

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/breaking-new-ground-with-new-laws>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

This is the first in a three-part series

Washington State is seeing success with a groundbreaking alternative to incarceration for parents who are in prison or facing prison time. It has reduced the average daily prison population, provided offenders with an incentive to not commit new crimes, and has reduced duplication of services by state agencies.

The Parenting Sentencing Alternative has two components: the Family and Offender Sentencing Alternative (FOSA) and the Community Parenting Alternative (CPA). These programs provide intensive supervision and structured programming and parenting guidance in lieu of prison time for eligible offenders.

The focus is on what is in the best interest of the child, and what will reduce multigenerational incarceration. This case management approach created a unique partnership between the two largest state agencies in Washington, the [Department of Corrections](#) (DOC) and the [Department of Social and Health Services](#) (DSHS). This was a logical union, given that nearly 75 percent of the affected offenders have received social and health services at some point in their lives.

The FOSA program, which was signed into law in 2010, created [an option](#) for judges to sentence eligible offenders to community supervision instead of incarceration. [The CPA program](#) allows for eligible, incarcerated DOC offenders to serve up to the last 12 months of their prison sentence in the community on electronic monitoring with more intensive supervision. In order for offenders to participate, the court or DOC must determine it is in the best interest of the child and not in conflict with community safety that the offender remains at home rather than in prison.

We are excited to see lower violation rates and lower return-to-prison rates as a result of this alternative. Currently, only about 15 percent of participants have been terminated or have had their alternative revoked. We are also seeing cost savings associated with reduction in duplicative services provided by DOC and DSHS. Within the first 18 months, 44 children were diverted from the foster care system and eight children left foster care to return to their families.

Community corrections officers have specialized caseloads with only FOSA or CPA offenders—mostly mothers and a handful of fathers. Because of the focus on children and their families it became clear that our staff members would benefit from cross-training from DSHS, the agency that manages social work, foster care, and other children's services for our state.

Unlike traditional supervision, this model requires more direct involvement with the day-to-day activities of the offenders, their children, and their partners or other family members. We work with the offenders on the principles of the Strengthening Families model and what we call Present Parenting. We interpret this to mean clean and sober living, putting children first, and balancing life's responsibilities.

Often in corrections, we view families as barriers to successful supervision out of concern that these associations will influence offenders to commit additional crimes. In Washington, we are challenging the idea that families are counterproductive and view them as potential assets. We're seeing that broadening our scope and looking at non-traditional views of supervision has increased opportunities for successful completion, as well as the offenders' abilities to meet their families' needs now and in the future.

Susie Leavell is program administrator of the Washington State Department of Corrections.

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