

# Interagency Collaboration in Juvenile Justice: Learning from Experience

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## Introduction

**S**TARTING IN the mid-1980s, juvenile violence became an important topic for policymakers, as illicit drug markets prompted increasing juvenile homicide rates and as experts predicted that demographic shifts in the youth population were likely to create even more crime in the future (Blumstein, 1995; Fox, 1996). Academics and practitioners quickly intensified their efforts to find better ways to decrease crime; one result was a focus on interagency collaboration as a promising mechanism for reducing juvenile offenses. In 1992, Hawkins, Catalano, and Associates published their influential *Communities that Care*, a comprehensive social development model for reducing juvenile delinquency (Hawkins, Catalano, and Associates 1992; see also Catalano and Hawkins 1996). This strategy was designed both to *decrease* environmental and individual risk factors for children (e.g., neighborhood social disorganization, poor parenting practices) and *increase* protective factors (e.g., social bonds, ability to resist peer pressure) for youth. The authors argued that one of the important requirements for this model to work effectively was a “high level of coordination and cooperation among service-providing professionals and concerned community members” (Hawkins, Catalano, and Associates, 1992: xiv).

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) soon began to recommend components of the *Communities that Care* model, including collaboration, as part of their comprehensive strategy for working with serious, violent, and chronic juvenile offenders (OJJDP 1995). The collaborative model is promoted widely for community agencies, such as probation, mental health, drug treatment programs, and other social service organizations (OJJDP 1999b). Some of this encouragement comes in the form of making interagency collaboration an important

requirement for funding programs. For example, an objective of one recent OJJDP funding notice was to “[e]ncourage collaborative working relationships among researchers, practitioners, and policymakers in the field of juvenile justice” (OJJDP 1999a: 40679).

In recent years, the state of California has provided funding to county probation agencies to develop new, collaborative approaches to reduce juvenile crime in their local communities. This was partly in response to concerns that unchecked juvenile crime would add pressure to state prison populations through Three Strikes (Little Hoover Commission 1998). In 1996, the California legislature created the Juvenile Crime and Accountability Challenge Grant Program, designed to fund comprehensive, interagency programs as a method of decreasing juvenile crime rates and increasing successful completion rates of probation, restitution, and community service among juveniles in the system. The Challenge Program provided competitive three-year demonstration grants administered through the Board of Corrections to probation agencies that joined with other local service providers to render a wide range of services to at-risk youth in their communities.<sup>1</sup>

Ventura County was awarded \$4.5 million over three years to implement the South Oxnard Challenge Project (SOCP). SOCP was designed as a collaborative, restorative justice program for youth 12–18 years of age, on probation, and living in South Oxnard, a largely Latino working-class area with the highest crime rate in the county. Among the goals of SOCP are reducing juvenile delinquency, increasing emphasis on families, and enhancing participation in juvenile justice by local residents. SOCP collaborating agencies include a range of county agencies, local community-based organizations, and community representatives—Ventura County Probation Agency is the lead agency and collaborates with Department of Child and Family Services, Behavioral Health Department (mental health and alcohol and drug programs), City Corps (community service), Oxnard Recreation Department, Oxnard Police Department, El Concilio De Condada De Ventura (a non-profit Latino advocacy organization), Interface Children Family Services (a non-profit social service organization), Palmer Drug Abuse Program, Ventura County Schools and some local residents and elected officials.

As part of the Challenge Grant program, all selected counties are required to collect implementation and outcome measures for participating youth. Ventura County contracted with RAND and Dr. Joan Petersilia to conduct a randomized field experiment, in which approximately 500

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youth were randomly assigned to SOCP or routine juvenile probation between January 1, 1998 and June 30, 1999. Data collection is still ongoing for the evaluation.

Throughout the evaluation, RAND staff have conducted participant observation of meetings and other project activities. This on-site involvement has allowed researchers to gain a detailed understanding of the process involved in creating new collaborations. In this article, we discuss the following implementation issues, which SOCP experience illustrates are critical to collaboration approaches:

- Collaborative Arrangement and Leadership
- Creating and Maintaining a Program Vision
- Daily Decisionmaking in a Collaborative Arrangement

Based upon lessons learned at SOCP, we hope to provide guidance to juvenile justice participants developing new programs involving interagency collaboration. As funding sources continue to push for interagency collaboration in the new millennium, we think it is important to build a knowledge base about the process involved in establishing effective and productive relationships.

### ***Collaborative Arrangement and Leadership***

Collaborative arrangements create unique challenges for participating agencies, even those who have a history of working together in previous projects as Ventura County does. SOCP experience indicates that the program's leadership and relationship structures are critical concerns at the outset when the program is initially envisioned and created. Important issues in the collaborative arrangement include the designation of lead and participating agencies, the levels of participation and role responsibilities, the scope and goals of evaluation, and interagency staff training.

#### *Lead and Participating Agencies*

Funding sources for justice programs now often require collaboration among certain types of agencies (e.g., government and community-based organizations) but expect one agency (often probation) to take the lead in applying for funding and administering the project. This initial grant structure can cause implementation problems for the lead agency in collaborative projects, because this agency maintains all fiscal responsibility to the funding entity but often shares decision-making and service implementation with other participants. Because of the implications of a shared power structure for daily project activities, the lead agency might carefully consider which specific agencies and community groups to include in joint projects. The choice of participants is especially crucial because the success of the project depends upon the ability of staff to work together toward a common vision and to administer services in a shared environment.

Collaborative projects are richer in content because they involve people with differing backgrounds and perspectives, but these inherent differences among participants can cause unique conflicts regarding program design and

implementation (which we discuss in later sections). SOCP experience illustrates that for collaboration to work well, participants must believe the joint project will serve their individual interests. In addition, "stakeholders must perceive that they have both high stakes and a high degree of interdependence with others that prohibits the unilateral solution of a problem" (Wood and Gray, 1991: 161). In essence, those involved must care a lot about the success of the project *and* be willing to trust that others involved can not only work toward that goal but are necessary to reaching it (Wood and Gray, 1991).

For example, SOCP experience indicates that without a financial stake in the outcome, agencies frustrated with the process may feel the perceived freedom to put less energy toward making the project work, toward following agreed-upon methods of practice, and toward ensuring staff cooperation with onsite management. SOCP also found that if people can agree on the bigger issues, such as the project's philosophical underpinnings and the importance of working together to solve the problem at hand, they may strongly disagree about the details but will still support each other in serving clients. In some locales, this ability to trust others will be colored by longstanding previous relationships among participating service providers (probation, schools, mental health, nonprofit organizations), which can greatly affect the ability of the agencies to work together. Participating agencies must be able to let go of previous animosities and compromise some of their individual interests for the greater needs of the project and its clients. Some collaborators in SOCP have found it difficult to forget about previous experiences with each other (i.e., to trust each other again) and to let go of the possible consequences of the current, temporary relationship on future relationships. For people or agencies who must work together in some capacity for many years (e.g., probation and the schools or city or county governments), short-term gains for projects like the three-year Challenge projects may not seem that important in the face of risking longer-term working relationships.

Another key decision is how to include community residents as collaborative partners. Community representatives add a new dimension to justice programs, and the community segment selected determines the "flavor" of the change. If the community is to be included, it is absolutely critical to define the relevant community (e.g., elected officials, business owners, activist organizations, ethnic leaders or populations, religious leaders, client parents, or the broader community as a whole) before beginning recruitment. Once the "community" is defined, collaborators could make strong efforts to recruit representative members of the chosen group. It helps to make this decision early to avoid confusion or false expectations later.

Another important consideration with respect to participating agencies and segments of the community is determining the length of the relationships. New projects might consider at the outset whether the contractual agreements between the parties will be for the entirety of the project or

whether they may change from year-to-year or as the project's components evolve. Part of the developed leadership structure should include provisions on which agency or agencies have the power to end relationships with participating agencies or particular staff should this become necessary.

#### *Levels of Participation and Role Responsibilities*

Once the agency and community participants are chosen, it is important to define very early the levels of participation they will have and what their roles will be. SOCP found that two levels of involvement were ideal—those who were centrally involved in project decision-making and those who were contracted to deliver specific services. For example, the SOCP model uses an interagency management team, consisting of primarily off-site managers from key participating agencies, who are responsible for making decisions about project philosophy, service delivery, and hiring line staff. Agencies that are interested in helping create a new vision and ensuring the project reaches its goals are important members of this broad management group. SOCP managers believe that this decision-making body is one of the strengths of the collaborative arrangement (see Wood and Gray, 1991).

Once the level of involvement is set, it is crucial to determine and agree upon the specific roles of all participants—agencies, managers, and line staff. New projects might consider the following questions. What specifically will partner agencies be expected to contribute? For example, will they simply provide staff to be managed by the lead agency or will they be expected to participate in managing them? Will they be expected to participate in decision-making about project implementation details? If managers are more involved, will they manage only their own staff or share these responsibilities? SOCP found joint on-site management by a subset of the larger management group was the ideal as long as communication and support among these supervisors was strong. And they found that their roles blurred as managers worked together to manage the blended group of staff. For example, probation managers consistently work with staff from other agencies, because most other managers are not housed on-site. Because line staff work in teams, managers from other agencies also work with probation officers and other staff to develop new ways to implement treatment strategies.

Defining and agreeing upon roles for line staff at the beginning is perhaps even more critical to maintaining program design integrity. Because collaborations are also usually “new,” many staff will feel they are on “uncharted ground” and will not know how to go about their work. Even most professional service providers have experience only within their disciplines—e.g., probation, mental health, or alcohol and drug treatment. Other staff (e.g., students, new college graduates) may not have any social service training or work experience at all. Without clearly defined roles when they start, many of them will find the newness disconcerting and each may develop his or her job description by default. This

can lead to inconsistency among staff in the implementation of the services and can lead to morale problems among staff who need more guidance or conflict among staff who believe others are not “doing their jobs.” This definition of roles in a written procedural manual is especially important in new joint projects because it creates a structure and guidelines for staff who will face not only new but difficult tasks as they learn to work with each other and implement new strategies for clients. They may be expected to be “creative” and “innovative,” but need a basis from which to develop new ideas. However, as the program evolves, roles may change based upon experience and may blur as staff work together toward common ends. Consequently, these defined roles must allow for flexibility and employees should be warned to expect their roles and job descriptions to evolve as agencies gain experience in the program.<sup>2</sup>

In addition, in working out role expectations, it is important to remember that managers and their staff may face conflicting role expectations from the project and their home agencies, so participants may find this a difficult although rewarding arrangement. For example, treatment staff may be expected both “to share” information (by the project) and “to protect” information (by their agency). Probation staff may be expected to work with families and victims (by the project) *and* focus specifically on the youth's compliance with court-ordered conditions (by the agency). Or the probation agency may expect surveillance to be a primary goal while the project sees treatment as the best approach.

Defining the community's role before individual members are recruited is also important, because it may prevent misunderstandings about their power at a later date. The new marriage between the justice system agencies and the community may be uncomfortable for all parties at the outset if the groups are not used to working together or if they have distrust or animosities toward each other. For example, if the community believes they have not gotten “enough” or “good” services from these agencies, they may be angry and find that their inclusion in the collaborative is opportunity to “right” the “wrongs” they perceive. Or, they may be genuinely interested in helping both the system and the clients but may not know how. Because the project is designed with a vision in mind, it is helpful to define the community's role clearly in writing and to give this description to them when they are recruited. For new collaborations, there are important questions to consider. For example, how will the community group be constructed (e.g., leadership structure, number of members, meeting schedules)? Will they be advisory only or will they have binding decision-making power regarding project implementation? Will they be expected to contribute services to the project (e.g., volunteer hours with clients, market the project to the community, raise funds) and, if so, how much? Will they gain access to specific information about clients and their cases?

#### *Scope and Goals of Evaluation*

Once the collaborators and their roles are determined, it is important to consider whether or not an evaluation com-

ponent will be included. Many granting agencies now require new justice programs to include evaluation components, as the Challenge Grants did. SOCP experience indicates that including the evaluators very early, before implementation, and including the evaluation plan in the project design was a valuable way to ensure that researchers understood and were measuring what agencies want to know and that data were being collected in a reliable manner (see Altschuler 1998). In SOCP, program staff and researchers worked together closely to determine the goals of the evaluation and the specifics of how important variables would be collected. This approach created a "team" relationship between the program staff and the researchers, ensuring more cooperation and trust between the parties. This trust was a key factor in the researchers' ability to see the "real" program experience and practice, rather than a glossy description designed for our view. Even with the trust between staff and evaluators, differences between program implementation strategies and evaluation goals continue to arise, but we are better able to work out the details of disagreements cooperatively. Because evaluators and research requirements can put a special "strain" on the practical approaches to program implementation (e.g., random assignment, increased documentation of services and outcomes), SOCP experience shows that training on the practical importance of evaluation and its rules also eased some of the frustrations that might otherwise build about the constraints of research.

#### *Interagency Staff Training*

Training of interagency staff is an unusual challenge, because most of those involved in the project probably will not have much, if any, experience in collaborative arrangements. Unlike probation services, which have strict legal guidelines regarding job duties and safety requirements, new projects rarely have a "template" to use as a training structure. Consequently, projects might consider hiring someone experienced in interagency collaboration to train both management and line staff early about the accomplishments and hurdles they might face and strategies for ensuring project success. SOCP found that training each discipline individually about their new roles and then training the entire group about the practical blending of these roles—i.e., how they fit together—was a valuable approach to setting the structure for the future.

Other training details that are important to consider at the outset are case management strategies and expected safety precautions. In SOCP, staff came to the project with different experience and abilities for case management and different expectations about the level of safety precautions necessary in working with at-risk youth. Managers found themselves working closely with line staff about these details on a daily basis. For example, as part their usual routines, some agencies did not necessarily remove weapons such as mace from clients but rather watched youth more closely when they were on-site. Others were unaware of the need to separate some youth due to gang rivalries.

Probation had liability concerns regarding these safety issues and required participating staff to follow more stringent rules regarding staff and client safety.

#### *Creating and Maintaining a Project Vision*

The project vision and its mission and goals are essential elements of the project and will guide the development and implementation of the program as it evolves over time. In collaborative projects, developing this vision is difficult and time-consuming because people from differing backgrounds, experience, and worldviews come together to develop a shared idea about what the project is supposed to accomplish and how participants should reach these goals. Participants in SOCP found that two of the central hurdles were differing views of the meanings of collaboration and the goals of joint programs (Wood and Gray 1991). Some members of the management team, including the probation manager, felt collaboration should involve a consensus view of project vision and goals, joint and consensus decision-making about implementation, and a willingness to change how the disciplines "usually" conduct business. The hope was that the project would be new, innovative, and would encourage "thinking outside the box." Others felt that collaboration meant networking and cooperation in planning services for youths (e.g., interagency referrals, program support) but that each service would maintain its original design structure (e.g., caseload size, treatment group content, expectations for completion of the component's services) and essentially provide their respective services independently while notifying other team members of their decisions about specific cases. But, because all were speaking the same vocabulary—e.g., "collaboration," "teamwork," and "case management"—the differences did not become apparent until implementation began.

In addition, in SOCP's case, because there were many managers working together, the interagency management team found it important to remind themselves not to focus on their own philosophical (and sometimes valid) agendas but rather the project's philosophy as a whole. SOCP was developed as a "restorative justice" project based upon Clear's Corrections of Place model (Clear, 1996) and therefore indicated a different way of thinking about working with youth on probation. Although staff were initially trained on the principles of this theory, the managers found that initial training was inadequate, in part because there were no "rules" for theory implementation and staff needed hands-on experience at making the new approach work. Posting the vision and the "guiding principles" on the walls as reminders also did not ensure they were implemented. Rather, the managers learned that staff needed constant reminders to use the vision as a guide for all project decisions and changes. For example, they often reinforce the vision daily by challenging the staff to consider how their case decisions "fit" within the project's philosophy. In this way the new philosophy was more likely to become a "way of business" rather than something filed away while staff

went about their “usual” duties.

Participants in new projects might carefully consider what their hopes for the program are and work out a shared understanding about implementation before it begins. For example, what are the individuals’ definitions of collaboration? Does it mean collective on-site management, shared or blended roles regarding clients, or each service provider contributing a separate but important piece of the program? How will differences in definitions be worked out? What do participants believe the goals are and how will the project and observers know when these goals have been met—by the level of shared decision-making or service delivery, by the number of clients or victims who participate, the number of therapy “sessions” held, a decrease in client arrests for violent crimes, an increase or decrease in institutional commitments, etc.? In addition, ensuring that agency heads and upper-level management “buy into” the project philosophy once it is developed may decrease the likelihood of misunderstandings later (Altschuler, 1998).

### ***Daily Decision-Making in a Collaborative Arrangement***

In this section we discuss both broader decision-making strategies and some important details to consider early to make project management easier in the long run. One of the first considerations here is the method the collaborative group will use to make decisions about project philosophy and daily details—i.e., will decisions be made by consensus or majority vote or by the lead agency after advisement from the other managers? Will the interagency management team address all issues, or will a smaller on-site operations team work out the problems that arise daily?

“True” collaborative arrangements imply equal power and therefore consensus or majority vote. SOCP experience indicates that reaching “consensus” in a diverse group may be very difficult and may even be impossible on some issues. While consensus is a “noble” goal, it is very hard work in practice and presents some unique challenges. A consensus approach requires considerable time and energy for everyone—involving long meetings and discussions and considerable compromise. It is important to determine what method the program will use to reach consensus and whether all key participants must be present to make critical decisions—especially if some managers have most of their time allotted to other duties. A skilled outside facilitator who has no “stake” in the outcome might help decrease the drain on participants’ time and help them arrive at consensus more efficiently. To date, SOCP uses participating managers to lead meetings and these leaders find it difficult to participate in the discussion and ensure that time is used efficiently by keeping meeting participants on the topic at hand. This is especially true if “conflict” arises in meetings and the leader for the day has important opinions to include in the discussion. It is important also to decide how difficult conflicts about project philosophy and implementation will be remedied. Due to its financial accountability to the fund-

ing entity, the lead agency may want to maintain the power to make final decisions about controversial issues.

If the entire interagency management team prefers to address all operation issues (e.g., daily issues that arise among staff and regarding clients), it may be difficult to devise methods for ensuring that issues are handled quickly and efficiently. One meeting per month, for example, cannot address or solve the many issues that arise during this time period in an ever-changing project. SOCP chose to have an on-site operations team consisting of a subset of the interagency management team that reports to the broader team but that has freedom to make quick, on-site decisions when necessary. This operations team determines issues such as how treatment teams are structured, how case management is delineated, and how office space is allocated, but asks for the entire team’s input on these decisions. When emergencies arise in SOCP regarding specific clients, for example, the on-site operations team is able to make decisions quickly without waiting for input from other managers.

Personnel decisions in collaborations are also unique. Projects must decide how staff will be hired—e.g., will participating agencies all have input or will the hiring agency make the decision? SOCP found that hiring by interagency team decision (usually a 3–4 member panel) worked well because this group was able to ensure the new staff had the personalities and skills to work within the program vision and to fulfill the agreed-upon roles. Other issues arise, however. For example, SOCP found it necessary to make agreements about the provision of staff supplies—such as the use of cell phones or county or other agency vehicles to transport clients—because of financial and liability concerns. New projects might answer the following questions early. Will all staff be able to drive probation-owned cars or use their cell phones? Who will pay for car insurance for staff? Will all staff be able to use computers that have on-line access to databases with confidential information about clients who are not in the program or even clients who *are* in the program?

It is very important to consider how and when interagency staff will share information about specific clients. The SOCP design calls for a “team approach” to case management and calls for open sharing of case details among relevant staff. SOCP found that the initial step was to have the parent and youth sign a confidentiality agreement allowing program agencies to share information about them, but this has not ensured free-flowing information among service providers. SOCP still continues to struggle with the fact that probation case files are accessible to other staff but most other case files are not (e.g., mental health, alcohol and drug treatment). This is in part because even with signed agreements, the treatment agencies feel safer following their own (and sometimes state) guidelines about client confidentiality and in part because treatment staff worry about possible punishment consequences for youth who may be violating their terms and conditions of probation. In dealing with these daily details, staff may lose sight of the overall project vision—possibly in hopes of “saving” one youth. New proj-

ects must determine when and in what circumstances staff will be “required” to report violations of probation to the probation officer, and if so, how they will ensure staff comply with this expectation.

Another challenge in collaborative arrangements is the details of “teamwork” with multiple agencies. Team approaches to decision-making about both project implementation (for managers) and client cases (for line staff) are time and resource intensive and can easily lead to “burnout.” Staff who are used to making quick, on-the-job decisions often are expected in a collaborative venture to wait and discuss case details in team meetings. These meetings take a lot of time, especially if the multi-agency team must discuss many cases each week. SOCP found that in the early stages of the project, new job duties coupled with the new approach to client case management prompted many long meetings among staff teams, which took time away from face-to-face contact with clients and their families. To partially address this concern, SOCP hired a team leader who was better able to organize the meetings and facilitate the group process. Based on their experience, SOCP would also recommend that new projects begin with a small number of staff (maximum 15) and smaller than usual caseloads (maximum 35 for probation officers and even fewer for treatment personnel) to make the process more manageable.

Collaborative arrangements also can increase the appearance that the project is very costly. Due to the collaborative arrangement, service providers will have the same youth on their caseloads—e.g., a probation officer, alcohol and drug treatment counselor, and mental health social worker may all count a particular youth as part of their caseloads. So, the total number served by the project may appear small due to the number of staff working with each individual youth; therefore, the cost per youth may seem high to observers. One strategy to alleviate observer concerns might be to determine the total cost per youth when the typical strategy of referring youth out for services is implemented. It may be that the individual agencies when working separately “together” spend the same or more per client and that collaborative arrangements just “look” more expensive because the funding is usually from one source.

### *Conclusions and Discussion*

Unlike some counties, Ventura has a long history of innovative programs and of working together to ensure their implementation. For example, during the 1980s, the county created the “System of Care” or “Ventura Model,” in which mental health, schools, and probation joined together to provide services to delinquent youth. Nevertheless, SOCP participants have reported that collaboration has been a difficult task at best and is much more arduous than anyone anticipated at the outset. Collaborative arrangements hold great promise for affecting the youth crime problem and can be rewarding for staff (Catalano, Hawkins, and Associates,

1992). However, they also are time and resource-intensive and can be emotionally draining for those involved. These service providers must not only do the usually difficult task of working with “troubled” youth and their families but also spend a lot of time working with “different” service providers who may have contrasting working styles and ideas about program implementation. SOCP managers found that a good management tool is to “celebrate” small successes—both in young clients who may face setbacks in striving for their goals and in staff who will no doubt face struggles they would not face otherwise. They also found that small details, such as allocation of office space and seating arrangements, can convey unintended symbolic messages about the “presence” of a hierarchical structure in a project that in reality sees service provision as a task among equal partners.

In sum, Ventura County’s experience implementing a new, collaborative program for youth on probation illustrates some lessons that are unique to collaborative arrangements and may be useful to other newly developing programs. Some of these lessons are:

- Because of the implications of shared power structures and the need for an “equal” stake in the program’s outcome, an “ideal” collaborative arrangement would include all agencies committing financial resources as well as their disciplinary expertise to the project.
- Clearly defined and agreed-upon leadership and relationship structures and project roles as well as careful consideration of existing relationships among participating agencies are critical to project success.
- Defining the scope of the evaluation and including evaluators early will increase the likelihood that the researchers will understand the new program and therefore will be able to devise appropriate and maybe new ways to measure implementation variables that are important to local practitioners.
- Creating the project “vision” requires clear distinctions about the meanings behind the shared language used by key actors. Maintaining this project vision is an ongoing, daily task that must be reinforced in every program decision, from major implementation decisions to expectations of specific clients.
- Working out the daily details of collaborative arrangements and the teamwork involved is very difficult and time intensive for all participants and may lead to frustration and quicker burnout among staff. Consequently, projects may consider taking special precautions to boost morale and help staff deal with stress.

True efforts at interagency collaboration in a comprehensive approach to intervention and treatment are rewarding and likely more successful when implemented well (Krisberg and Howell, 1998). However, they can be uncomfortable, time-consuming, and stressful for people who work in them day-to-day. Perhaps new projects may find

lessons from the South Oxnard Challenge Project helpful as they work together toward the common goal of providing better, more intensive services to today's at-risk youth.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The state had \$50 million for grants for which counties applied. In 1997, fourteen counties were awarded grants. In 1999, seventeen counties received monies from a second wave of funding.

<sup>2</sup>In the evaluation of Intensive Supervision Probation (ISP), RAND found that similar issues about staff roles arose within programs run solely by one agency, in that case Probation. But, it seems these problems might increase when different agencies are working together.

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