

Statement from community supervision executives on the importance of using best practices during the COVID-19 crisis



In this time of national concern over the spread of COVID-19, the undersigned probation and parole executives and associations offer the following guidance and recommendations to (1) utilize social distancing to reduce the unnecessary and inadvertent spread of the coronavirus through community supervision, while (2) continuing to support persons under supervision and assure public safety.

People under correctional control are especially medically vulnerable. They disproportionately suffer from heart conditions, tuberculosis, HIV and diabetes, among other medical vulnerabilities. Further, outbreaks of contagious diseases in correctional facilities could lead to the infection of staff, incarcerated people and family members and could negatively impact staffing patterns, rendering such facilities more difficult to operate in a safe and healthy manner. Since approximately 11 million people churn through prisons and jails every year, if infectious diseases are spread inside correctional facilities, they have an elevated potential to affect community health. Finally, the millions of people visiting probation and parole offices are similarly medically vulnerable, putting our staff and one another at heightened risk of becoming infected.

With 4.5 million people on probation and parole nationally, there are more people under supervision than is necessary from a public safety standpoint. Too many people are placed under supervision who pose little public safety risk and are supervised for excessive supervision periods beyond what is indicated by best practices. This stretches probation and parole resources; hampers our ability to assist and supervise those most in need; and ultimately contributes to the revocation and incarceration of people for technical, non-criminal violations, like missing appointments and substance use.

This would be concerning under any circumstances. But it is especially problematic with the current COVID-19 emergency. As such, the undersigned probation and parole executives and associations offer the following guidance and recommendations for elected and appointed officials that comport with best practices and will help reduce the impact of community supervision on the spread of the coronavirus. Many of these recommendations can and should be enacted quickly before there is any inadvertent contagion:

1. **Immediately limit office visits for people on parole and probation.** In order to avoid unnecessary travel and congregating in waiting rooms where the virus may spread, probation and parole departments should forgo reporting altogether for those who pose lower risk and/or have people under supervision

report via telephone, on-line or by postcards. Research on, and experience with, computerized reporting has found that lower-risk individuals in particular perform well on computerized reporting.

2. **Suspend or severely limit technical violations for the duration of the coronavirus crisis.** Research has not found an association between technical violations and favorable public safety or rehabilitative outcomes. Further, probation and parole revocations for technical violations are a significant contributor to jail and prison churn. Incarceration for technical violations should be immediately suspended or drastically curtailed legislatively or administratively to reduce the possibility of unnecessarily carrying the virus into correctional facilities or from such facilities into the community. Given the limited research support for reincarceration for technical violations, the public safety and rehabilitation outcomes of reducing violations should then be carefully evaluated before technical violations are reinstated to pre-crisis levels.
3. **Reduce intake onto probation and parole to only those who absolutely need to be under supervision.** We urge courts and paroling authorities to limit placing people under supervision to only those who need, and can benefit from, community supervision. Courts and paroling authorities should release people from supervision as soon as possible who are low risk or who have shown through their performance on probation or parole that they no longer need to be under supervision. Persons currently on probation or parole for more than two years who are in compliance should be considered for immediate discharge from supervision.
4. **Reduce the terms of probation and parole to only as long as necessary to achieve the goals of supervision.** Most reoffending occurs in the first 18-24 months of supervision, suggesting that probation and parole terms longer than that engender costs with diminishing benefits. Legislatures, courts and paroling authorities should limit supervision terms to 18-24 months and allow people to further earn time off for compliance with conditions.

The above two recommendations would focus probation and parole resources on those who can truly benefit from community supervision, while limiting the travel, office visits and incarceration that increase COVID-19 exposure of persons under supervision.

5. **Train staff to provide clear, accurate and understandable information to probation and parole clients.** Supervision staff should inform their clients of proper precautions, [recommended by public health officials](#), against virus

spread such as staying home when sick, covering coughs and sneezes, frequently washing hands with soap and water and cleaning frequently touched surfaces.

Community supervision executives

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