

EDUCATION

MacDonald, whose style is more progressive than some other law enforcement leaders in the county, said he believes that one of the best ways to reduce recidivism is to educate offenders.

Job training will continue in County Jail facilities, and more inmates will be assigned to classes that tackle criminal thinking, lifestyle choices and "cognitive distortions," MacDonald said. The classes also are aimed at building skills in jail rather than waiting out a 90-day sentence in a cell, MacDonald said.

County probation officials say they want to stop the revolving door of jail inmates in the county by focusing on programs that have been statistically proven to work.

In a second phase of the program, county leaders plan to collect data on offenders in County Jail and review what worked and what failed.

"The plan is an ongoing process that's very data driven," MacDonald said.