

# **Report on a Survey of Probation & Parole Officers with regard to 12-Step Programming**

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# **REPORT ON A SURVEY OF PROBATION & PAROLE OFFICERS WITH REGARD TO 12-STEP PROGRAMMING**

In recent years, it has become common knowledge that reducing the use of drugs and alcohol among offenders can significantly lower recidivism rates. Department of Correction has taken several measures to help many of the estimated 85% of offenders that have substance abuse problems. As part of a multifaceted approach, the Department has supported the use of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and Narcotics Anonymous (NA) as tools for keeping probationers and parolees drug free. However, the use of these 12-step programs in relation to community corrections is worthy of examination.

## **PURPOSE**

In fall of 1997, a survey of probation and parole officers from the Field and Community Services Division (FCS) was administered. The purpose of the survey was multifold. It primarily intended to:

- Examine the perceived effectiveness of AA and NA with regard to offenders on probation and parole
- Determine the level of knowledge probation and parole officers have of 12-step programs
- Explore how officers monitor offenders regarding AA and NA attendance
- Detect weaknesses in FCS's management of substance abusing offenders
- Identify how AA and NA can better meet the needs of offenders and the community where they reside.

In August of 1997 following the administration of the survey, a mandatory 12-step training for probation and parole officers was initiated. One training was held in each district office and educational videos were left at each site. The training focused on explaining the 12 steps to officers and educating them on how to better monitor substance abusing offenders.

In November of 2000, a follow-up survey of probation and parole officers was conducted by the state's department of correction. The survey posed basically the same questions to Field and Community Services officers as in 1997 and had the same basic information gathering purposes. The results of that survey are presented in this report. Also included is a brief comparison of results from the 1997 and 2000 surveys which may help to provide insight into the usefulness of mandatory 12-step training.

## **METHODOLOGY**

In November of 2000, 209 surveys were distributed to FCS staff throughout the state. Accompanying each survey was a letter from the appropriate District Manager asking employees to complete and return the form. The survey included 23 items with both forced response and open-ended questions as displayed in a replica the survey provided at the end of this report. No identifying information was requested, therefore, all responses remained anonymous. A total of 101 surveys were returned to the research department, however, only 89 surveys from probation and parole officers were considered for purposes of this report. Once received, data from the surveys was coded and entered into an Excel spreadsheet.

## **RESULTS**

A written summary of responses from the 89 surveys returned by FCS probation and parole officers is provided below. Percentages used in the narrative are based on questions

completed and do not include answers that were left blank. However, data tables depicting the actual and full distribution of responses to close-ended questions are included at the end of this report. Responses to open-ended questions have not been reproduced but are available upon request. Also available but not included in this report is a break down of results based on differences in the respondent's district, type of caseload, and length of time in current position.

### **Position and Caseload Information**

Approximately 56.2% of respondents reported that they held the position of probation and parole officer with 43.8% identifying themselves as probation and parole officer senior. Since the question regarding position was open-ended, however, it is possible that senior officers responded without noting their elevated distinction. Of more interest, perhaps, is the fact that more than 54% of probation and parole officers responded that they had been in that job for five years or less while only 5.5% reported having worked in the career for over 15 years. As expected, the number of surveys returned from each district were in similar proportion to the number of officers employed at each site with nearly half of all returns coming from Districts 3 and 4. Similarly, reports identifying the type of caseload held were representative of the actual number and type of caseloads that appear throughout the districts. However, responses related to type of caseload and number of clients classified as maximum, minimum, or medium are somewhat unreliable given that specific reporting instructions for these questions were not provided on the survey form.

### **Level of Problem**

When asked the approximate percentage of offenders per caseload having substance abuse problems, FCS officers reported data consistent with local and national estimates.

Over 51% of officer responses indicated that 81% or more of the offenders on their caseloads have a drug or alcohol problem. And, over 79% indicated that 61% or more of their caseloads had substance abuse problems. Officers consistently noted that they based these determinations on PSIs, UAs, current crime and criminal histories, professional substance abuse evaluations, and personal interviews.

### **12-Step Participation**

Officer responses identifying the approximate percentage of offenders per caseload going to 12-step meetings were fairly evenly distributed between 1% and 100%. The only exception was a particularly small number reporting that 90% to 100% of their caseload attended meetings.

### **12-Step Recommendations**

Of the 89 FCS officers responding to the survey, 92.1% indicated that they recommend AA or NA to their clients with 2.2% indicating they sometimes recommend and 5.6% indicating they do not. Given an opportunity to elaborate on a negative response, several respondents noted that client readiness to become sober and preference in treatment are important considerations in recommending AA or NA. Others sighted constitutional and religious issues as reasons to merely “encourage” or “suggest” participation. Only one comment each listed possible glorification of drug and alcohol and criminal association as reasons for not utilizing 12-step programs in case planning. Those officers that do refer to AA and NA, however, noted that their decisions are based on such factors as court orders, substance abuse evaluations or counselor recommendations, client motivation, personal interviews, and prior treatment. Over 69% recommend that offenders attend meetings 2 or 3 times a week while nearly 21% believe the ideal frequency varies by offender.

## **12-Step Availability**

Over 70% of FCS officers reported that 10 or more AA or NA meetings per week were available for their clients. Approximately 10% indicated they “don’t know” the availability of meetings in their areas, and the remaining revealed their offenders can choose from only a limited number of weekly meeting.

## **Monitoring of 12-Step**

Of the 88 officers providing responses, 92% indicated that they monitor the attendance of offenders at AA and NA. An overwhelming number of the 92% explained that “greencards” or some other signed form was accepted as proof of being present at these meetings. A handful of officers noted that they ask specific questions regard step work, sponsorship, or the location and time of meetings in order to make a judgement about attendance. Very few reported utilizing surveillance tactics to verify participation.

## **Helpfulness of 12-Step**

When asked whether AA and NA are helpful to clients, all 89 FCS officers responded. A majority of 59.6% indicated that they felt the meetings are “somewhat” helpful while 23.6% felt they were “very helpful”. Only seven respondents felt the meetings were “seldom helpful”, “not helpful”, or were unsure of their answer. Somewhat surprisingly, 9% of respondents disregarded the answers provided and wrote in that the helpfulness of the meetings “vary”. When given an opportunity to elaborate, many explained that AA and NA’s value is dependent on a client’s readiness to become drug free, motivation to change, and authentic meeting participation. A small group of officers praised the kinship and

nonjudgmental environment of 12-step while a similar number wrote negative comments about their helpfulness.

### **Officer Knowledge of 12-Step**

When asked to rate how comfortable they were with their knowledge of AA and NA in three areas, FCS officers most frequently chose the “somewhat” response. More officers appeared to have a slightly better understanding of sponsorship than either step work or service work. However, at least 74% answered either “somewhat” or “very” comfortable in each category. In response to a related question, 75.3% indicated they can identify if a client is working steps, 5.6% said they sometimes can, and 18% revealed that they simply can not. Additional comments suggest that proof of step work is determined by asking the offender questions about their participation and observing positive changes in their attitude and behavior. Only one respondent indicated that sponsors were contacted.

### **Improvements to 12-Step**

Through comments to open-ended questions, FCS officers revealed that their greatest concern about AA and NA meetings is possible exposure to other drug users and criminals. In fact, several noted that mandatory attendance can contribute to such anti-social associations by requiring participation by offenders who are fully committed to the recovery process. The officers also felt strongly that their inability to accurately monitor attendance and share information with 12-step providers was problematic. To a lesser degree, respondents felt that the quality and availability of meetings and sponsors as well as the religious overtones of AA and NA programs could all be areas of weakness. Overall, the officers indicated 12-step fellowships could better meet their needs by working closer with and providing information to FCS regarding schedules, sponsors, and offender progress,

particularly if it can be done without compromising the anonymity aspect of the program. In some instances, officers shared their thoughts about what might help to improve existing meetings. Such suggestions included adding more social events and screening participants for seriousness.

### **Training**

Responses to a question asking officers if they were interested in additional training on topics related to 12-step were split nearly evenly. Over 47% indicated they wanted more training while 52.3% said they did not.

### **SUMMARY & COMPARISON TO EARLIER SURVEY**

Overall, the survey of probation and parole officers conducted in November of 2000 suggests that they are generally supportive of 12-step programming but stress that its helpfulness and use as a case management tool are highly dependent on offender motivation and readiness to change. Officer responses also seemed to continually emphasize their concern that negative associations might spawn from 12-step participation as well as their desire to improve cooperation with AA and NA fellowships.

In many ways, the findings of the 2000 survey of FCS officers mimic those of the 1997 survey as revealed in an independent report by Teresa Guanche. Though the survey questions varied slightly and 92 surveys were returned in 1997 while only 89 were received in 2000, many comparisons can be drawn. In the areas of availability of AA and NA meetings and perceived helpfulness, responses from 1997 and 2000 were nearly exact. Similar responses were found in relation to position and caseload information, level of substance abuse problem, number of offenders attending meetings, and monitoring of participation. Similar findings also prevailed with regard to number of weekly meetings



recommended with one exception. While approximately 13% of officers reported to recommend more than five meetings per week in 1997, no officers chose such responses in 2000. A close percentage did, however, initiate a new response which suggests that recommendations vary by individual. In effect, the only significant differences between the 1997 and 2000 results appeared in the areas of officer knowledge of 12-step programming and desire for training.

With regard to questions asking officers to rate their knowledge of 12-step programs, the response of “very comfortable” increased from 1997 to 2000. In fact, the number of “very comfortable” responses rose by 114% in the area of sponsorship, 128% in the area of step work, and 178% in the area of service work. Consequently, the “not comfortable” response decreased by 72%, 59%, and 52% in the respective areas. Not surprisingly, a reduction was also found in the request for training. Only 47.7% of officers in 2000 indicated that they would like more training on 12-step while 75.8% in 1997 appeared to desire more information.

By reviewing the information gleaned from both the 1997 and 2000 surveys of FCS staff, it appears many of the same attitudes and concerns about 12-step programming have prevailed throughout the years. Officers, however, now report that they are more knowledgeable about AA and NA than they previously were. An assumption can be made that the initial 12-step training which followed the 1997 survey may be at least partially responsible for the increase in awareness about 12-step programs. This insight in addition to the reportedly high number of inexperienced FCS officers and continued desire for information suggest that further training may also prove effective – particularly if it focuses

specifically on the reoccurring attitudes and concerns that probation and parole officers have expressed about 12-step programs.