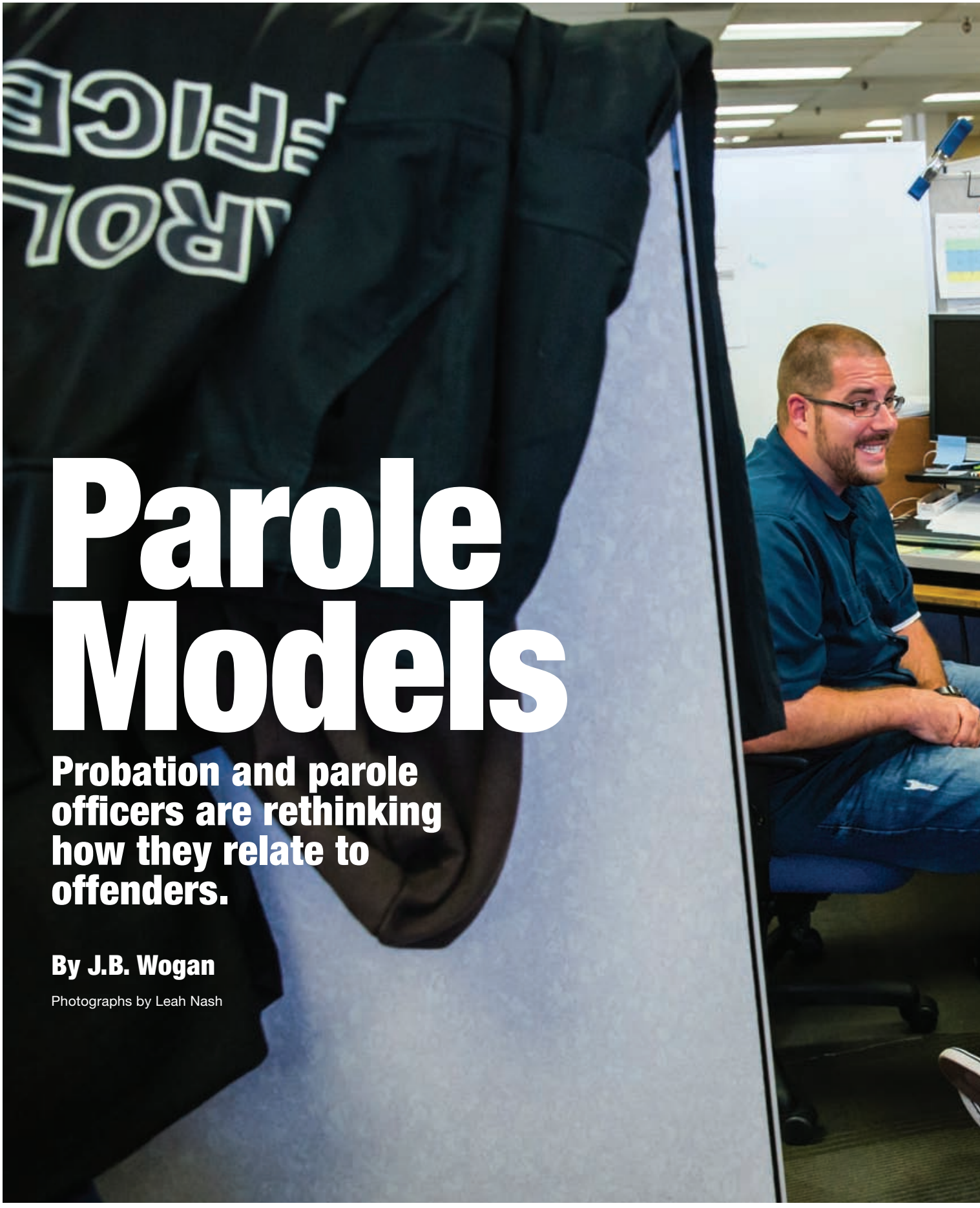
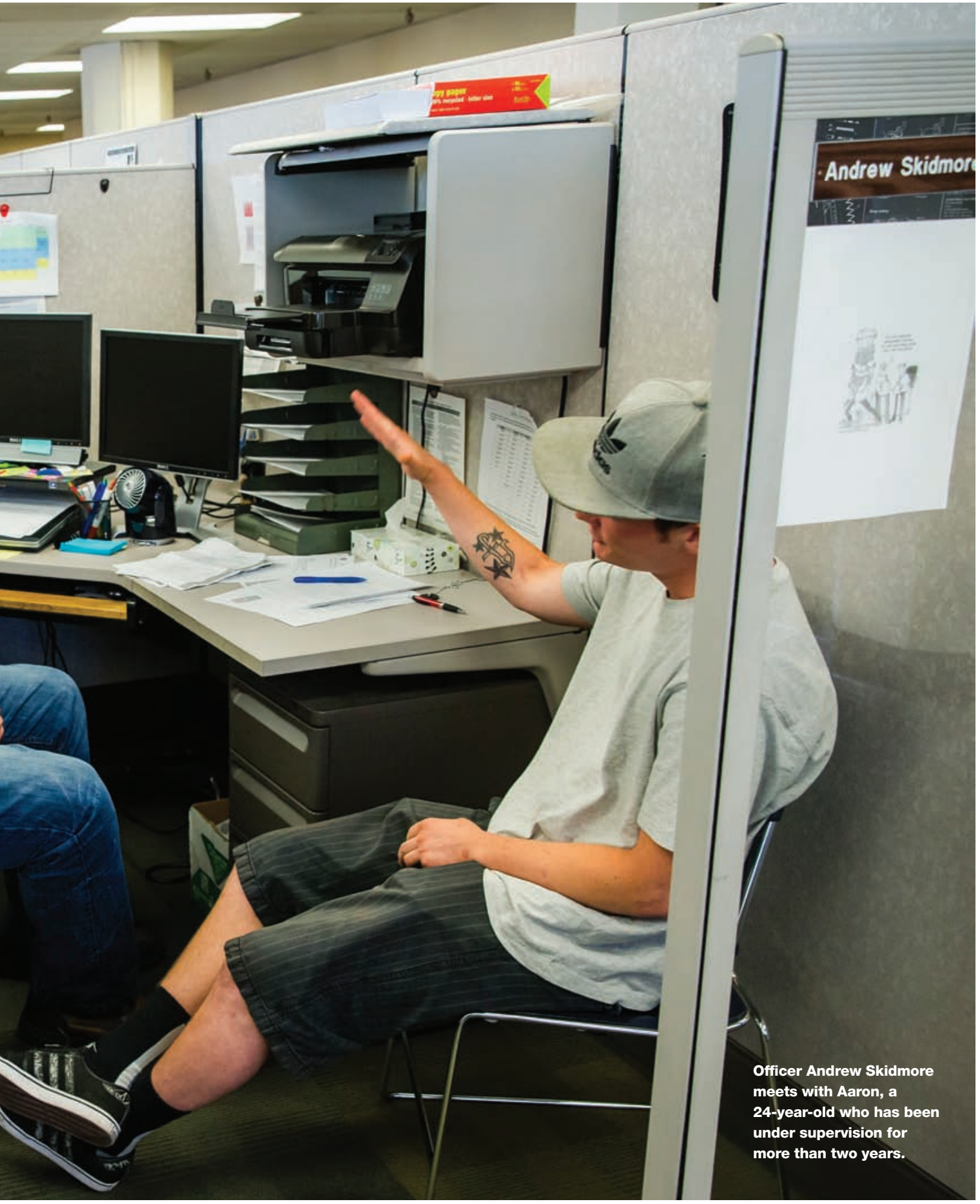


Parole Models

Probation and parole officers are rethinking how they relate to offenders.

By J.B. Wogan

Photographs by Leah Nash



Officer Andrew Skidmore meets with Aaron, a 24-year-old who has been under supervision for more than two years.

As a parole and probation officer in Multnomah County, Ore., Andrew Skidmore can be tough when he has to be. He is trained in hand-to-hand combat. He likes guns enough to have a detailed schematic of his Glock tacked to a wall in his downtown Portland office. He also keeps a black tactical vest with handcuffs, a baton and pepper spray. If he needs to make a forcible arrest of someone breaking the rules of community supervision, he can do it, no problem.

But Skidmore is trying a different method. Officers in Multnomah County don't want former criminal offenders to think of their "POs" as adversaries. Skidmore sees himself as a mentor and role model. Today, he is meeting with Aaron, a 24-year-old who has been under supervision for more than two years for selling meth and possessing heroin. For much of that time, Aaron has been either homeless or in jail.

On home visits, Skidmore has to wear his vest with a gold star emblem and "PAROLE" in large white font. Here, he's in jeans with an untucked button-down shirt. In any given situation, Skidmore can choose whether to play the part of enforcer or counselor. When Aaron misses appointments or fails drug tests, Skidmore responds with mandatory community service, jail time or other sanctions. But when Aaron does what he's asked, Skidmore peppers him with compliments.

After some perfunctory questions about housing and employment, Skidmore asks for the homework Aaron's been assigned. He unfolds a crinkled set of worksheets subtitled "Friends Exercises." The homework nudges Aaron to reconsider friendships that increase his chances of committing another crime. Aside from family, the people closest to Aaron are all drug users. Skidmore asks him how he can make friends who would be a better influence. Aaron looks frustrated. "I don't know how to go about that," he says.

Oftentimes, parole and probation officers are the only positive role models offenders have. About a decade ago, criminologists began asking if parole and probation visits were a missed opportu-

Asked how he can make friends who would be a better influence, Aaron responds, "I don't know how to go about that."

nity for law enforcement. What if officers developed a more supportive relationship with offenders? What if they demonstrated to clients that they weren't just checking boxes and delivering sanctions? The working theory was that given some personal attention, offenders might be more receptive to advice about resolving conflicts and avoiding crime. Amid a flurry of academic journal articles and pilot projects, researchers from the University of Cincinnati developed EPICS, short for Effective Practices in Community Supervision, a new model for structured face-to-face meetings between officers and their clients. While universities in Australia and Canada produced similar approaches based on the same underlying theory, EPICS has become the go-to model for parole and probation in much of the United States. Since 2006, more than 80 state and county criminal justice departments have adopted EPICS, including Multnomah County. By focusing on behavioral change, rather than just threats of being thrown back in jail, EPICS and similar efforts may help break the cycle of incarceration. "I don't think the majority of people on supervision like being criminals," says Scott Taylor, who runs the department of parole and probation in Multnomah County. "They just can't figure how to get out of it."

Law enforcement agencies in this country have been engaged in community supervision for more than 150 years, basing their practice on the idea that some convicted criminals can reintegrate into society, so long as they meet with assigned officers on a regular basis. Community supervision takes two primary forms: probation and parole. Generally speaking, probation is an alternative to incarceration, and parole is early release from prison. People on probation tend to be convicted of less serious offenses than people on parole. In Multnomah County, Skidmore and his colleagues work with both parolees and probationers.

EPICS is part of a larger change that is developing within the nation's parole and probation systems. Parole boards are under scrutiny for keeping people in prison without explaining why they don't qualify for supervised release in the community. Many states have changed sentencing requirements so that nonviolent offenders are increasingly the responsibility of local jails and community supervision agencies, not state prisons. Parole and probation officers are using risk assessment tools to concentrate services on the people who are most likely to reoffend.

Since 2000, anywhere from 4.5 million to 5 million adults have been under community supervision in a given year, but as prisons come under increasing pressure to lower their inmate populations, the number of offenders on parole and probation is certain to grow. In the past, parole and probation agencies have generally ignored research that suggests ways to reduce recidivism; the field has been stuck in a mode of monitoring and enforced compliance. As more offenders are released to community supervision, however, agencies are showing an interest in ideas designed to cut down on criminal behavior. EPICS is one of those ideas.

The guiding principle behind EPICS is that offenders need help learning how to approach life in a more constructive way. If they're offered drugs, they need to know how to weigh the long-term cost of incarceration against the short-term benefit of getting high. They need to practice overriding impulsive responses to situations. More broadly, they need to understand how their default thought patterns, without a conscious effort to change, will lead to further crime and punishment. Probation and parole officers are in a position to help because offenders have to visit them several times a month. They have a captive audience.

The difference between EPICS and the traditional model of supervision is more a matter of emphasis than total redesign. Parole and probation officers have always occupied a middle ground between law enforcement and social work. In the past, officers sought to change criminal behavior, but they did it by threatening sanctions, including jail time, community service and house arrest. With EPICS, officers play a more direct role in behavior change by teaching skills that might break an offender's cycle of criminal behavior.

Though EPICS has spread quickly, the jury is still out on

A New Way: How EPICS Works

Developed by the Corrections Institute at the University of Cincinnati, Effective Practices in Community Supervision (EPICS) provides a structured process for face-to-face meetings between probation/parole officers and their clients. Officers can serve as positive role models and mentors for offenders, supplementing the support offenders already receive in counseling or drug treatment. Every EPICS session follows the same four steps:

1. Check-in
2. Review
3. Intervention
4. Homework

Check-in: Officers try to establish a collaborative rapport with clients. They ask about crises and acute needs. They also assess whether clients are meeting conditions as mandated by courts or parole boards.

Review: Officers discuss skills taught in a prior session, skills taught in outside counseling and treatment, and skills practiced in the last homework assignment. They also go over clients' personal goals.

Intervention: Officers teach skills, such as cost-benefit analysis, using worksheets and roleplaying. Officers choose skills that address the offender's highest risk factors, such as antisocial peer groups or personal beliefs that lead to criminal behavior.

Homework: Officers assign written exercises related to the intervention. They also encourage offenders to try using the new skill in a real-world context.

whether it is effective at reducing crime. Two years ago, an evaluation in Ohio found that when officers used EPICS as designed, it led to lower rates of rearrest and re-incarceration, particularly among clients who had been assessed as high risk for reoffending. But the same study suggested that when trained officers weren't faithful to the model, they got worse results than officers who did not use EPICS. This July, *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, a peer-reviewed journal, published a meta-analysis of 10 evaluations of EPICS and similar community supervision models in the United States and abroad. It found that the average recidivism rate for offenders was about 13 percent lower when officers received training in an EPICS-like model.

Pat Schreiner, who manages probabation and parole officers in Multnomah County, listens in on a client session.

In Multnomah County, Taylor points to two indicators as evidence that EPICS may be working. First, demand for jail beds has gone down. Six years ago, the county would regularly report 600 jail beds in use on any given night. Now the number hovers around 380. Second, the county's monthly recidivism figures are lower than in the next five largest counties in the state, despite the fact that Multnomah County encompasses a major urban area (Portland) and has more high-risk offenders than any other Oregon county. Taylor acknowledges that neither is definitive proof that EPICS has lowered recidivism, but he is betting it works. "Five years from now, somebody may say, 'Well, you were part of a religion that had no merit,'" Taylor says. "We live with that risk."

Seven years ago, just as EPICS was gaining its first adherents, an influential Canadian study gave further impetus to the parole and probation reform movement. A group of clinical psychologists in Ontario published a journal article that challenged the traditional paradigm of supervision under parole and probation. The article called meetings between officers and offenders "the black box" because so much about the interaction was unknown. Visits with officers could last five minutes or 45 minutes. The appointments ranged from once a week to once a month. Aside from a few mandatory yes or no questions about housing, employment and run-ins with police, the content of conversations didn't have to follow a prescribed structure. Instead, most of the format was left to the discretion of each individual officer.

James Bonta, the article's lead author, argued for major change. Prior research already showed that community supervision was most effective when officers concentrated treatment on people at the highest risk of reoffending. Treatment itself worked best when it targeted specific problems that led to criminal behavior, such as substance abuse or spending time with antisocial peers. Officers could enhance the effects by tailoring interventions to the offender's learning style. Some officers already did the things Bonta prescribed, but several studies showed that they were the exception rather than the rule.

Pat Schreiner, who is currently a community justice manager in Multnomah County, recalls the article as an indictment of the way many officers approached their jobs. At an earlier point in his career, Schreiner himself had practiced intensive surveillance, a type of supervision where officers closely monitor high-risk offenders and enforce compliance with conditions mandated by a judge or parole board. But articles like the one published by Bonta forced him to reflect on whether intensive surveillance actually reduced crime. Nothing he'd seen or read suggested that the extra monitoring and punishment cut down on relapses in criminal behavior. It's a lesson he shares with new EPICS trainees today. "Just because I like what I'm doing, and I'm good at what I'm doing," he says, "doesn't mean I'm doing good."

By contrast, EPICS adds structure to offender-officer interactions and helps officers target the catalysts of criminal behavior. The change "is beyond big," says Stu Walker, a manager in Multnomah County who trains other officers in EPICS. Before becoming a manager, Walker used to work domestic violence cases as an officer. Even though he always tried to spark a change in clients' behavior, he didn't really know how to do it. The old way of helping clients, he says, was like trying to hit a precise target with a shotgun. "We were talking about housing, drug and alcohol use, the fight at the bar, restraining orders, employment status," Walker says, "but not talking about the thinking that drove the behavior.

"I saw recidivism day after day. I saw my clients creating new victims of domestic violence," he says. "I knew we weren't doing it right."

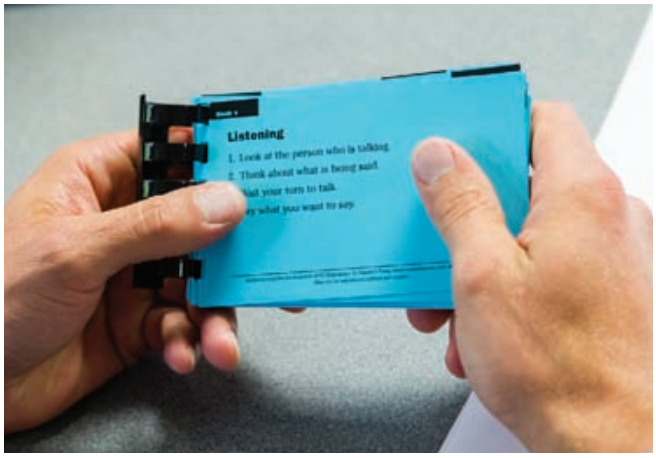
Walker is an EPICS convert. When the department instituted EPICS in 2011, he was vice president of the union that represents the county's parole and probation officers, and he relayed

concerns from peers who didn't trust EPICS. He himself initially voiced skepticism about the model. "If you don't do it right, it can be too much like counseling," Walker explains. (While EPICS demands that officers empathize and connect with their offenders, there's a limit. They're supposed to be "friendly," but not "friends" with offenders.)

Almost five years into using EPICS, some officers still don't like it. One officer calls it "paint by numbers" because the model is so prescriptive, it can feel like there's little room for improvisation or natural conversation. Every meeting follows four steps. Every step comes with its own protocol and training. Even though the clients are adults, officers have to assign homework and go over clients' answers at the next session. To make sure officers use the model correctly, the department makes periodic audio recordings of sessions and grades officers on their performance. Multnomah County goes a step beyond most places with EPICS by incorporating "live coaching," in which a trainer observes a client session and gives immediate feedback to the officer in person. Some officers say the feedback skews toward criticism and misses the productive moments that fall outside the EPICS framework.

Trainers play the roles of offender and officer to demonstrate proper use of EPICS.

Offenders don't always like EPICS either. It can seem pedantic or contrived, especially with older offenders who've been in the system for years. When Chris Enquist, another parole officer, asks his client, Ricardo, why cost-benefit analysis might be a valuable skill, Ricardo bucks. "I don't value any of this," he says. "I value getting out of parole." Enquist tries to establish a rapport with Ricardo, per his EPICS training, but Ricardo still sees Enquist as the enemy. "You seem like a nice guy," Ricardo says, "but you're a PO, dude. Everything I write down is a trap."



Officers use worksheets and flash cards to teach clients new skills, such as empathy and cost-benefit analysis.

Using another worksheet, Skidmore asks Aaron to list people he'd like to spend less time with.

"Now you've written something here that I've never seen anyone write before," Skidmore says, smiling. "I want you to explain what you mean." One of the people Aaron has listed is himself.

"I want to spend less time with myself," Aaron says. "I want to get out of my own head."

"I like that," Skidmore says, nodding. "I'm glad you wrote that down."

As Skidmore finishes the appointment, his voice grows quiet. He tells Aaron he's leaving the department to work in another Oregon county.

"Really?" Aaron asks, his voice cracking. He looks stunned.

Skidmore doesn't know when he'll leave—it may be months—but he treats the conversation like a goodbye. Aaron has been sober for a little more than three months. He is still homeless, but he has plans in motion to move in with his sister and her husband. He's talking about other goals, like finding a job one day and making friends who don't use drugs. At the moment, his life seems to be on an upswing.

"What do I always tell you?" Skidmore asks.

"That I'm a smart guy."

"That you're a smart guy, as long as you stay sober." He gives Aaron his contact information and asks him to keep in touch. "I'd like to know how you're doing." **G**

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