

I. Executive Summary

The San Francisco Public Defender's Office Reentry Unit provides the Office's adult 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 Social Work services are a cornerstone of the holistic legal defense team approach employed by the Office of the Public Defender. The Reentry Social Workers work hand in hand with the Public Defender Attorneys in order to provide vigorous legal defense by addressing underlying and contributing social and behavioral health needs. Currently, the Office employs only 2.5 FTE Reentry Social Workers, and thus, is able to assign a Social Worker to only a fraction of the cases that would benefit from such expertise. 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:

Outcomes Evaluation Objective: To determine whether defendants who receive Reentry Social Work services fare better than those who do not in terms of legal and social outcomes.

1. Are Reentry clients sentenced to state prison less frequently than non-clients?
2. Do Reentry clients receive shorter sentences than non-clients?
3. Are Reentry clients' final sentences more favorable in terms of placement and length of incarceration as compared to the exposure on their case at the time they begin services?
4. What proportion of Reentry clients experiences legal victories at sentencing?
5. What proportion of clients in custody is awarded early release? What type of early release?

Process Evaluation Objective: To understand how the Social Work Program contributes to the legal and social outcomes clients experience.

1. How are Reentry Social Workers involved in the clients' legal cases and court proceedings?
2. How does the location of Social Workers within the Public Defender's office contribute to client outcomes?
3. What factors do public defenders consider when referring clients to the Reentry Social Work Program?

A mixed-methods evaluation approach was used to answer the above questions: reviews of case files of randomly-selected clients as well as of well-matched comparison group of defendants were complemented by in-depth interviews with seventeen key stakeholders, including Social Work Services Program staff, Public Defender Attorneys, former Reentry clients, and external stakeholders in both the criminal justice system and social services sector.

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; community-based 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 likely 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 actually 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.** A majority (59%) of Reentry clients sentenced to jail were awarded early release from San Francisco County Jail.
- ❖ **Reentry client legal outcomes result in 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. For the sixty-six Reentry clients in our sample, avoided prison days due to alternative and reduced sentencing resulted in a savings of over \$5,000,000 to California state prisons. Avoided jail days for the sample due to alternative and reduced sentencing and early release resulted in a savings of over \$1,000,000. The net savings for San Francisco County jail after the cost of averted prison sentences served in jail is added to the jail savings is \$110,577.
- ❖ **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 that helps Judges understand client circumstances and understand what programs may 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 services within a relationship that fosters trust and support for their clients, resulting in improved legal and social outcomes.

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.

I am a huge supporter; I think the [Reentry Unit Social Work Services] should be tripled or quadrupled. It should be a much bigger part of the Public Defender's office.... I think that for a great deal of clients, we need to address their underlying social deficiencies (job skills, illiteracy, substance abuse, mental health problems, etc.) Those issues need to be addressed – without doing that we don't have as good of an outcome.

San Francisco County Superior Court Judge
