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Pennsylvania Board of Probation and Parole

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Trends, Training and Action in Recidivism Reduction

Positive Trends in Recidivism

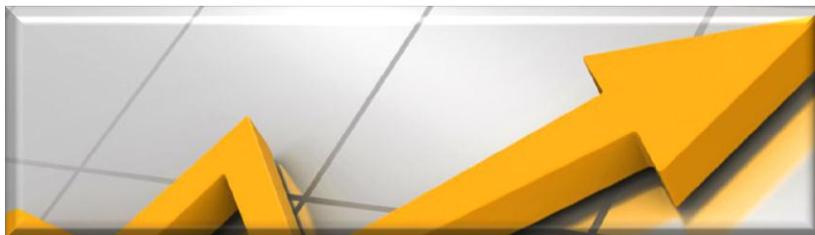
The Board has implemented evidence-based practices in its decision making and supervision practices to address offender recidivism. Recidivism is defined by the Board as a revocation of parole for a technical or criminal violation, a measure that is specific to parole and differs from measures of the Department of Corrections. It provides an important tool for the Board to evaluate its performance.

The Board's most recent study, with a baseline year of FY2003/04, found:

- The three year recidivism rate is 40%, a decrease of 10 percentage points.
- The one year recidivism rate is 20%, a decrease of seven percentage points.

Measurements regarding specific characteristics of offenders found that offenders:

- Convicted of a violent offense recidivate at a rate five percentage points higher than offenders convicted of a non-violent offense;
- With at least a high school education recidivated about 10 percentage points less than those with less than a high school education;
- Arrested before the age of 16 had a recidivism rate about 15 percentage points higher than those first arrested at 16 or older;
- With current or past drug problems were 11 percentage points more likely to recidivate than offenders without drug problems.



Sen. Stewart Greenleaf Addresses Recidivism Reduction Efforts at Parole Agent Training

On November 1, 2013, the Parole Board's 117th Basic Training Academy graduated 19 agents. Senator Stewart J. Greenleaf, sponsor of recent legislation to reduce recidivism through enhanced reentry services, provided keynote remarks to the graduates.

As he provided a history of the efforts of the Senate Judiciary Committee to address crime, Sen. Greenleaf stated, "We thought as we got tough on crime that violent offenses would go down and we'd have safer streets, but that didn't happen." He noted that the crime rate steadily climbed despite increased penalties, mandatory minimum sentences and other legislative changes.

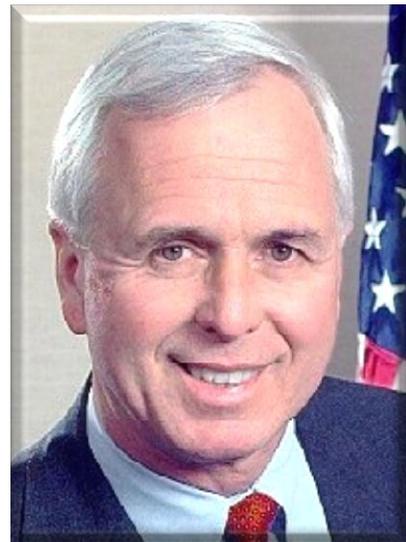
"What we didn't address is that punishment without rehabilitation is a failure. An absolute failure," he remarked as he stressed to the graduates the need to protect society, but also the need to rehabilitate every person that we come in contact with.

As part of the eight-week training academy program, parole agents learn about evidence-based practices for effective parole supervision – what works to change offender behavior. Cognitive-behavioral therapy is one of the most promising approaches for changing criminal thinking patterns, which leads to criminal behavior. Motivational interviewing skills teach parole agents how to make every contact with an offender meaningful by tapping into what motivates that particular individual. The risk, needs and responsivity principles necessitate that the level of intervention should match the level of risk, interventions should be targeted to factors related to reoffending, and interventions should be delivered in a way that meets the learning style of the offender. Additional programs are offered regarding substance abuse, domestic violence and other practices for effective supervision that can lead to successful reentry.

Following Sen. Greenleaf's remarks, Chairman Michael Potteiger presented the awards for Class Valedictorian and Top Gun. Institutional Parole Agent Laura Weimer at SCI Somerset received the Valedictorian Award for achieving the highest score on the written test. The Top Gun award was presented to Parole Agent Joseph Aquino of the Reading Sub-office for achieving the highest score on the firing range.

At the end of the ceremony, the graduates took the Oath of Office and were presented with their Parole Board badges.

The Board's BTA consists of eight weeks of education on Board policies and procedures, defensive tactics, firearm's training and research on evidence-based practices for effective parole supervision. Twenty-eight county parole agents attended part of the training at no cost. They receive firearm's training through the County Firearms Education and Training Commission.



Senator Greenleaf

Parole Agent Shares his Passion about Helping Offenders Change

"It doesn't get boring," Agent Lapp stated as he began to walk the students from Elizabethtown's Adult Degree Program through the parole process.

"We need to do reentry. We need to work with offenders. There are so many programs now that if you want to change you can, Lapp said.

"When I first meet with a parolee I tell them the worst thing they can do is to stop seeing me. You will get caught. If you have a problem, talk to me."

Born and raised in Lancaster County and stationed at the Board's Lancaster Sub-Office, Parole Agent Lapp was eager to share his experiences of the past 18 years as a parole agent with the students of Marc Goldberg's Modern Corrections class.

Lapp explained that the Board interviews offenders for parole approximately four months before their minimum sentence date, but they are not released prior to that date. Offenders granted parole must abide by conditions set by the Board and the agent must hold the offender accountable, and work with him or her to change offender behavior.

"It's easy to incarcerate someone; it's hard to work with them. Years ago the thing to do was to incarcerate. Now we work with these guys. You work with people until they become a liability on the street. Until you think they are going to commit a crime," Lapp said.

Lapp spent three years in the Navy and then worked with juveniles at the old Lawrence Hall juvenile detention facility. He began taking classes at York College to finish his criminal justice degree and one day noticed a job posting for parole agents. At the time, 1995, the Board had expanded to nine members and was actively hiring new agents. After he was hired by the Board, he spent one year in the Chester District and then transferred to Lancaster.

He worked briefly as a supervisor, but he didn't like being behind a desk. "I'm a people person. I like to talk to people," Lapp said, and it was evident by his presentation.

"To work with people takes time. They will relapse. It makes you angry at times but you can't get angry with the parolee." The way to change behavior according to Lapp is to "treat people with respect, get to know them – work with them – then when they mess up and it's time to go back to jail often they know it to and don't fight you."

Sadly he noted, "Many offenders who are 29 or 30 years old have never held a job. They have drug addictions. I've known some of these people for years, their grandfather, sons and grandchildren."

It is this family cycle in the criminal justice system that the Board would like to stop.

As part of its efforts to reduce recidivism, the Board uses a graduated violation sanctioning tool that reflects the severity of the offense and the individual circumstances of the offender. An agent has many options to sanction an offender before requiring a return to prison. The agent can take into consideration whether or not the offender is working, supporting a family, or has a need for family interventions that are interfering with successful reentry.



Parole Agent Shares his Passion about Helping Offenders Change

Working with an offender also means holding them accountable and teaching them to be responsible. As an example Lapp said, "If I go to a parolee's house at 10am and he's just getting out of bed, I have to ask 'how hard are you looking for a job?' They like to use the excuse I can't get a job, I have a felony, but there is job training."

When Lapp began his career parole agents were not trained to provide cognitive- behavioral interventions. Specialized parole agents have received training from the National Training and Curriculum Institute to provide programming in district offices. "Offenders can be put into programming where we can find out what they are doing when they are on the street," he said. *Thinking for a Change* is an example of one such program that addresses cognitive distortions, antisocial behavior and attitudes.

Lapp expressed that the main part about doing his job is to be fair. "The main difference between me and most of these offenders is that they made one bad decision. Some people are bad to the core, but I try to find some good thing and establish a rapport. Otherwise they won't talk to you. Show them that you care about them, [their family, wife, and children](#). Many are so institutionalized that they can't handle responsibility," he said.

Marc Goldberg is a former deputy secretary for administration for the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections who requested a guest speaker who could give his students a real life perspective on [Pennsylvania's Reentry System](#).