

Building Bridges Between Probation Departments and the Public Workforce System: Lessons from California's ForwardFocus Initiative

In 2011, California took a hard look at prison overcrowding and recidivism: the population of 150,000 inmates was at 187% of prison design capacity, and more than 60,000 felon parole violators returned to state prison each year. Public Safety Realignment legislation (AB 109) brought about significant reform to California's corrections and rehabilitation systems, shifting responsibility for adults convicted of certain non-violent, non-serious felonies to county jails and probation. AB 109 also established a dedicated and permanent revenue stream for counties to implement the legislation and test new models of community-based services.

In this new climate of Realignment, Probation Departments and their local partners play stepped-up roles in reducing recidivism and supporting individuals' re-entry into communities and families. For many, the attainment of marketable skills and employment are among the highest priorities post-incarceration. Indeed, success in education and careers reduces recidivism rates, improves public safety, and returns economic benefits to individuals, families, and communityⁱ.

California legislators addressed the need for re-entry employment services and embraced opportunities presented by AB 109 by funding the ForwardFocus initiative, (AB 2060) administered by the California Workforce Development Board (State Board) since 2015. ForwardFocus invites Local Workforce Development Boards (Local Boards) to leverage federal workforce funding and state grant funds in partnership with county agencies, Probation departments, education providers, and community-based organizations, to bring evidence-based and innovative workforce strategies to bear on the career success of Californians on probation, mandatory supervision, or post-release community supervision.

ForwardFocus seeks to increase communication and collaboration among county Probation departments and Local Boards, raising questions and inspiring solutions to common challenges. The initiative's thirteen sites – selected through a competitive application process – convene periodically in a Community of Practice to share their successes, challenges, and questions for further exploration. This brief, **“Building Bridges between Probation Departments and the Public Workforce System: Lessons from California's ForwardFocus Initiative,”** captures emerging innovations and lessons learned over the initiative's initial two years, with implications for the future sustainability and institutionalization of new approaches to serving the re-entry population.

Exploring Potential: Probation and Workforce Partners in Dialogue

As Probation and Workforce partners in ForwardFocus engage in dialogue and problem-solving – locally, and through the Community of Practice – they are exploring common questions and issues related to the alignment and coordination of their services. These include:

1. What are our respective roles (Probation and the Local Board) in the delivery of job-readiness and employment-related services?
2. How can we facilitate communication, collaboration, and professional development among our respective staff?
3. What data needs to be shared across our systems, and what tools or systems can we use to share it?
4. What funding resources can be leveraged across our systems to meet the employment-related needs of participants and to sustain effective programs?

Innovating Re-Entry Employment Strategies: Leveraging Probation and Workforce Strengths

While ForwardFocus partnerships are evolving and at various stages of development, they are surfacing early answers to the questions above and lessons learned about collaboration between the Probation and Workforce systems. These promising practices are explored briefly below and will continue to be topics of discovery as the initiative advances.

- Probation and Workforce partners are defining the ways their experience, strengths and responsibilities are complementary, then implementing **co-case** management of each participant's progress toward career goals.

- In Sutter County, a full-time One-Stop Case Manager and an instructor from the local Adult School co-locate at Probation, where individuals are assessed, get help with right-to-work documents, build basic skills, and complete job readiness training.

- In Orange County, a One-Stop Workforce Specialist holds weekly hours at the Probation office, where she joins meetings between the re-entering individual and the Probation officer to identify needs and develop an employment plan.

- In Tulare County, a strong working relationship between Probation and the Local Board is documented in a detailed map of the "Participant Journey," from pre-release through job retention, supported by the two complementary systems.

- Probation Departments and Local Boards are formalizing and solidifying their

relationships, with sights set on the **scaling and sustainability of their collaborative practices.**

- In counties like Sacramento and Santa Barbara, the Local Board has a seat on the Community Corrections Partnership (CCP), which oversees AB 109 funding and designs regional solutions to realignment and re-entry.
- Los Angeles County has piloted the evidence-based Back on Track co-case management model, which formalizes Probation and Workforce partnerships and positions the program for replication.
- In efforts to improve referrals and co-case management processes, Probation and Workforce partners are opening up **communication channels and systematizing data-sharing.**
 - Tulare County used a grant from the State Board's Workforce Accelerator Fund to establish a shared data portal, which enables Probation staff to enroll participants in workforce services and enter individuals' data and case notes into CalJobs, greatly facilitating co-case management.
- Probation and Workforce partners are **leveraging public dollars in creative ways,** knitting together system resources to implement new employment and training models.
 - Sutter County WDB receives AB 109 dollars to provide enhanced employment services to re-entry individuals through the One-Stop Career Center.
 - Yuba County's One-Stop used Work Experience funding to hire a probationer, who now provides direct employment services to the Probation department's ForwardFocus referrals.
 - In Orange County, a contracted One-Stop provider has secured additional funding from the U.S. Department of Labor to support connections to Probation and services to re-entry job-seekers.

Defining Collaborative Re-Entry Employment Models: Probation and Workforce Joining Hands

Partners at the ForwardFocus sites are building upon their complementary strengths, creating innovative and collaborative ways of facilitating re-entry employment success. While models continue to evolve and their impact has not yet been evaluated, early lessons suggest that a key to their success may be the depth of alignment, integration, and trusting collaboration between local Probation and Workforce Development entities, which together garner such valuable resources and hold such promise for California's re-entry population.

ForwardFocus sites note that communication at the leadership level – between Probation Chiefs, and Local Board Directors – is essential to defining a common vision and establishing shared goals and strategies that lay the groundwork for productive

collaboration. At the same time, **strong working relationships among direct service staff** can potentially bring to life strategies that motivate and prepare job-seekers, open doors, engage employers, and make connections that secure futures and deter cycles of recidivism.

As relationships are strengthened at the local level, Probation and Workforce partners are positioning themselves to **tackle some persistent challenges**. Referrals from Probation to the Local Boards can be hindered by bureaucratic procedures that have divided the systems for decades. Funding streams and their respective programs – such as AB 109 and ForwardFocus, as well as the more global Corrections and WIOA programs – bring their own requirements and restrictions, sometimes preventing or discouraging a unified approach to serving re-entry individuals. ForwardFocus partners are working to establish common principles, values, and approaches to serving a common clientele. For example, Santa Barbara’s ForwardFocus program got off to a slow start because referrals weren’t coming from Probation; over time, however, two entities have improved communication and strengthened their partnership. Workforce staff have gained understanding of the barriers such as homelessness that can impact a probationer’s readiness for work, and Probation staff have come to embrace the role workforce services can play in their clients’ long-term economic security.

Looking Ahead: Alignment and Integration of Re-Entry Employment Services

ForwardFocus is creating a space where California’s Probation and Workforce Development systems can work to envision and realize cross-system integration and alignment, in an environment that encourages innovation and collaborative problem-solving. As the ForwardFocus Community of Practice continues to meet and exchange effective practices and solutions to common problems, what is learned will be shared in subsequent briefs. This information-sharing should help ForwardFocus and the broader field of re-entry practitioners to strengthen programs serving those for whom these county systems can be gateways back to their communities and future career opportunities.

“Degrees of Freedom: Expanding College Opportunities for Currently and Formerly Incarcerated Californians,” Stanford Criminal Justice Center & Chief Justice Earl Warren Institute on Law and Social Policy at UC Berkeley School of Law, February 2015. Retrieved at:

<http://law.stanford.edu/wpcontent/uploads/sites/default/files/publication/874512/doc/slspublic/Degrees%20of%20Freedom2015.pdf>.