

STAR PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Over many months, a working group consisting of a district judge, magistrate judge, and representatives of the Federal Defender's Office, U.S. Attorney's Office, and the U.S. Probation Office planned a unique reentry court. The final plan, approved by the Board of Judges in May 2007, targeted medium to high risk offenders being released to the City of Philadelphia who have correctional needs, particularly in relation to employment. The one year pilot program screens new supervision cases for voluntary participation; those that decline are placed in a control group for statistical analysis. Participants meet, as a group, with a magistrate judge every other week to discuss all aspects of their supervision. The intense oversight is augmented by providing the participants with all possible resources at the disposal of the U.S. Probation Office and the Reentry Coordinator of the U.S. Attorney's Office. The attending magistrate judge has the authority to levy an assortment of sanctions for noncompliance with the conditions of supervision. Any participant who favorably completes the one year program will receive a recommendation to the sentencing judge to reduce the term of supervision by as much as twelve months.

Reentry court sessions began on September 12, 2007 with 12 participants. Over the course of the next several weeks, cases that met the criteria of the program were reviewed and individuals were interviewed. At the January 16, 2008 session, with the introduction of two additional individuals, the program met the capacity of 26 participants.

Following the approval of this pilot program by the Board of Judges, the designated probation officer, with the assistance of the working group, had the task of implementing the components of the program as outlined in the proposal. Most significant, was the manner in which the program was presented to offenders. It was obvious from the onset that the manner in which the program was presented, as well as the clarity of the program goals, was essential in securing an agreement from the individual to participate. Many offenders were skeptical of "another program" to participate in and had concerns about the time and effort that were required to remain in the program. These concerns were quickly diminished upon commencement of the program as the participant's realized that the only added expectation to their conditions of supervision is a 2 - 2 ½ hour commitment to the Court on a bi-weekly basis. All other components of the program are brought together by intensive supervision by the supervising probation officer and additional resources provided by the reentry coordinator. In regard to employment, the reentry participants benefit from the resources made available by the U.S. Probation Office's employment team. This team is headed by a senior probation officer who specializes in offender employment needs. The team was established in the summer of 2005 in order to provide enhanced employment assessments to offenders and to create employment opportunity in the community.

It is important to note that prior to each biweekly appearance before the magistrate judge, a meeting is held with the working group to review the progress of each participant and any issues relating to noncompliance or other needs of the offender that have arisen that could prevent the offender's success in meeting their goals. The tone of this group is essential and should be non-adversarial. While respecting the positions of each member and their role in the reentry court, the final goal is to ensure that the offender is meeting the conditions of supervised release, increasing their skill and ability to become more productive citizens of the community and reducing the rate of recidivism with a highly structured support system.