



July 12, 2024

Understanding the Connection: Probation's Role in Addressing Homelessness *A Message from Steve Jackson, Chief Probation Officer of San Joaquin County*

Stanislaus, Placer, and now San Joaquin. What is it about Probation, and why does it make sense that departments should lead their respective counties in the supervision and mitigation efforts in resolving the issue of homelessness?

Let me first provide some context behind the conversation in the form of numbers.

- Our department oversees 6,276 clients on formal probation and 1,149 under the AB109 Public Safety Realignment.
- As of July 2024, the percentage of clients experiencing homelessness is at 10.5%.
- A report prepared for the San Joaquin Council of Governments forecasts that San Joaquin County's population in 2024 will be just above 812,000.

Given the relatively small number of homeless individuals compared to the County's population and the clients under probation supervision, why would the Probation Department take on the responsibility of addressing homelessness in the county?

Well, first, let me state the obvious: jurisdiction! The Probation Department supervises and provides services across all municipalities within the County. Second, our officers are crucial in connecting clients with essential services such as substance use, behavioral health, medical, education, and vocational training. They also provide programming tailored to a client's needs as a proven method requiring our officers to build relationships with their clients, service providers, and community members. Third, what other law enforcement or corrections agencies have been tasked with more legislation reform than California Probation Departments in the last two decades?

As you can see, Probation Officers are unique in the law enforcement community as they must balance accountability and opportunity to help enhance public safety. They are highly trained in motivational interviewing and have an educational background in cultural competency and other behavioral sciences.

Probation Departments across the state have proven time and time again that we [they] can pivot, take on challenges in our profession, and make them work quickly. Whenever widespread changes are proposed to the justice system, the first look overwhelmingly goes to Probation for implementation.

Juvenile Court and Field Services

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Juvenile Detention Facilities

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SAN JOAQUIN COUNTY
PROBATION
DEPARTMENT

Steve Jackson Chief Probation Officer

Look no further than California's historic criminal justice reforms, the 2011 Adult Realignment (AB109) and the 2021 Juvenile Realignment (SB823). In fact, outside of a small population of offenders whom the Department of Adult Parole still supervises, Probation is responsible for overseeing the entire juvenile justice system and nearly all of the adult justice system.

Probation Officers are often called the “Swiss Army Knife” of law enforcement. They possess various tools and utilize resources to address different situations effectively. Officers frequently wear many hats in their daily work, assuming the roles of social worker, counselor, mentor, role model, officer, and teacher. The list goes on and on.

Many probation departments employ social workers, eligibility workers, community-based organizations, substance use and behavioral health workers, and peer navigators to enhance their supervision units. We understand that one agency or governmental body cannot solve the problem alone, and no one does it better when engaging partners for optimal success.

Do those experiencing homelessness need criminal prosecution for their situation, or do they need to be connected to services and treatment to achieve success? With little exception, most people want to live a secure and healthy life. To get them to the point where they are ready to address the symptoms that led to their situation, we must be bold in holding them accountable for their choices while continuing to provide them with opportunities to change.

This is why we are taking a two-pronged approach to mitigating homelessness in San Joaquin County. Being bold with accountability means mobilizing your efforts to target the 10% of unhoused individuals using 90% of your resources. By this, I mean calls for service, jail beds, hospital beds, and psychiatric holds. The second part is providing these folks with intense case management services, connecting them with housing support, medical services, substance use, and behavioral health treatment, and reintegrating them with family when possible. This approach can only be successful with a lead agency that understands the value of partnership and collaboration and can navigate across many jurisdictions. That lead agency is the Probation Department.

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