

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/promising-outcomes-for-a-parenting-sentencing-alternative>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Washington State's Parenting Sentencing Alternative provides qualifying offenders with the opportunity to parent their minor children under intense community supervision instead of serving prison time. Although it is too soon to gauge the program's long-term success, the Department of Corrections is seeing a number of early benefits, including cost savings, with Community Parenting Alternative (CPA) and Family and Offender Sentencing Alternative (FOSA) cases.

On average, it costs \$34,000 to supervise these alternative cases between \$7,000-\$8,000 more than traditional community supervision. Officers have smaller caseloads but are more directly involved with day-to-day activities of offenders and their children, partners, and other family members. Although the program requires a higher initial cost per offender than traditional supervision and expends more resources up front, [cost savings](#) come in the reduction of daily population rates and duplicate service reduction. It costs an average of \$90 a day to incarcerate; in contrast, it costs \$7 a day to electronically monitor those who are on the prison-based alternative. While other supervision expenses exist, this reduction in costs upon transfer from prison provides substantial savings.

Currently, 67 percent of offenders are parenting with another support person in the home, 30 percent are on their own in their home, and 3 percent participate in some sort of parenting plan. By increasing the depth of our supervision, we see that offenders are more likely to successfully complete their supervision and meet their families' immediate and future needs. To date, roughly 18 percent of program participants have had their alternative revoked or been terminated from the program. Rates of recidivism calculated as a new felony within three years after release are around 29 percent for traditional supervision. For CPA/FOSA cases, we have seen that of the 230 offenders who have successfully completed the program, only two have returned to prison on a new felony since June 2010.

The Parenting Sentencing Alternative helps provide very good outcomes for participants: sustained employment, continued education, improved parenting skills, and better readiness for life in general. It helps equip offenders with skills to balance life's responsibilities with parenting. We want participants to be "present" parents, meaning putting their kids first and being clean and sober.

Because this model of supervision is new, we need to understand whether the program is successful and what improvements we can make to help participants succeed. We can already see the tangible data (44 children diverted from foster care, dollars spent and saved, etc.) and we are tracking more qualitative data through participant surveys.

Program participants receive an exit survey upon completion of supervision and follow-up surveys six months and one year thereafter. The survey responses help us to determine how to improve upon our existing structure as well as measure our success. Does this alternative work for a client simply because he is at home and not in prison? Is it working because she has additional supports in place that wouldn't otherwise exist? Further research will help us answer these questions.

A graduate student from Washington State University currently is following the program as part of her thesis. Partnering with educational institutions helps us broaden our understanding of the program's progress, and emphasis on research and planning allows us to talk more profoundly about its various aspects. As time goes on, more data will reveal those elements of the program that are most effective as well as those that are no longer helpful.

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

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