

Office of the Public Defender
City and County of San Francisco

Reentry Unit Social Work Services Program Evaluation
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EXCERPT

The San Francisco Public Defender's Office Reentry Unit provides clients with an innovative blend of legal, social, and practical support through three programs: Clean Slate Program, Children of Incarcerated Parents program, and the Social Work Services component. San Francisco's Reentry Unit represents an unprecedented effort by a Public Defender's Office to address clients' legal outcomes through a comprehensive social services support system. The San Francisco Public Defender's Office engaged LFA Group (formerly LaFrance Associates) to evaluate clients' legal and social outcomes as a result of their engagement with Public Defender Reentry Social Workers. The following research questions guided the evaluation:

Key Findings

Nearly all Reentry clients experience some form of victory through their participation in Social Work Services. Of the clients with some type of victory during their engagement with Reentry Social Work Services, almost all (98%) saw improvement in their legal cases over the likely sentence they would have faced without Reentry Social Worker services: these defendants had less severe sentences (for example, jail instead of prison; program or probation instead of jail) and in some cases shorter sentences, and experienced other legal victories such as early release from a jail sentence. They also experienced personal and social successes such as becoming ready to seek drug treatment.

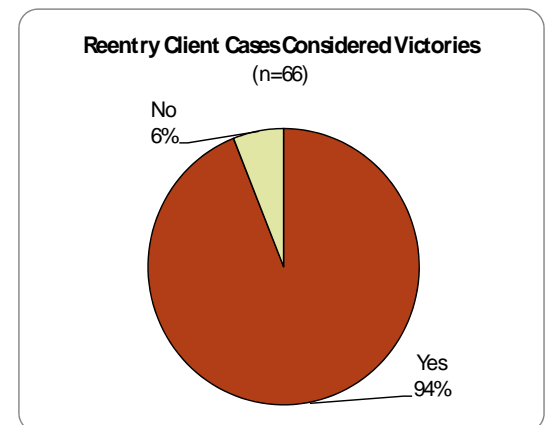
- ❖ **Reentry clients are less likely to be sentenced to prison.** Of those Reentry clients facing a prison sentence, 83% received an alternate sentence, allowing them to avoid prison. More than one-quarter (29%) who had been facing a potential jail sentence were given an alternative sentence that allowed them to avoid incarceration altogether. Comparison group cases were more than five and a half times more likely to receive a prison sentence than those receiving Reentry Unit Social Work Services.
- ❖ **Reentry clients experience reduced sentence lengths.** Reentry clients who did not receive less severe sentence placements did receive sentences that represented shorter time spent in prison or jail than they could have faced. The few clients originally facing prison who in fact received a prison sentence saw their sentence reduced from an average of nearly 5 years to an average of less than 3 years. For those facing jail who received jail sentences, average sentence length shrank from one full year to nine months.
- ❖ **The impact of Reentry Social Worker support is evident even beyond sentencing.** Almost half (49%) of Reentry clients sentenced to jail were awarded early release from San Francisco County Jail.
- ❖ **Reentry client legal outcomes result in significant cost savings for the criminal justice system.** The combination of alternative sentences and shortened sentences cumulate in a significant amount of prison and jail days avoided by Reentry clients. Prison days avoided because of the reduced prison sentence length and alternate sentencing that Reentry clients experience translates into a cost savings of \$57,788,640 for the California State Prison system.

83% of Reentry clients facing a prison sentence received an alternate sentence, allowing them avoid prison.

❖ **Interviews with key stakeholders reveal that the impact of Reentry Social Worker court advocacy is widely recognized, and that the location of social workers in the Office of the Public Defender is valuable:**

- Reentry Social Workers provide support for attorneys to focus on the legal aspects while ensuring that clients' social services needs are met.
- Reentry Social Workers provide expertise which helps judges understand client circumstances and understand what programs will be successful for a client.
- Public Defender Attorneys utilize the important services the Reentry Social Workers provide and call for the expansion of the Reentry Unit Social Work Services program. Being located within the Office of the Public Defender, Social Workers' expertise and linkages are more easily accessed by others involved in clients' cases, including clients themselves.
- Communication and relationship-building among all aspects of clients' legal and social stakeholders – from judges and district attorneys to Public Defender Attorneys and social services providers – is improved by the location of the social workers in the Office of the Public Defender.
- Reentry Social Workers provide high-quality work with their clients resulting in improved legal and social outcomes within a relationship that fosters trust and support for clients.

Overall, nearly all (94%) Reentry Social Work clients experienced some form of victory in the sample of cases evaluated (see Exhibit 8). Of the clients with some type of victory during their engagement with Reentry Social Work Services, almost all (98%) saw improvement in their *legal* cases over the likely sentence they would have faced without Reentry Social Worker services: these defendants had less severe sentences (for example, jail instead of prison; program or probation instead of jail) and in some cases shorter sentences, and experienced other legal victories such as early release from a jail sentence. Personal and social victories attained in client cases included successes such as clients attending all their medical or other appointments, deciding to seek drug treatment, and achieving detoxification from substances.



Overall, Public Defender clients who are linked to

Reentry Social Workers experience improved legal outcomes through Reentry Social Worker court advocacy, which educates judges and district attorneys, strengthens the legal team, and facilitates clients' alternatives to incarceration.

For full report go to: <http://sfpublicdefender.org>