

MOTION BY SUPERVISORS JANICE HAHN AND
MARK RIDLEY-THOMAS

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Over the past few years, the Los Angeles County (County) Board of Supervisors (Board) has approved a number of motions focused on the Probation Department (Department). Connected in part to these motions, the Auditor-Controller conducted 16 audits of the Department in a similar time period.

Numerous consultants and institutions of higher learning were enlisted to identify structural and procedural issues, including strengths and shortfalls, in order to make recommendations for improvement within the Department. One of the common themes of the audits, motions and reports that were developed is the need for different types of training for Department personnel to support programmatic goals. There are also signs that morale is low and employee engagement is suffering.

Probation staff must wear many hats: they are life coaches, mentors, guidance counselors, disciplinarians, therapists, enforcers, and resource navigators. Given these many functions, the Department must ensure its employees are provided with robust, state-of-the-art, meaningful training that keeps pace with the needs of the clients they serve.

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MOTION

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KUEHL	_____
HAHN	_____
BARGER	_____
RIDLEY-THOMAS	_____

Since Probation clients range from youth in high-risk situations to adults leaving prison and everything in-between, trainings must also be tailored to address the various developmental stages and needs of client populations.

In 2013 and 2014, the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), recognizing the need for more effective training, together with a consortium of universities embarked on the establishment of “DCFS University” to facilitate improved training and to improve the professional skills of DCFS staff. DCFS completely overhauled the training for its newest social workers. This new model called for a 52-week training program for all first-year hires. The training makes frequent use of simulation labs and experiential learning, with infrequent use of traditional classroom instruction. The simulation training specifically focuses on promoting and developing critical thinking, decision making, analysis, and problem-solving skills in a safe and supportive atmosphere.

By many accounts, DCFS University has been a resounding success. Anecdotal evidence suggests the County’s social workers feel supported in their professional development and DCFS benefits from employees with greater buy-in to the Department’s mission. This experience could inform the Department as it strives to foster a culture of purpose and professionalism.

Additional models exist for revamping training to better prepare staff to meet the needs of populations they serve. At the City level, Los Angeles Police Department undertook a major transformation of its training academy in 2007-08, adopting a problem-solving, focused, scenario-based curriculum to redefine professionalism

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and incorporate best practices in community policing. At the County level, models have emerged in multidisciplinary training across agencies who serve the same populations. An example includes the recent training on the Los Angeles Model at the Department's own Campus Kilpatrick, where staff from various County departments – including Probation, Mental Health, Juvenile Correctional Health Services, and Los Angeles County Office of Education – as well as community-based providers, received joint trainings on topics such as positive youth development, trauma-informed practices, and conflict resolution.

The Board supports the Probation Department in its efforts to create a culture of purpose and professionalism. Increased investment in state-of-the-art training and professional support would encourage employee engagement, improve morale and add to promoting this desired culture.

WE, THEREFORE MOVE that the Board of Supervisors instruct the Chief Probation Officer together with the Chief Executive Officer, County Counsel, the Directors of DCFS, and DHR (Department of Human Resources), labor representatives, and other parties deemed appropriate and necessary to report back in writing within 180 days on:

1. Identifying best practices in the field for new training as well as for ongoing certification to teach and reinforce the various skills needed to effectively serve the wide-ranging population of clients served by the Department, including utilizing research that has already been done on this topic through various reports completed during the Probation Governance Study; and

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2. The feasibility of replicating these best practice, evidence-based, multi-disciplinary, tailored training models to enhance existing training and to inform the creation of a “Probation University,” modeled after DCFS University; and
3. The availability and identification of ongoing funding streams to pay for training both within the Department and at “Probation University.”

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