

THE BEGINNING OF THE INVEST PROGRAM

A TALK WITH SDPO ED SYKES

In 2016, in response to direction from the Board of Supervisors, Los Angeles County Probation Department, Workforce Development Aging and Community Services, collaborated with the Office of Diversion and Reentry, and the California Employment Development Department to launch the Innovative Employment Solutions (INVEST) program to create employment opportunities for Adult Probationers in L. A. County. It wasn't easy.

SDPO Edward Sykes was there at the beginning of the INVEST project. His mission as supervisor was to get the wheels turning on a type of program that had not been implemented before. The recently retired Mr. Sykes shared with me the challenges and successes at the beginning of the INVEST program.

Senior Director Kathy New was instrumental in finding a new special training opportunity from the Federal Government. The National Institute of Corrections was offering a training that would provide information and skill sets needed to help create employment opportunities for those in the criminal-justice system. Those who completed the training would also be awarded the title, *Offender Workforce Development Specialist*. Rooted in evidence-based best practices, the program was meant to provide clients with training and employment. "It targeted individuals who had challenging backgrounds to get them not just jobs, but careers," said Mr. Sykes.

One of the most important parts of the program was the partnerships that Probation Departments were required to make with other County departments and Government agencies like Workforce Development and Employment Development agencies. "One of the most challenging aspects of working with these different agencies was accepting each other's disciplines," said Mr. Sykes. We all had a different way of doing things. Our departments have different cultures. Probation does things our way. Workforce Development has a different way of carrying out their functions." They all were doing the same thing so far as helping clients, but there were different peculiarities to each agency. Communication had to be cohesive.



SDPO ED SYKES (Retired)

After the training which Mr. Sykes coordinated and conducted with Workforce personnel, the work started. Probation Officers would now work hand in hand, co-located with the work source center staffs at American Job Centers of California (AJCC). There would now be a probation officer housed at the five identified AJCC work source centers to be able to deliver services for probation clients. This had never been done before. Not on this scale, at least.

Mr. Sykes started having weekly meetings to make sure that there was good communication between everyone. There had to be a connection. "Some of the sites worked quickly because you had personalities that really matched well with each other," remembered Sykes. "But then you'd have other people whose personalities just didn't match. It took a lot of work, but that's what leadership is for."

Another challenge was that workforce center staff were concerned about clients who were on probation. Were they dangerous? They hadn't had clients like these before. Or so they thought. "We had to show them that they had been working with these people already," said Mr. Sykes. "They just didn't know it."

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About 12 - 18 months into the program, things really turned around with work force staffs becoming the biggest advocates for the clients. Too much sometimes. Mr. Sykes smiled as he remembered, "The work force program staff became even a little protective of the clients. We had to remind them to let us know if the clients showed up with contraband!" Soon they were all on the same page.

"We've had very healthy relationships with community partners and community-based organizations," said Mr. Sykes. "INVEST is almost like a brand now. Most people in the community and the DPOs know what INVEST is and what it is we do. I am very proud of that."

"My job has always been to keep the staff focused, motivated, and getting them what they need," he said. "If the staff's mind is right, if the staff love what they do, then that transfers to the client. Which then transfers to a healthy community. We take care of the staff and the staff take care of the client."

Other staff that were integral to the start of the INVEST Program include DPO II Brad Carson. "He knew about the training before we all knew about it," said Mr. Sykes. "He was very instrumental in the beginning with connections, and information about funding as well as the science behind workforce development. DPO II Eric Cerda told me about this program. When they first asked me to oversee it, I declined. But then they asked again. And I said I would join the program if I could have Mr. Cerda and a county car to help with covering the five countywide locations. I believed that with those two things I could figure the rest of it out. And DPO II Shangela Whaley has also been one of those individuals who has been a great help. Whatever you throw at her she can just go through it, figure things out and keep moving. She's demonstrated some great leadership skills and has been a go-to person for me."



Left to right: CDS Tatiana Soria, DPO II Shanegela Whaley, DPO II Marie Lever, HSA I Whitney Moore White, Evelyn Perez, SDPO Edward Sykes, DPO II Erick Cerda, MA Sona Malkhasyan. (photo taken before Covid-19)

Now retired, Ed Sykes looks back fondly at his 34-year career with the Probation Department. His take on success? "Never forget who you are and step into your greatness, it's right in front of you."

Prob-News will present more stories of the INVEST program in future newsletters.

Probation News

For more information about the INVEST program email:
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