

Returning From Prison to Washington D.C.

“We Make Transition Possible”

By Leonard A. Sipes, Jr.

The name sounds like the essence of bureaucracy—the Transitional Intervention for Parole Supervision unit, or TIPS. The TIPS teams of Community Supervision Officers evaluate and assist the vast majority of offenders returning from prison to Washington, D.C. They are part of the federal, executive branch agency that provides parole and probation supervision in the nation’s capital, the Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency (CSOSA).

CSOSA supervises approximately 15,500 parolees, supervised releasees and probationers on any given day. Each year, approximately 2,300 men and women return to Washington, D.C. from any one of the federal Bureau of Prison (BOP) facilities throughout the United States. For most of them, the first CSOSA staff member they meet is a TIPS officer.

The TIPS unit was a core requirement when CSOSA was initially established as a new federal agency in August of 2000. Recognizing that the District of Columbia’s Lorton prison would soon close, and that D.C. offenders would be housed in any one of the Bureau of Prison facilities, CSOSA knew it would be difficult for D.C. offenders to successfully reintegrate and reestablish ties with their families and the community. To address this need, the TIPS unit was established to work solely with returning offenders.

TIPS is truly unique. Through a collaborative, working relationship with the BOP, TIPS staff begin to work with offenders long before the offenders are released to the community or a BOP Residential Reentry Center (RRC, also known as halfway house). TIPS staff begin working on an offender’s case once they receive notice from the BOP of the offender’s pending release. TIPS staff begin to identify the offender’s needs and investigate the offender’s proposed home and employment release plans. One TIPS team is located in an RRC, working closely with offenders living there, but still under BOP’s supervision. In addition, CSOSA established a relationship with the faith-based community that links offenders to mentors who serve as a positive role model and community resource for the returning offender. TIP staff serve a vital role in this function by determining offenders suitable for participation in the program and linking them to mentors.

“TIPS staff perform a key, critical function in the reentry planning process,” says Thomas H. Williams, Associate Director of Community Supervision Services. “TIPS staff not only address offenders’ needs upon release so they can have the opportunity to successfully reintegrate in the community, but also help ensure public safety by approving or denying offender home and employment plans.”

TIPS officers can be compared to air traffic controllers: They take a look at thousands of incoming “flights” and organize their “arrival.” They act as persuaders and negotiators with offenders, families and service providers. They “set the stage” for the offender’s future supervision. Their first priority is public safety while being an offender’s advocate for needed services.

“I was doing a home plan for a returning offender with sex offenses in his background,” stated Sharon Jackson. Sharon has over 20 years of experience supervising juvenile and adult offenders. “His living arrangements would have put him in contact with children. There was no way I was going to approve him living in that house. He had to make other living arrangements,” she said.

There are 22 Community Supervision Officers (known as parole and probation agents elsewhere) and three supervisors dedicated to the TIPS function. Their job is to assess returning inmates for risk of re-offending and need for services. They work principally with offenders residing in six halfway houses operated by the Federal Bureau of Prisons. (Since December 2001, D.C. offenders serve their time in federal prisons.)

Federal Bureau of Prison case managers submit a release plan to CSOSA; TIPS officers investigate these plans, which address a proposed place to live (or lack of one) and potential employment. Using the plan as a baseline, TIPS staff analyze the incoming offender’s needs and arrange for the offender to access services at the time of release. This can include medical, mental health, and substance abuse treatment, as well as any requirements imposed by the US Parole Commission as conditions of release. Sometimes, TIPS officers have months to do their jobs—sometimes days.

“We had an offender who weighed 600 pounds coming out of prison in a couple days,” stated Sharon Jackson. “The federal halfway houses were not equipped to deal with him. He had a challenging medical need, and I was able to help him find housing with a private transitional center. That’s just one example of what we do and the unique challenges that confront us every day.”

To understand TIPS is to acknowledge that returning offenders bring with them very little luggage but a lot of baggage—the complex issues that need to be addressed to give them the highest likelihood of staying out of prison. TIPS officers prepare the way for the offender and those in CSOSA who will supervise him directly upon release from prison or the federal halfway houses.

Approximately 50 percent of all offenders returning to D.C. transition through a halfway houses. Another 30 percent enter post-release supervision without a halfway house stay. The remaining 20 percent are released with no supervision obligation. TIPS officers assist everyone having a term of community supervision.

Once the offender is released to the community, the offender’s supervision is transferred from TIPS staff to a general or special supervision team. Although TIPS work is short-

term and intensive, it is critical to ensuring the smooth transition of the offender from incarceration to the community.

Every offender has issues; approximately 70 percent have substance abuse histories. Approximately 30 percent of DC offenders have temporary housing arrangements. Many have complex issues, like mental illness or medical problems. Most need services to find education or jobs.

“The issue is public safety, and will always be public safety,” states Edmond Pears, Branch Chief the Investigations, Diagnostics and Evaluations Branch that encompasses TIPS. “We fully understand, for example, that unmet mental health needs and homelessness greatly increase the possibility that the offender will commit another crime. We can intervene. We can stabilize. We can help this guy and lessen the chance of someone getting hurt.”

The Initial Process

TIPS receives information on most inmates from the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) approximately six months before the scheduled release date. In addition, TIPS staff can access the BOP’s information system for the inmate’s criminal history, institutional behavior records, medical conditions, mental health and social needs, prior community supervision adjustment and programs and services received during incarceration. The TIPS staff create a plan of action that is ready when the offender enters the federal halfway houses and/or the community. (The offender is still in BOP custody while in the halfway house.)

The halfway houses provide an array of services, such as intake, orientation, screening, assessment, case staffing, referrals, crisis intervention, counseling, home and employment investigations and discharge planning. But the offender’s stay is limited and most cases does not exceed 30 days.

“Thirty days is not a lot of time to analyze a person and his risk and social history and to arrange for needed services,” said Trevola Singletary-Mohamed, a TIPS Community Supervision Officer (CSO). CSO Singletary-Mohamed started community supervision with the adult probation division of D.C. Superior Court before CSOSA assumed the function in 1997. “You may have the file months ahead, and that’s vital to the process, but nothing beats having the person sitting in front of you answering your questions. The file and evaluation may state that he has a history of cocaine use and received treatment while in prison, but you find out through an interview that a ‘history’ meant daily use for several years. Sometimes, it’s the quality of the information that you gain through personal interviews that tells you what you need to know.”

Housing

Finding housing for returning offenders is one of the most difficult parts of the job. The hyper-heated housing market in Washington, D.C. makes this especially difficult. If the

average offender who comes back through a halfway house only stays there for a month, then that's just a temporary solution.

Some do not come back through halfway houses because of limited bed space or previous medical or mental health issues that the halfway houses are not equipped to manage. Halfway house staffs also evaluate offenders based on criminal history and prior problems while in a previous halfway house.

Approximately 25 percent go home or to another residence upon release. TIPS staff investigate all proposed living arrangements to ensure that they are viable and safe for all concerned. The home environment is reviewed and evaluated. Issues include the occupants' legal right to the residence, adequate living space, and evidence of illegal substances or criminal activity. The bottom line is whether placement will lead to future crimes.

Many offenders have burned their bridges with the family. Community corrections professionals have heard many stories of mothers who state that they will allow a returning son to live with them in public housing, but she never places his name on the lease. Other family members promise the use of their homes but back out when the home plan is investigated.

Some families have moved outside of D.C. US Probation or state agencies will assist with placement in the family's new state of residence if the US Parole Commission approves. If the offender has a detainer on other criminal charges, he must resolve those legal matters before pursuing supervision in another jurisdiction.

Offenders also cannot be a hardship to their family members (for example, a one bedroom apartment with one adult and three children). For the returnee to live in public housing, his name must be on the lease. TIPS staff do not take the family's word for it; they must see a copy of the lease.

TIPS staff will not automatically approve a plan if another offender is living there; it's up to the discretion of the CSO. Each case is individually assessed and investigated for suitability of the residence and peer support within the residence.

There are faith-based, charitable and private institutions that will provide services for returning offenders. Some deal with unique needs, like medical or mental health issues. Some are merely shelters offering a legal place to stay at night and something to eat. Staff would rather not use shelters. They also strive for housing that promotes the offender's transitional process.

With only 25 percent living in private residences (and some of these placements are temporary) then it is easy to see why housing can take so much staff time.

"It takes a dedicated person to make these arrangements," states CSO Daynelle Allison, a D.C. resident who has worked for CSOSA for three years. "I've had months, but

sometimes just days to find a place to live for people with special medical or mental health needs. We do not compromise the quality of our supervision or housing investigation based on how much time we have. We do what we need to get the job done.”

“We need to be sure that arrangements are made to the point that an ambulance will meet the returning offender’s plane or bus and transport the offender to the residence, a hospital, or mental health clinic. Part of all this is a commitment to meeting simple human needs, and part of it is a commitment to protecting the public,” Sharon Jackson said.

Finally, when other options have been exhausted, the TIPS officer can recommend public law placement to avoid homelessness. Under this option, TIPS staff request that the U.S. Parole Commission add a special condition of release for the offender that will require the offender to reside up to 120 days in a halfway house until suitable housing is available. This type of placement is utilized only as a last resort.

Services

Beyond housing, the placement of returning offenders into the right services is a challenging task. CSOSA provides direct services to a variety of offenders on special supervision caseloads, which include sex offenders, mental health, domestic violence, anger management, drinking and driving, and high-risk drug cases. CSOSA also provides educational and employment assessment and placement.

The bulk of support services are provided by the D.C. government and non-profit agencies; in recent years, CSOSA has instituted a partnership with the city’s faith community to augment these services. CSOSA is leading a movement in the nation’s capital to galvanize churches, mosques, and synagogues to provide direct mentoring services. Hundreds of offenders have taken advantage of this initiative.

Service organizations throughout the country often express reluctance to work with offenders. With limited budgets, some organizations prefer “easier” clients. TIPS staff have expressed that providers in the District of Columbia are more likely to assist offenders because of close supervision imposed by Community Supervision Officers.

“CSOSA has worked extensively with service providers throughout the city to make sure they understand that helping a returning offender means fewer crimes and a safer community,” states Elizabeth Powell, Supervisory Community Supervision Officer (SCSO). “CSOSA has some of the toughest contact and drug testing standards in the country. Service providers know they have allies when it comes to addressing non-compliant offenders. The Community Supervision Officers are there to help if the offender creates a problem or does not take their interventions seriously. Close supervision works.”

“We also help offenders readjust to life in D.C.” states CSO Singletary-Mohamed. “Some of them have never ridden the Metro [D.C.’s subway system] before. Some of them just want to talk, to express their hopes and fears. And some offenders refuse services and require motivation from TIP to understand how they can benefit from participating in services. But we care, and they seem to understand that and comply.”

Conclusion

All of us in community corrections understand the challenges. President George W. Bush clearly laid out the issues for reentry in his State of the Union speech in 2004. He announced a new plan to bring local and faith-based groups together with federal agencies to help recently released prisoners make a successful transition back to society - reducing the chance that they will be arrested again. This 4-year, \$300 million initiative seeks to provide transitional housing, basic job training, and mentoring services. Reentry is now a popular topic within criminological circles. More has been written about reentry in the last three or four years than the last ten.

Reentry may be the buzzword in the criminal justice system right now, but it is not just a buzzword at CSOSA. TIPS staff do the real work of reintegration. With one eye on public safety, and the other on the offender’s needs, TIPS staff guide returning offenders through their first steps beyond the prison gates and give them a real opportunity to successfully reintegrate into the community.