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Project Spotlight: The Texas Interagency Initiative to Provide Intensive Probation Supervision

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Program Description

Project Spotlight¹ is an innovative program that partners law enforcement, juvenile probation and adult probation officers to provide intensive community supervision of high-risk offenders in crime-ridden neighborhoods. This coordinated effort between the three agencies is a new approach that provides professionals with an effective means of sharing information and enhancing supervision and crime control efforts. The three-person teams provide intensive monitoring and surveillance, including evening and weekend visits to the homes, schools, and places of employment of offenders to ensure that conditions of probation are being met. Key features of the program include small caseloads, frequent contacts, and multi-agency coordination of services. Operating in a complementary fashion, Project Spotlight has a strong prevention component that provides a variety of rehabilitative services to offenders and their families.

Project Spotlight Objectives:

- ◆ *Lower crime rates*
- ◆ *Better supervision of offenders*
- ◆ *Less recidivism*
- ◆ *Safer communities*

Background

In the early 1990s, throughout the United States, observers of criminal justice practices began to notice a new phenomenon—police and probation working together in partner-

ships designed to enhance the supervision of offenders in the community. One of the first formal endeavors—Operation Night Light²—was implemented in the Boston area and had a significant impact on violent crime, winning support of community leaders as well as social service agencies.

The Boston Model: Operation Night Light. The Boston project was the result of a collaboration of probation and anti-gang police officers. Facing rising juvenile crime rates, professionals were forced to rethink their mission and strategy. Youth crime was well publicized, and departments were under pressure to stem the flow of young offenders entering the system. Professionals who worked directly with gang-involved youth, reflecting their concern with saving lives and preventing violence, took the beginning steps. This front line initiative grew as police and probation recognized common goals and realized the benefits of interagency cooperation. Youth violence decreased as the project matured and was adopted and promoted by both police and probation. This historic partnership led to the formal establishment of Operation Night Light, a collaborative venture between the Boston Police Department and the Office of the Commissioner of Probation for Massachusetts. Currently, Operation Night Light is a central component of Boston's strategy to deter and prevent youth violence, and many of its principles have been incorporated into standard operating probation practice. As a result of the outstanding success of this police-probation partnership, many other jurisdictions in Massachusetts, as well as the rest of the country, have followed the lead of Operation Night Light and implemented their own similar programs. In Texas, this new initiative was named Project Spotlight.



Key Features of Project Spotlight:

- ◆ *Intense supervision (3-5 contacts per week)*
- ◆ *Reduced caseloads (10-15)*
- ◆ *Nontraditional work hours (often between 6 – 11 p.m.)*
- ◆ *Highly visible teams*
- ◆ *Enhanced educational and social services*
- ◆ *Emphasis on public safety through strict offender accountability*

The Implementation of Project Spotlight

Administration. The Texas Legislature designated seven of the most populous counties to receive annual grants: Bexar, Dallas, El Paso, Harris, Nueces, Tarrant, and Travis. Within each county, grant funds are managed by a lead agency. Counties employ interlocal agreements to assign responsibilities and share funds among the participating agencies. Contracts are used to purchase needed services from providers of prevention, education, and employment services.

Core to the concept is a team of three juvenile probation officers, adult supervision officers, and law enforcement officers. These nine individuals form the Project Spotlight team and are assigned to high-crime neighborhoods in their county to work together to provide youths and young adult probationers with intensive supervision and surveillance. The team members coordinate their efforts, share information with each other, and ensure that youths and young adults are held accountable for their actions while in the community. Electronic monitoring and regular drug testing are integral parts of the program.

In addition to the seven sites, the Criminal Justice Division awarded funds for the creation of a coordinating center. Located at the George J. Beto Criminal Justice Center at Sam Houston State University, the Center for Project Spotlight provides training forums, a quarterly newsletter, and on-site technical assistance. The Center is assisted by an advisory group of state and local officials with expertise in the fields of probation, law enforcement, education and employment, prevention, research, and evaluation.

Project Spotlight teams. Due to the inherent flexibility of the program, there is a great deal of variability in how individual counties implement the Project Spotlight mandate. Common to all is the three-agency team concept. Each county strives to maintain three teams of three individuals but there is some variation. Team members work together to provide comprehensive and intense supervision of probationers assigned to Project Spotlight. Information is shared between agencies,

and the result is a much more detailed and comprehensive understanding of each probationer and his or her needs.

Teams are assigned smaller than usual caseloads and are required to make frequent contacts. Many of these home visits are unannounced, and occur later in the day (6-11 p.m.). Law enforcement team members and, in certain jurisdictions, probation officers with weapons training, provide security. A typical day includes the possibility of court appearances, case management and paperwork, school or job visits, community activities, service coordination and consultation, and home visits. The level of technology employed varies from county to county; however, many counties have hand held radios, cell phones, pagers, laptop computers and digital cameras as aids.

In order to increase awareness of Project Spotlight, team members conduct internal presentations for their own departments, as well as meet with local judges, prosecutors, and civic groups. Providing information about Project Spotlight to various agencies and professionals involved in juvenile justice increases referrals and adds an effective alternative to sentencing options. As is the case with any large-scale, coordinated effort, it is absolutely critical that agency management, as well as local judges and policymakers, are informed about and supportive of the Project Spotlight mandate.

Program Benefits

Interagency collaboration. Traditionally, a major obstacle to the effective monitoring and supervision of offenders has been the lack of communication and coordination of resources between juvenile and adult correctional agencies and law enforcement. Each agency spends a great deal of resources to provide supervision and services to juvenile and young adult offenders, and yet, they are often missing vital pieces of information, duplicating efforts, or, sometimes, even working at cross purposes. Project Spotlight brings police and probation together so that information may be shared and supervision enhanced in a productive and efficient manner.

Building partnerships. Project Spotlight not only offers law enforcement and probation agencies a practical solution to the problem of offender supervision, it also stresses community involvement and the coordination of multiple resources. Neighborhood organizations, social services, and local businesses are all encouraged to assist in building a stronger community, as well as a continuum of services for Project Spotlight probationers and their families. Finally, the community itself is expected and encouraged to become involved in the reintegration of probationers back into their neighborhoods and schools. Only through this collaboration of multiple parties is the offender provided with an effective support



system and a way of reversing the pattern of offending behavior.

Effective crime prevention. By monitoring probationers closely, Project Spotlight is able to revoke probation swiftly for those offenders who choose to continue committing crimes. By making three to five (and sometimes more) contacts per week, teams are highly visible and well aware of the neighborhood and probationer activities. The protection of the public is a high priority for Project Spotlight, and teams will not hesitate to enforce conditions of probation.

Program Success

In its quarterly newsletters—*Project Spotlight News In Brief*—the Center for Project Spotlight publishes the small victories as well as big breaks reported by participating counties. These success stories include the following:

- ◆ **Positive life change:** Travis County received a public ‘thank you’ from a probationer who believes his life was turned around by the personal involvement of the Project Spotlight team. In a letter read in open court, the youth stated, “if there was no such thing as Spotlight I would have still been stealing and selling dope—headed straight for prison.... Project Spotlight shows you the right way to make money... [It] made a man out of me. I really enjoyed myself at the UT vs. SW basketball game.... You can tell... [the] probation officers really do care about us and they are really trying to help us. Project Spotlight you’ve changed my life and I just want to say thank you!”
- ◆ **Large seizures:** Nueces County Project Spotlight personnel, operating on a tip about a probationer in violation, were able to seize a 25-caliber pistol, ammunition, drug scales, 11 pounds of marijuana, and 126 grams of cocaine. Although this probationer was not assigned to Project Spotlight, officers often do courtesy checks for other Community Supervision Officers. This incident demonstrates that cooperation really pays off! Also in April 2002, Harris County made a significant seizure during an initial home visit. After detecting a faint scent of marijuana, and obtaining consent, officers searched the home and seized 4 pounds of marijuana, 21.2 grams of cocaine, nearly \$4000 in cash, a 12-gauge shotgun with rotary magazine, a sword, and a dagger. Project Spotlight endorses a tough stance on violators—before he had even begun the program, the probationer was arrested!
- ◆ **Community involvement:** Early in 2001, the Ysleta Community Outreach Center opened in El Paso. A significant portion of the funding for the Center came from a Project Spotlight supplemental grant for education and employment services. Many times services are desperately needed in those communities that Project Spotlight serves—communities that often have few resources of their own. Grant funds provide the opportunity for youth

and young adults to, for example, earn their GED and/or vocational training, receive substance abuse counseling, enroll in parenting classes, and engage gang intervention services. Other services include a crisis and domestic violence shelter, victim services, and a runaway resolution program.

- ◆ **Building partnerships:** Project Spotlight in Dallas County has partnered with a private organization, Southwest Behavioral Systems, Inc. (BSI), to provide a diverse range of services to probationers. Responding to a call for a wrap-around service provider, BSI rose to the challenge, providing such services as psychological assessments and counseling, career development, substance abuse treatment, minority health services, and academic remediation. BSI objectives dovetail nicely with Project Spotlight goals—progress is measured in terms of reduced recidivism, commitment to education and/or vocational training, obtained employment, and improved family, school, and community relationships.
- ◆ **National awareness:** In 2001, Bexar County entertained a film crew from CBS’ 48 Hours. The TV news show was producing a documentary focusing on contemporary probation practices. Project Spotlight was highlighted, along with the Gang Unit, and provided the nation with an opportunity to witness an innovative and groundbreaking program here in Texas.

The above noted stories are just a small sample of the excellent work accomplished by Project Spotlight teams across Texas. Every day, teams in every county face daunting challenges and often succeed in making a difference in the lives of young probationers. Their dedication and commitment to the goals of Project Spotlight are to be commended.

Challenges Facing Project Spotlight

Legislative support. As is the case with many innovative and large-scale programs requiring multi-agency cooperation, the first few years represent a learning curve. Although the “big picture” model may be conceptually solid, most programs require some degree of fine-tuning, as front line workers report back on what works and what needs improvement. Project Spotlight is committed to reinventing police-probation partnerships to provide greater public safety and reduce crime. The Governor’s Office has demonstrated its forward-thinking commitment to pioneering criminal justice endeavors by providing the resources to push forward with this groundbreaking partnership. The continued commitment and support of the Criminal Justice Division will ensure the ability of Project Spotlight to grow and mature, consistent with other regional models, such as Boston’s Operation Night Light. That program has been in existence for over a decade and has effected a dramatic reduction of crime while positively intervening in the lives of at-risk juveniles. Project Spotlight, in the few years it has been in existence, has also



made a positive difference in the lives of probationers and the communities they live in. However, success is only ensured by the determined, consistent, and unwavering support of all invested parties.

Measuring program success. In assessing the effectiveness of Project Spotlight, the one question all parties would pose is simple: Does it work? Unfortunately, the answer is much more complex.³ Initial performance outcome measures originally proposed by the legislature were discarded when the Criminal Justice Policy Council produced a report suggesting that the measures were unrealistic, vague, and illogical (November, 2001). As a result, new measures were adopted. By 2002, Project Spotlight teams were focusing on new, more realistic outcome measures. They include the following:

Project Spotlight Outcome Measures

- ◆ *Percentage offenders who successfully complete Project Spotlight*
- ◆ *Percentage successful completers who are re-adjudicated/convicted for offenses that occur within one year following completion*
- ◆ *Average number of contacts per offender, monthly*
- ◆ *Number of contacts made with community*
- ◆ *Percentage of offender families who are referred to services*
- ◆ *Total number of offenders supervised in Project Spotlight*

Although these new performance measures are more realistic and attainable, there is still a large amount of information regarding the positive effect of Project Spotlight that is not captured by current measures. In many ways, it is the age-old “numbers game,” in which front line workers are convinced of the worth of a program, yet struggle to demonstrate its efficacy with standardized reporting data.

A new definition of success. Across the state, counties are devising and implementing fresh new ways to service the community while maintaining strict community supervision standards. Many of these initiatives go unrecognized at the state level—but communities are aware that Project Spotlight has invested in them! One example is found in Corpus Christi. The Nueces County Community Supervision and Corrections Department devised a creative way to clean up neighborhoods, while providing work for offenders in the community. Crack houses and methamphetamine labs were providing a breeding ground for crime and decay in a number of areas. Seeing the opportunity to meet many needs at once, Nueces County volunteered to work with the Habitat for Humanity ‘Re-Store’ Program. A lease on an abandoned

warehouse was given to Project Spotlight, which soon staffed the endeavor with offenders. Working in conjunction with Habitat for Humanity, Project Spotlight put probationers to work demolishing former drug houses and recycling parts to be used for new housing for local homeless individuals. In one original idea, three different objectives were served: (a) a focus on cleaning up communities, (b) the provision of meaningful work for offenders in the community, and (c) provision of services to the disadvantaged by constructing housing for the homeless.⁴

The Nueces County example is just one of many challenges met by Project Spotlight teams across Texas on a daily basis. Did this one project positively impact the local community? Almost definitely. And yet, will the value of such service be reflected in the standardized data reported every quarter? Probably not. In fact, “[i]t is difficult to evaluate such initiatives, especially to attribute one type of activity to, say, the cause of a reduction in crime. In order to prevent programs from being doomed for failing to meet predetermined quantitative targets, perhaps attempts should be made to measure the success of programs by other measurements, such as qualitative ones.”⁵ The challenge of assessing the success of a program based on qualitative measures is no easy task. However, “innovative programs tend to be dynamic and organic. What develops from the input may not actually have been conceived from the outset of the idea.”⁶ In many ways, the Project Spotlight initiatives have resulted in many unforeseen positive outcomes. The challenge, now, is how to assess and report that kind of success.

The Future of Project Spotlight

Project Spotlight is poised to expand its role and focus on relevant and timely issues in 21st century police-probation partnerships. Due to its inherently flexible structure, Project Spotlight can respond in an integrated fashion to concerns and issues from both corrections and the community. As the program continues to evolve, it will be necessary to incorporate new ideas into the existing framework of community supervision.

New ideas. Drawing from the success of the pioneering Boston-based Operation Night Light and others, a number of initiatives are presented for consideration. The common theme, which runs through each of these endeavors, is simple: address the problem before it happens. This approach necessitates a new way of thinking as opposed to waiting until a youth has entered the justice system. Professionals are encouraged to proactively seek solutions to the challenges faced by children who are often the victims of unstable, violent, or impoverished life circumstances. Understanding the special needs of youth at-risk for delinquency requires the input and cooperation of all agencies tasked with children’s welfare.



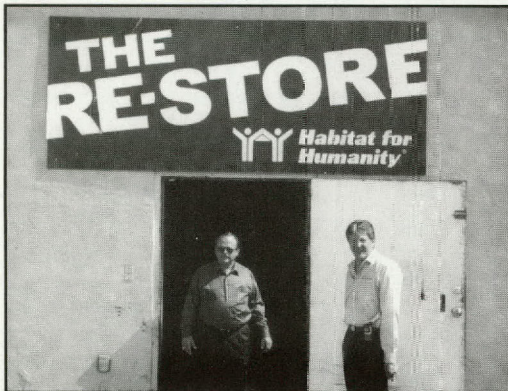
Bexar County Project Spotlight teams employed their own marked vehicles. Greater visibility ensures that offenders in their communities are aware of being closely monitored.



By putting young offenders to work, Project Spotlight probationers help to maintain their communities.



Contraband seized during a Project Spotlight home visit.



Project Spotlight joined forces with Habitat for Humanity in Nueces County.



The Calderon Boy's and Girl's Club Boxing Program in Bexar County now partially supported by Project Spotlight prevention funds. This is just one example of Project Spotlight's gang-deterrence initiatives.



In many ways, Project Spotlight already incorporates elements of the below noted programs. However, devoting resources and personnel to expanding and formalizing these initiatives may allow for a more integrated and effective delivery of services.

Proactive community intervention. An innovative, proactive approach was adopted by Suffolk County in 1994. By instituting the Community Based Juvenile Justice (CBJJ) program,⁷ the District Attorney's office undertook the task of intervening in the lives of youths at-risk for becoming delinquent. The original purpose of CBJJ was to reduce juvenile crime, increase school and community safety, and provide effective intervention services for at-risk youths. Rather than acting after the youth has offended, CBJJ takes a proactive stance assuming that, by introducing positive options early, future risk of offending may be reduced. In order to do so, regular meetings are held with Youth Services, Social Services, police, probation, schools, and the DA's office. Identified juveniles who appear in need of services are discussed and, based upon the input from all participating professionals, appropriate interventions are recommended. Either the agency that interacts most frequently with the youth, or the agency to which the juvenile is referred, assumes responsibility for tracking the progress of the child. This innovative program seeks to encourage non-profit and community participation, believing the most successful interventions for youth will involve resources close to home and easily accessible.⁸

By effectively incorporating a program such as CBJJ, professionals can meet the goal of positively supporting the family members of probationers who might otherwise be negatively influenced by the behaviors of the offender. By providing not only effective supervision of probationers, but also proactive, meaningful support for younger siblings, Project Spotlight can demonstrate its commitment to enhancing the safety of the community while providing positive, pro-social opportunities for children in disadvantaged circumstances.

Gang intervention and deterrent programs. In 1991, Arizona police and ATF developed a groundbreaking program for youth to deter gang involvement as a means of curbing rising rates of juvenile violence. Police and ATF agents created a specialized, school-based gang prevention curriculum that places law enforcement officers in middle schools to teach children about the risks and criminal costs of gang involvement. Gang Resistance Education and Training (G.R.E.A.T.) is a nine-week, national prevention program that has been credited with dramatically reducing youth crime in various areas that have implemented it.⁹ Each Project Spotlight jurisdiction has been allocated funding as part of a gang prevention initiative out of the Governor's Office. Although counties have discretion in how they choose to utilize funds,

organized broad-based programs like G.R.E.A.T. certainly seem worthy of consideration.

Vocational training and employment assistance. A common theme voiced by front line workers in juvenile justice is the lack of viable alternatives for youth facing high unemployment with poor vocational training. Once again, the Boston model has demonstrated a new solution to an old problem. The Boston Jobs Project¹⁰ grew out of the struggle to assist youths who wished to turn their lives around, but were faced with many closed doors, and few options. The Jobs Project drew together at-risk youths, law enforcement, juvenile justice, community businesses and leaders, and clergy. The Boston project acknowledged the importance of providing positive, stable, and productive alternatives to a criminal lifestyle:

It is no easy task—these young people are alienated from community, school, church and family. They face an environment lacking in adult role models, a labor market where living wage jobs are out of their reach, and a peer culture that dismisses educational achievement. The goal of the Jobs Project is to build a bridge to the city's surging economy for these youth who enjoy the fewest advantages and bear the greatest problems. The Jobs Project is built on the concept that a job connects a young person not only to the mainstream economy, but also provides access to education and skill building that will allow him/her to move toward a career goal and self-sustaining income. The ultimate outcome will be declining rates of youth violence and truancy, unemployment and poverty in our communities.¹¹

This innovative program draws together resources at all levels; case managers orchestrate the delivery of services and monitor the progress of the juvenile. Alternative schooling is provided for at-risk youths—who by definition are often academically deficient—concurrent with vocational training. With the support of municipal officials, a network of businesses willing to hire and train youths provides jobs for first time workers. This on-the-job training is often invaluable in providing a stepping-stone to gainful employment elsewhere. By providing the necessary tools, the Jobs Project ensures that at-risk youths have the opportunity to support themselves thereby reducing dependence on a criminal lifestyle.

Conclusion

Contemporary crime reduction programs rely heavily on successful multi-agency partnerships to deliver beneficial outcomes. The development of such partnerships is at the core of Project Spotlight, an innovative program currently operating in seven Texas jurisdictions. The objectives of this



initiative are to reduce crime in specific neighborhoods and to hold offenders on probation accountable for their actions while in the community. To achieve these objectives, Project Spotlight brings together professionals from the law enforcement community, juvenile probation departments, and community supervision and corrections departments.

The Project Spotlight program, still in its infancy, has nonetheless demonstrated its value in improving both the neighborhoods and the quality of life of individuals in communities affected by crime. A continued investment in the Project Spotlight mandate will allow the program to demonstrate its long-term efficacy in promoting public safety and ensuring offender accountability. The importance of this mandate has been recognized not only by front line workers, but also by influential leaders. The *Dallas Morning News* recently quoted Senator Royce West, instrumental in securing initial funding for Project Spotlight, and a strong advocate for the program:

We can take the time and put the necessary resources into providing positive alternatives for our youth today, or we can absorb the cost of housing them at the Texas Youth Commission and the Texas Department of Criminal Justice later in life. I can assure you it's cheaper to put the resources in now than it is to pay to house them for the rest of their lives.¹²

The core philosophy of Project Spotlight embodies this proactive stance. With continued support, it will persevere in its mission to provide intensive and effective community supervision—making Texas' neighborhoods safer for all citizens.

The Center for Project Spotlight is staffed by the Correctional Management Institute of Texas (CMIT) and the Bill Blackwood Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas (LEMIT), at Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, Texas. Program personnel include Dan Richard Beto, Director; David Webb, LEMIT Representative; Phillip Lyons, LEMIT Representative; Sue Godboldt, Program Assistant; and Karen Kalmbach, Program Assistant.

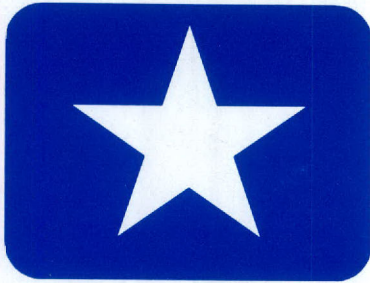
Additional information about Project Spotlight may be obtained by contacting the Center for Project Spotlight at (936) 294-3916 or (936) 294-3073. Alternatively, you may visit Project Spotlight's website at: <http://www.projectspotlight.org>. The website provides a wide range of information with links to numerous sites. Also provided are complete descriptions of local Project Spotlight projects and resources available in each participating county.

Endnotes

- ¹Project Spotlight Website <<http://www.projectspotlight.org>>
- ²The Boston Strategy, Overview <<http://www.bostonstrategy.com/overview/reason.html>>
- ³David Webb (2002). Innovative Youth Offender Programs—Doomed in Success? *Crime & Justice International* 18, no. 66(2002): 9-10.
- ⁴Webb, p. 10.
- ⁵Ibid.
- ⁶Ibid.
- ⁷Community Based Juvenile Justice <http://www.bostonstrategy.com/programs/06_CommunityBasedJuv.html>
- ⁸Ibid.
- ⁹Gang Resistance Education and Training <http://www.bostonstrategy.com/programs/08_great.html>
- ¹⁰The Boston Jobs Project <http://www.bostonstrategy.com/programs/02_BostJobsProj.html>
- ¹¹Ibid.
- ¹²Ed Housewright, "Program Putting At-risk Youths in the Spotlight: Delinquency Plan Focuses on Dallas ZIP Code," *Dallas Morning News*, June 4, 2000.

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