

Parole Officers Undermanned, Overwhelmed

by Tony West

Exploding numbers of parolees and probationers are straining the Philadelphia Adult Probation and Parole Dept. to the breaking point.

Longer sentences imposed at the tail end of the last crime wave are expiring, releasing a flood of ex-offenders to the streets. To cope with the current crime wave, a bevy of state initiatives will increase the number of police officers, who, it is hoped, will be making more arrests ... which in the end will yield more candidates for probation and parole.

Sooner than that, another dam will burst when a Federal Court will rule the City of Philadelphia must reduce its prison population, probably by 2,000 or so.

All these forces mean probation and parole fated to play an increasing role in our criminal justice system. Unfortunately, probation/parole officers are in no shape to carry out this role.

Chief problem is an inadequate salary structure, charges Bob Zimmerman, head of AFSCME Local 810 which represents the 285 officers. "Out of the 15 largest counties in America, we are 8th in starting salary but last in maximum salary," says Zimmerman. A starting officer begins about \$6,000 above a City social worker, but maxes out \$6,000 below one.

As a result, Zimmerman says, his department is "hemorrhaging" employees. "When I first came in around 1980, it was a career," he relates, "decent pay, good benefits and working conditions. In the last eight years, we're in a 40% turnover rate every five years.

"Traditionally we lost officers to the Federal system," he says. "Today we are losing them to Bucks and Montgomery, where they get smaller caseloads and higher pay. Some just bail out of the criminal justice system."

Constant turnover means actual caseloads are much higher than they look to be on paper. "In reality, we don't know how many cases we have," laments Zimmerman. Officers have little time to learn their clients as they are shuffled and redistributed each time another officer quits.

This shortage of experienced hands in probation/parole couldn't come at a worse time for criminal justice system. The current wave of violent crime is largely confined to repeat offenders. One quarter of the victims and perpetrators of murder in 2006 were in the probation/parole system.

Politicians have been tripping over each other to expand the Police Dept. Probation and parole, by contrast, have been largely ignored. Notable exceptions are Mayoral candidate Bob Brady and President Judge C. Darnell Jones II, who have deplored poor staffing in PPD. Council Persons Jannie Blackwell, Dan Savage, Juan Ramos, Frank Rizzo and Bill Greenlee are starting quiet study of the problem.

At one time, PPD was oriented toward the neighborhoods where offenders live, work and stumble. But in the last decade, neighborhood offices have been closed and the officers concentrated in Center City. Increasingly, 1st Judicial Dist. management views their function as a paperwork-processing job. "But in reality, ours should be a 24/7

mission,” Zimmerman states. “You can’t do it from a cubicle. We have only a dozen or so cars available to us.

“We have totally lost touch with the community we serve.”

Without added personnel, adequate resources and a career track, society’s only way to monitor ex-offenders at risk of recidivism will grow increasingly futile and unsuccessful.