

More Than the Sum of Its Parts

Why Hawaii's Opportunity Probation with Enforcement (HOPE) Program Works

Key Elements of HOPE

- > The program targets probationers at high risk of failure.
- > An initial notification hearing informs each probationer about the program's expectations and consequences.
- > Frequent random drug testing is conducted.
- > Swift, certain, and short jail sentences are imposed for every probation violation.
- > Drug treatment is mandated only for people who do not abstain from drug use and for those who request it.

This policy brief was created by Vera's Center on Sentencing and Corrections, which works with government leaders to advance criminal justice policies that are fair, efficient, and protect public safety. For more information, go to www.vera.org/centers/center-sentencing-corrections.

BACKGROUND

The number of people under community supervision in the United States has increased steadily over the past decade: at year-end 2008, almost 4.3 million adults were on probation, up from 3.8 million in 2000.¹ One of the challenges facing policymakers nationwide is how to help more people finish probation successfully, given that almost 40 percent fail to complete their terms, with many ending up in prison at greater costs to taxpayers.

A program called Hawaii's Opportunity Probation with Enforcement (HOPE) set out to reduce this high failure rate. HOPE imposes swift, certain, and short jail sanctions in response to every detected violation of an individual's probation conditions. This has proven to be an effective method of keeping people on probation and out of prison; a recent evaluation showed that participants were significantly less likely to be arrested for a new crime or have their probation revoked, resulting in fewer days in prison as compared with individuals on traditional probation.²

Given HOPE's success, states and counties are interested in replicating the model, seeking similar results. The Vera Institute of Justice produced this policy brief to provide information about what works and to share an important lesson about the risks of applying parts of a program without analyzing *why* it originally worked.

HOPE: KEY ELEMENTS AND EVALUATION

Started in 2004 by Judge Steven Alm of Hawaii's First Circuit Court, HOPE targets high-risk probationers and applies swift, certain, and consistent sanctions in response to behavior that violates the terms of the individual's supervision. (See "Key Elements of HOPE" at left.)

An independent randomized controlled evaluation of HOPE completed in 2009 confirmed the program's success: HOPE participants were 55 percent less likely to be arrested for a new crime, 72 percent less likely to use drugs, 61 percent less likely to miss an appointment with their probation officer, and 53 percent less likely to have their probation revoked.³

Notably, the evaluation found that the program as a whole is responsible for these results, including reduced recidivism. Researchers did not identify any specific features of the program that made it succeed. In addition to the main elements listed in the sidebar, other features that may have contributed to the positive results were the involvement and commitment of a broad array of system actors—judges (including the chief judge), probation administrators and officers, jail administrators, prosecutors, public defenders and other defense attorneys, and law enforce-

ment. Credit is also given to having started the program as a pilot and expanding it only after it was running smoothly.⁴ Additionally, for HOPE to operate effectively, law enforcement personnel must be available and willing to serve warrants on probationers each and every time they violate their supervision conditions.

HOPE: EXPANSION

The success HOPE has had in keeping people in the community and out of prison is prompting other jurisdictions to develop similar programs. Because HOPE's success cannot be linked to any single feature, states adopting the model should resist the temptation to pick and choose from its components and expect similar outcomes.

Combining parts of successful correctional interventions does not always add up to positive results. The Vera Institute of Justice learned this the hard way through its reentry initiative Project Greenlight. Project Greenlight was a short-term, prison-based demonstration project that incorporated state-of-the-art elements on correctional interventions; it was operated by New York State agencies and administered by Vera. An evaluation of the work revealed unexpected findings: the project had no effect on quality-of-life outcomes (such as housing and employment), and participants were rearrested and parole was revoked at rates higher than among nonparticipants in a comparison group.

What contributed to these negative outcomes? In Project Greenlight, the developers of a cognitive behavioral program proven to work in prisons altered the model to work within the reentry context—including shortening the treatment period and increasing the class size. Seemingly small deviations from the model may help explain the disappointing results.⁵

Although Project Greenlight and the HOPE program serve different populations and operate in different settings, the

lessons learned from the former can help inform those looking to replicate the success of the latter. States adapting the HOPE model should be mindful that implementing just one or two components of the program may not produce results identical to what HOPE has achieved. For example, one key element of HOPE is the use of swift and certain jail sanctions as a response to violations. There is no evidence, however, that jail sanctions alone (especially in a context that is not “swift and certain”) improve probation outcomes. A 2008 Vera Institute study on the use of jail sanctions for violations of community supervision in Multnomah County, Oregon, found, for example, that people who received jail sanctions were *less* likely to successfully complete probation or parole than those who did not.⁶ In fact, HOPE is the only program imposing jail sanctions that has been shown to improve outcomes among people on probation.

Another key element of HOPE is its application to high-risk probation populations, including people convicted of violent and sex offenses. Using the HOPE model for different populations, particularly probationers at low risk of failure, may result in different outcomes. A significant body of literature shows that focusing resources on low-risk people can actually *increase* their likelihood of failure.⁷ Jurisdictions wishing to explore whether the HOPE model would be effective for other populations (such as people on parole) should consider first establishing a traditional program and only then consider expanding its use by piloting the model with other populations. Finally, as with any new program, it is essential to build an evaluation component into a pilot or expansion.

HOPE is one of the most successful probation innovations in recent years, and its application in other jurisdictions is a positive development. But to ensure that its success is replicated, states and counties should consider why the program works and be sure to incorporate all of its key elements. As Vera learned through Project Greenlight, variations or short-cuts may prove costly in terms of outcomes and expense.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Lauren E. Glaze and Thomas P. Bonczar, “Probation and Parole in the United States, 2008.” Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletin. NCJ 228230 (Washington DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, December 2009).
- 2 Angela Hawken and Mark Kleiman, *Managing Drug Involved Probationers with Swift and Certain Sanctions: Evaluating Hawaii’s HOPE* (Washington DC: U.S. Department of Justice: National Institute of Justice, December 2009).
- 3 Ibid.; The Pew Center on the States, “Issue Brief: The Impact of Hawaii’s HOPE Program on Drug Use, Crime and Recidivism,” (Washington DC: Pew Center on the States, January 2010).
- 4 See HOPE: Benchmarks for Success (www.hopeprobation.org/about/benchmarks-for-success) for more guidance on how to successfully implement the HOPE model.
- 5 James A. Wilson, “Habilitation or Harm: Project Greenlight,” *National Institute of Justice Journal* 257 (2007): 2-7. James A. Wilson et al., *Smoothing the Path from Prison to Home: A Roundtable Discussion on the Lessons of Project Greenlight* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, December 2005).
- 6 Andres Rengifo and Christine Scott-Hayward, *Assessing the Effectiveness of Intermediate Sanctions in Multnomah County, Oregon* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, July 2008).
- 7 See e.g., Christopher T. Lowenkamp, Edward J. Latessa, and Alexander M. Holsinger, “The Risk Principle in Action: What Have We Learned From 13,676 Offenders and 97 Correctional Programs?” *Crime and Delinquency* 52, no. 1 (2006): 77-93.