

MOTION BY SUPERVISORS SHEILA KUEHL AND  
MARK RIDLEY-THOMAS

November 19, 2019

**Expanding Opportunities For Probation Officers Through A Master of Social Work (MSW) Incentive Program**

The first juvenile delinquency court, which was established in 1899, identified rehabilitation of youth as the primary focus of juvenile justice. In 1961, California, following national trends, separated young people who were in the dependency system from those in the delinquency system. The result was that juvenile delinquency courts, despite having the goal of rehabilitation, took on a custodial reform approach with emphasis on the role of the Probation Officer.

Probation Officers (POs) have undoubtedly played a key role in juvenile court, but as we have learned more about youth development and evidence-based practices for addressing youth with complex trauma and other issues, the need for more robust training in these areas has become clearer. The abilities and knowledge required for POs to skillfully address youth with myriad needs has grown exponentially.

MOTION

SOLIS \_\_\_\_\_

RIDLEY-THOMAS \_\_\_\_\_

KUEHL \_\_\_\_\_

BARGER \_\_\_\_\_

HAHN \_\_\_\_\_

There has been a national discussion regarding the most effective models for rehabilitating youth who have had contact with law enforcement. As best practices in the domain of youth development and rehabilitation evolve, so too must the philosophical framework upon which Los Angeles County's (County) juvenile justice system is built. It is time to reimagine the role of individuals who are best positioned to connect with, influence, and mentor youth caught in this system. POs are mandated to care for the safety and well-being of juveniles as well as to provide support, guidance, and resources in custody and out in the community.

Correctional paradigms are not only inordinately expensive, but often increase recidivism because they fail to meaningfully address underlying factors that contribute to a young person's path into the system. Environments that are punitive in nature have been proven to be largely ineffective in treating and rehabilitating young people in the system and have deleterious effects that exacerbate mental health and behavioral challenges. Such approaches are woefully deficient in providing a roadmap for real transformation.

In October 2017, the County Board of Supervisors (Board) passed a motion that directed Probation to identify best practices in the field for new training as well as ongoing certification and to explore the creation of a Probation University, modeled after the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) University. This was a step in the right direction. While Probation's lens has expanded in recent years to include therapeutically informed practices such as motivational interviewing, cognitive behavioral therapy, dialectical behavioral therapy and mindfulness, many staff express that they are ill-equipped to adequately support individuals who are struggling with

serious mental health issues, substance abuse, family disconnection, and histories of complex trauma. We are in the midst of a sea change with respect to how we understand rehabilitation, healing, and justice within our systems. Accordingly, we must transcend outdated practices that are not aligned with what works. There is a gap between the needs of incarcerated youth and the ability of POs to provide high quality clinical engagement based on their limited training in the areas of mental health and trauma, addiction, behavioral change, adolescent brain development, and therapeutic relationship building, among others.

The system as we know it is fundamentally changing in ways that require innovative re-envisioning of the roles of the POs who are an integral part of it. The Board of Supervisors passed a motion in February of 2019 that calls for the phase out of Oleoresin Capsicum (OC) spray in County juvenile facilities. The Department of Mental Health (DMH) will be deeply involved in this process, as the need for specialized clinical expertise will profoundly grow in conjunction with the move away from force and the shift toward increased relational awareness and attention to the overall atmosphere of juvenile facilities.

In addition to the impending elimination of OC spray from our camps and halls, as well as the closures of several facilities in the last year, the County has invested more resources into community based diversion programs that will inevitably further reduce the number of youth who are being detained. In a move that amplifies this trend, the Board passed a motion in August 2019, to explore the possibility of transferring the juvenile side of the Probation department into either an entirely new agency or folding it into an existing County department.

While the County is exploring these possibilities, there is an opportunity now to simultaneously optimize employees' potential for professional growth and development while bolstering the Department's capacity to provide young people with the specialized support and attention they need and deserve. POs are valued members of the juvenile justice system and have a wealth of knowledge, experience and understanding when it comes to the youth who are in their care. Their jobs are dynamic, challenging, and important.

The Master of Social Work (MSW) degree provides an education that is beneficial both for its practical applications, as well as its profound critical deconstruction of social problems within the context of historical oppression, marginalization, and systemic inequities. Through academic study and practice internships, MSW programs engage individuals in thoughtful self-reflection and help students develop valuable interpersonal competencies, while simultaneously providing a critical framework with which to more holistically comprehend and address the dynamics that impact people in complex and subtle ways. This kind of education can give POs a whole new set of tools that has the potential to greatly enrich their work with young people and ultimately, create improved outcomes.

Currently, the department provides bonuses for advanced degrees and all Deputy Probation Officer II Treatment and Counselors have at least an MSW. We need to think about how to best utilize and uplift our current and prospective Probation employees, as we move closer to a justice system that genuinely prioritizes youth development.

An MSW educational incentive program will offer interested employees or current students partial reimbursement for the attainment of this degree, in return for a commitment to work with the Department for a specified period of time. The MSW degree is versatile, yet allows for individuals to specialize in particular areas of professional practice. It is considered a terminal practice degree in the field of social work. Social workers with expertise in mental health and substance abuse are currently in high demand and this trend will continue to grow alongside the expansion of diversion programs that prioritize treatment over detention. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the profession is expected to grow by 16% between 2016 and 2026, more than twice the average rate of all occupations.

Educational incentive programs exist in the Departments of Children and Family Services and Public Social Services. The Department of Public Works and other departments sponsor similar programs for other advanced degrees. POs would benefit from an incentive program that can create pathways to increase job security, expand expertise, and develop relevant skills. Furthermore, this program will enrich the experiences and improve the outcomes for young people who receive these services.

In addition to the County exploring this type of incentive program, it may be beneficial to simultaneously examine whether employment pipelines can be created from local MSW programs into the Probation Department. As the Department seeks to fill vacancies, innovations in recruitment can help address gaps and opportunities in staffing and also help improve outcomes for the clients who are served.

**WE, THEREFORE, MOVE** that the Board of Supervisors direct the Probation Department in conjunction with Chief Executive Office, the Department of Public Social

Services, the Department of Children and Family Services, the Department of Public Works, and the Department of Human Resources, in consultation with local Master of Social Work (MSW) degree programs, to report back in writing to the Board of Supervisors within 60 days on:

- 1) Current policies related to financial support for the attainment of MSW degrees in the Department of Public Social Services, the Department of Children and Family Services, and advanced educational degrees in the Department of Public Works;
- 2) A feasibility study including an assessment of potential funding streams for replication of such a program in the Probation Department; and a proposed implementation plan for a Probation Department MSW pilot program; and
- 3) Recommendations on potentially creating employment pipeline programs from local MSW programs into the Probation Department, to fill any current or future vacancies.