



SOLANO COUNTY GRAND JURY
2014 - 2015

CALIFORNIA STATE PRISON-SOLANO
YOUTH DIVERSION
PRISONER'S OUTREACH PROGRAM

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I. SUMMARY

On March 26, 2015 members of the grand jury attended the Prisoner's Outreach Program (POP) program at California State Prison-Solano (CSP Solano). POP, established in 2008, is a voluntary community program operated by inmates and staff at CSP Solano. Up to three sessions are scheduled each month. CSP emphasizes that "POP is not a scared straight" program. The main goal of POP is strategically aimed at empowering the youth and their parent(s)/guardian(s) into honestly looking at their behavior and into themselves; therefore, gaining the necessary awareness and sense of responsibilities needed to take charge of their life and make positive changes for their future. POP does not judge, shame, humiliate or force anyone into change. POP is not used as a *punitive measure*. All parents/guardians and youth attending POP, do so voluntarily.

II. INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND

POP sessions are usually held on, but not limited to, Thursdays from 12:00 p.m. – 8:00 p.m. POP does neither replace good parenting, nor the work that youth and their guardians must do for themselves. One purpose of the program is to educate attendees about blind spots (unresolved feelings, thoughts, resentments and occurrences that are missed or swept under the rug) that can contribute to, or fuel, dysfunctional cycles like: gangs, addictions, domestic violence and trans-generational incarceration. An optional follow-up session is available.

POP presenters expose the attendees to the harsh realities of prison life, instead of glamorizing a criminal lifestyle. POP presenters also teach ways to break the barriers to communication and illustrate how their actions hurt the people who love them the most.

Youths are referred to the program by various schools, universities, law enforcement agencies, community centers and other interested departments and organizations or individuals. It is not necessary to be a part of any organization, agency or department to attend POP; anyone can apply to attend with their youth. POP is not limited to dealing only with at-risk youths. POP offers an educational experience for all attendee's.

III. METHODOLOGY

Attended an 8 hour Prisoner's Outreach Program (POP)

Reviewed

- Youth Diversion Prisoner's Outreach flyer

Interviewed

- Prison Staff
- Prisoners
- Four youths attending the program

IV. STATEMENT OF FACTS

There were four youths present. Two of the youths were from one family and were accompanied by their parents. One other youth was present with a parent. The fourth youth was unaccompanied, as it is not required to have a parent/guardian present. However sessions can service up to 20 youths per session. The session lasted approximately 8 hours. The session is more effective when the youth has a parent, family member, guardian, mentor or counselor present.

POP Members

POP members are inmates that must possess a genuine desire and aptitude to help at-risk youth. POP members are screened, interviewed and meet the highest standards of institutional conduct. POP members do not have any history of crimes against children or sex crimes of any sort. In order to earn the privilege of working directly with the public, members are required to go through a rigorous training process, consisting of several classes:

- Reflective listening
- Conflict resolution
- Child development
- Grief & loss
- Family dynamics
- Parenting
- Addiction studies
- Domestic violence

The POP membership consists of a variety of ethnicities, age groups and social strata. Some POP members grew up in the toughest neighborhoods in the state, and some were raised in prosperous suburbs. However different the social and criminal backgrounds may seem, all inmates made bad choices and decisions and took a wrong turn at one of the crossroads in life. POP believes that in every young person's actions or expressions, there is a message worth listening to. "POP members receive no special privileges or monetary compensation

for their participation. The members of POP invest their time and energy into the program because they care about young people. They believe that if one young person is prevented from initiating a life of crime, their efforts have been worthwhile”.

There were 15 POP inmates during the session the Grand Jury attended. Most sentences were for life and over 9 inmates were there for murder. The cumulative time in prison for these mentors was over 300 years.

The Prisoner’s Outreach Program:

- *Identifies possible barriers to change and promotes healthy communication between youth and their guardians*
- *Uses assertive communication and offers objective feedback while discussing real-life issues that affect the youth and their guardians.*
- *Has unique ways of challenging behavior without judging, which they have termed “Carefrontation”, rather than confrontation. “We are no one to judge you. We will communicate honestly and respectfully”.*
- *Strives to educate guests about decisions, choices, consequences, prison life and resources available to them, including support groups and community programs. POP members also share their experiences, hoping to deter youth from a life of crime and further family dysfunction.*

DAY OF THE SESSION

The session begins with attendees being escorted by POP members and staff on a tour of the prison. The youth are in two lines and centered between two lines of inmates. Attendees get a first-hand look at overcrowded and controlled living. They also see where inmates eat, sleep, work and sometimes die. Attendees can feel the fear, loneliness, shame and pain experienced when one loses his or her freedom.

After the tour, the POP members introduced themselves, and attendees heard from former gang members, drug dealers, addicts, robbers and murderers. POP worked with attendees, discussing real-life issues such as drugs, alcohol, gangs, peer-pressure, bullying, addiction, violence and other negative influences. POP emphasized the importance of family, school, communication, choices and consequences, self-respect and how to gravitate toward positive influences.

POP has been successful in providing a judgment-free environment where attendees discuss the motivating factors behind their destructive, maladaptive behavior. Attendees are encouraged to openly discuss their thoughts and feelings surrounding their choices and the resulting consequences.

POP is nothing like what you see on television's "Scared Straight" program. The inmates who volunteer for the POP program spoke with the attendees in a calm and non-combative manner. Each of the inmates shared their history that brought them to CSP. The youths were asked to share their reason for being in the program. Initially sharing was a problem; however, they did eventually open up regarding their family, school, peer and gang affiliation, where applicable.

Each of the four youths sat at a separate table with two POP inmates. Approximately 90 minutes was spent exchanging dialog. After the 90 minutes the person who came with the child joined at the table. The POP inmate shared what was discussed and allowed an open dialog. When the meeting ended one could tell the direct effect it had on the visitors by observing a more open dialog, tears and hugs.

Below are thoughts conveyed by members:

- ❖ They are responsible for their actions...
- ❖ Stop, Look and Listen...
- ❖ He joined a gang and was told to murder someone, and he did...
- ❖ Your current situation doesn't determine who you are or your future. You can change...
- ❖ At 18 he thought he was invincible...
- ❖ Buried feelings turned into anger...
- ❖ Feels loneliness daily.
- ❖ Criminals don't care about criminals.
- ❖ Guilt feelings for the death of his wife who was driving to see him in prison.
- ❖ Felt nobody cared about him.
- ❖ 10 years ago done with gangs and homey's upset and they rushed him and he defended himself.
- ❖ I took the life of an innocent human being.

It is CSP's belief **"A healthy relationship between a young person and their parent/guardian is essential to that young person's emotional growth and ability to positively change."**

It is CSP's hope that **"our guests leave the program with a greater awareness of themselves, and understanding something new about the consequences of the choices they make."**

V. FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Finding 1

The POP program appears to be a non-threatening way to exchange dialog as to the consequences of poor lifestyle choices.

Recommendation 1

Continue to run the program, which will be of value to the community, youths as well as inmates.

Finding 2 –

The POP program is in need of follow-up with the youth referral agencies to determine the success of the program.

Recommendation 2 –

CSP and referral agencies should obtain post program follow-up to determine if the program was beneficial. It is recommended this information be obtained within 180 days after the program session.

REQUIRED RESPONSES

None required

COURTESY COPIES

Clerk, Solano County Board of Supervisors

California State Prison – Solano

Solano County Probation Department

Health & Social Services

Police Departments

- Benicia
- City of Suisun
- Dixon
- Fairfield
- Rio Vista
- Vacaville
- Vallejo