

Little Hoover Commission Hearing Testimony

Thursday, September 26, 2013

0930 hours

Ronald Reagan Building Auditorium
300 South Spring Street
Los Angeles, CA 90012

Speaker:

Chief of Police Charlie Beck

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Good morning. As Chief of Police of the Los Angeles Police Department, I am honored to appear before this esteemed Commission. The Little Hoover Commission is well-known by those of us in public safety as a body of individuals who collectively work to investigate, report, and give meaningful recommendations on matters that improves the quality of life for all of us who live in this great state.

The subject before this Commission today, California's Prison Realignment Act, represents one of this state's most critical issues that, while still in its infancy, is poised to make the most profound change in the criminal justice system since the adoption of the "Three-strikes" legislation some twenty years ago. As identified in the Commission's invitation for me to appear today, Los Angeles County is home to approximately one-third of the state's prison population, one-third of the state's offenders on Post Release Community Supervision (PSPs), and approximately forty percent of the state's "triple non-offenders", also known as N3s. A full one-third of all of the offenders released into Los Angeles County, whether as a PSP or N3, reside in the City of Los Angeles. Therefore, as Chief of Police, I have been keenly interested in the underlying philosophy and origin of prison realignment, as well as the practical impact on those involved and our neighborhoods and communities in Los Angeles.

Prison Realignment sprang from two necessities: downsizing our woefully overcrowded prisons and breaking the vicious cycle of recidivism where two-thirds of those released from prison would find themselves rearrested within three years. As Chief of Police, I recognize and support the need to achieve both ambitions. I have also worked aggressively with my criminal justice system partners to ensure the record crime reduction experienced in Los Angeles over the last decade was not lessened as a result of Realignment.

I have been frequently asked about the potential impact on public safety with the implementation of Realignment. Defining the potential has never been a challenge. If successful, Realignment offers our communities, as well as those incarcerated by our criminal justice system, a better tomorrow. However, success requires more than transforming the mindset from "long-term incarceration and punishment" as consequences of crime, to "treatment services and community supervision". Providing the motivation and effective services that successfully redirects individuals away from preying on the public is much harder in application.

This is where the difficulties lay with Realignment today. Over time we have seen how ineffective our prison system has been in changing behavior. Now with the shift of responsibility from state to local government for both the incarceration and subsequent community supervision, it is upon us to do all we can to provide a more effective solution.

Here in Los Angeles County I am encouraged that we have a Sheriff who has taken the enlightened approach of using an individual's time incarcerated to improve their life skills and move them away from their dependency on narcotics and alcohol. Los Angeles Sheriff Leroy Baca's Education Based Incarceration is providing inmates valuable life skills rather than simply punishment as retribution for the crimes they have committed. I have reviewed the program and am confident it is already playing a significant role in improving the chances of an individual once they are back on the streets.

Similarly, Los Angeles County Probation Chief Jerry Powers and his Department have demonstrated their commitment to building an effective community-based services system that provides the needed treatment services and supervision on reentry to ensure these individuals stay on a path of recovery and succeed.

In Los Angeles today, we have, in theory, two vital ingredients: effective rehabilitation while incarcerated and community supervision strategies that offer to produce better results. While there has been much written on such initiatives in other states, I am unaware of anyone attempting to do this work on the scale or compressed timeframe as here in California and specifically Los Angeles County.

What is missing in the formula for Los Angeles has been the number of personnel to accomplish the plan as I have described, particularly community supervision. This is largely the result of the extremely short time frame in which this seismic shift of responsibility has occurred. The second challenge has been the scope of Realignment. Not just with the release of PSPs back into the community, but in sentencing changes for new arrestees known as N3s and what services and community supervision will be available upon their release from county jail.

In addressing these challenges, the Los Angeles Police Department has played a significant role in filling the gap that has resulted from there simply not being enough Probation Department or Sheriff's Department resources to fulfill the responsibilities. Neither agency has the needed resources in place to adequately supervise PSP individuals released back into our communities. Without regular supervision and consequences for those who fail to live up to their responsibilities, these offenders would likely return to committing new crimes and endanger public safety. For these reasons, I chose to realign a sizeable portion of my Department's resources to focus on this returning population in the hopes of reinforcing effective community supervision and to quickly identify those who were destined to reoffend. This was not an easy decision given the already significant demands on my Department; however, it has been the right decision. Over the last nearly two-years, we have repeatedly seen that absent our work, individual PSP offenders would not have been held accountable for their actions and public safety would have suffered.

In going about our work, our personnel has worked closely with the Probation and Sheriff's Departments in identifying PSP offenders who would benefit the most from our added attention. To date, our dedicated and trained personnel have focused primarily on the Very High and High Risk classified offender categories as well as those absconders who have refused to comply with the conditions of their release from prison. Their work is not without its critics, but I am convinced that for Realignment to be a success we must have community supervision by professionals that are persistent and clear-eyed as to the strengths and weaknesses of those under supervision.

As for opportunities for improving realignment success here in Los Angeles County, my recommendations are simple and straightforward. Each of the twenty-one teams I have committed to this should have a full-time deputy probation officer working with them. Secondly, N3s that are currently being sentenced to county jail in lieu of state prison as part of Realignment should have a one-year mandatory term of community supervision as each PSP does today.

The addition of a full-time deputy probation officer to each team will add a critical capability to provide additional services to support individual PSPs while also providing additional access to information from Probation Department resources in real time. My Department uses this model of a multi-disciplinary team very successfully in dealing with gang members as well as task force operations on other crimes. I understand the shortage of personnel that the Probation Department has for all of their competing needs, but firmly believe the strategy to first staff these teams should be paramount in relationship to other duties in dealing with the PSP population.

As to the mandatory one-year term of community supervision for all N3s, I believe history is the best validation of the merits for this recommendation. Each N3 prior to Realignment was given a three-year term of parole upon their release from prison. With Realignment, those coming out of state prison (PSPs) are no longer on a mandatory three-year term. Rather, each could be supervised for as little as six-months or as long as three-years based on their conduct in the community. As stated earlier, here in Los Angeles County, Probation Chief Jerry Powers has wisely mandated that the minimum term be one-year of community supervision and support services. As we have seen in the first two years of Realignment, more than fifty percent of PSPs violate their terms of release or commit new offenses. N3 sentenced individuals are of the identical make-up and we should ensure that they are provided the necessary community supervision and support services upon their release from county jail, as do their PSP predecessors. To simply release these individuals without supervision or services is inconsistent with the founding principles of Realignment and will have a significant adverse impact on public safety today and in the future.

In closing, I would like to thank this Commission again for the invitation to speak before you today. Your work on this important subject will be viewed by many across the state as an unbiased and candid examination. It is my sincere hope that my testimony will add to the depth of your understanding and that you will find merit in my recommendations going forward.

CB

Provide a brief biography with submitted testimony