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Cuts threaten a new probation program that offers a path away from gangs

L.A. County's pilot program, the Day Reporting Center, gives gangbangers the tools they need to change their lives. But it may lose its funding.

By Alexandra Zavis, Los Angeles Times

June 4, 2010

Mario Farmer was just 13 when he started gangbanging in South Los Angeles.

By 15 he was stealing cash and cellphones. When he was released from a Los Angeles County Jail last fall at 21, his mother feared he was headed in one of two directions: back to prison or to an early grave.

But instead of returning to his old ways, Farmer moved out of the neighborhood and enrolled in a job search program.

"I feel like I got a new beginning," he said, "a fresh start in life."

The chance to turn his life around came through the [Day Reporting Center](#), a new kind of probation program that officials believe can help reduce California's alarming recidivism rates and address [overcrowding in the state prison system](#). About 40% of new prison admissions — nearly 20,000 people each year — are felony probationers who commit new crimes or violate the terms of their sentences.

"What this program does is offer the support, the resources, the education for someone to make a real change and difference in their lives," said the county's Deputy Chief Probation Officer, Cal Remington. "It's just a better way to do business."

Of the 80 men who completed the state-funded pilot program after it was launched in late 2008, 65 have found jobs or contract work, four have joined vocational programs, three are in college, one is looking for a placement and seven re-offended.

But despite some early successes, L.A. County probation officials don't know if they can raise the money to keep the center open when the pilot funding runs out in August. The department, under pressure to close a projected \$36.5-million deficit and improve juvenile care, did not include the program in its budget request for next year.

Although the department's rehabilitation efforts were traditionally focused on juvenile offenders,

research suggests that some adults can also be persuaded to turn away from crime, said Ed Johnson, a senior probation director who oversees the pilot program. But this takes time and resources not typically available to L.A. County probation officers who, he said, might supervise as many as 350 offenders at a time.

Most adult probationers are seen once a month for about 10 or 15 minutes. But at the Day Reporting Center, six deputy probation officers supervise about 150 offenders, who attend sessions three or four times a week at a converted furniture factory in South Park.

Jesus Escobar, a 22-year-old who has been on and off probation since he was 15 for tagging buses, said he never had a mentor until he was assigned to the center's Gabriel Perez.

Growing up in Watts, Escobar used to bicycle past USC and dream of going to college. He never finished high school. But Perez encouraged him to take community college classes and helped him apply to USC.

"He believed in me," Escobar said. "I was just motivated from that point."

The day before graduating from the Day Reporting Center in May 2009, Escobar learned that he had been admitted to USC. He is majoring in sociology and political science and considering law school.

At the center, new arrivals are matched with needed services, including mental health and substance abuse counseling, preparation classes for the high school equivalency test, computer training and career guidance.

All the probationers — or clients, as they are known at the center — are required to attend classes on moral reasoning, anger management and life skills. These are led by specially trained deputy probation officers and frequently bring together rival gang members. To everyone's surprise, there have been no fights.

But staffers acknowledge that they can't help everyone. Of the 230 men assigned to the center so far, 69 did not complete the six- to nine-month program because they committed new crimes, violated the rules, failed to show up or requested permission to quit. Nineteen others left because their probation was terminated early, and 12 moved out of the area. The staff could not say how many were sent to prison.

Those who have stuck with the program often say they do so for the chance to find work. Many of them have wives, girlfriends and children to support.

Erick Cerda, the center's employment resource coordinator, has helped probationers find office, construction and maintenance jobs. When he walked into a session with an armful of ties, the tattooed young men seated before him in jeans and T-shirts looked skeptical.

Cerda pointed out that whenever there was a gang shooting, the images broadcast on TV were of

people who looked like them.

"If I'm an employer and I see you coming looking like that, you think I think you're coming for a job?" he asked them. "No. I'm getting ready to call 911."

Soon, they were all fumbling with ties.

The program targets men ages 18 to 25 who have gang connections or live in gang hotspots. Although the age group makes up about 11% of the county population, its members commit nearly 30% of the crimes, according to figures provided by the probation department. Sex offenders and those convicted on gun charges are not admitted.

The program costs about \$7,000 per offender, far less than the \$45,000 price tag for a year in prison, said Reaver Bingham, a department deputy director.

It was established with \$5 million in state funding. Additional funding becomes available in mid-2011 for counties that demonstrate that they have kept probationers out of state prison. To keep the center open until then, the department obtained a grant that pays for probation staffers, but it still needs about \$700,000 to cover rent, security and programming costs, Bingham said.

If the funds cannot be raised, the department might have to close the center and run a more limited version of the program out of its regular offices, he said.

Deputy Probation Officer Victor Banuelos said he dreads the prospect of losing the one-stop center. "We can see it working," he said.

In May, the center celebrated the graduation of 23 probationers. Dressed in their sharpest suits and ties, the men filed into a hall packed with cheering relatives. Speeches were made and certificates handed out.

The occasion was especially poignant for one 21-year-old, who was mourning the death of his cousin's pregnant wife in an apparent gang shooting.

"I kind of didn't want to come today," said Leroy Johnson, a former gang member. "But my probation officer told me not to do something I'd regret."

Farmer was also there, holding up his certificate as his tearful mother snapped pictures.

"I haven't finished anything before," said Farmer, who dropped out of school. "It gives me hope that I can do something with my life."