

# San Mateo County's Service Connect Program: A Model for Multi-Departmental Collaboration Providing Client-Centered Services

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*"Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much."*

—Helen Keller

The conveniences enjoyed by our modern society come with a price of increasingly complex social issues. While attempting to improve outcomes for specific populations, such as individuals re-entering society from incarceration, local government systems must establish new ways of doing business that break the silos of traditional government service. Through collaborative efforts, San Mateo County's Human Services Agency is demonstrating the power of social services through an interagency partnership

with the Probation Department, the Health Systems Department, and the Sheriff's Department to instill support for those exiting incarceration. This collaborative method encourages a multifaceted approach to working with formerly incarcerated individuals and should be considered for application when developing service programs for other populations, such as the homeless, who have been challenging to serve using traditional methods.

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## Introduction

Service organizations are constantly seeking to improve methods that create a deeper impact on their target population. Over time, new processes are developed and slowly refined to create evidence-informed, evidence-driven, and evidence-based practices that can demonstrate an impactful change on an individual or group. Current trends strongly indicate the need for broad cross sector coordination and many programs that have been recently developed involve some form of multi-disciplinary teams, wrap-around services, and/or collective impact. While these approaches may seem like buzz-words, the trend and subsequent successes of programs based off of these models indicate that social changes thrive when collaborations exist. The Public Safety Realignment Act demonstrates a current example of how government mandates and financial allocations created an opportunity to completely redesign how a specialized population is served and ignites ideas for a collaborative model to be applied to other populations in need.

## Background

In April of 2011, California Governor Edmund G. Brown signed Assembly Bill (AB) 109 and AB 117 enacting the Public Safety Realignment Act into law. This legislation sparked a significant system change in how adult correctional services are handled and slowed the churn of low-level offenders who pass in

and out of the state prison system. This law also created a unique opportunity for new collaborations to be created in re-designing the system of support for our community members re-entering society from incarceration.

Driven by federal and state mandates and special funding allocated for programs, local plans for implementation of the Public Safety Realignment Act have been led by the Community Corrections Partnership (CCP) committees established in each county. A county CCP is a committee of leaders from relevant departments, such as Probation, Sheriff, the District Attorney, and Public Defender. CCP committees also engage representatives from supportive service departments as appointed by the County Board of Supervisors. This initial collaborative approach in developing the realignment plan allowed for new opportunities and assistance for enriching services for the individual that were not previously provided by the single system service prior to Realignment.

Each California county's CCP committee has been able to create an approach to public safety realignment that reflects each county's needs. In Monterey County, this includes the Department of Social Services as a voting executive committee member and behavioral health/mental health and employment training as part of the committee membership. In San Mateo County, the approaches utilized led to the creation of the Service Connect program.

## San Mateo County Service Connect Program

The San Mateo County Service Connect program is a multi-disciplinary team approach in coordinating services for eligible populations. Service Connect Program services are available to individuals who have served a sentence for specific non-serious, non-violent, and non-registerable sex offenses and are subsequently enrolled in the following programs:

- Post Release Community Supervision (PRCS) – realigned transfer of responsibility from state parole to county probation.
- 1170(h) Split Sentence – not eligible for incarceration in prison under Penal Code 1170(h) but can serve a sentence split between jail custody and a period of Mandatory Supervision.
- Unified Reentry (formerly called Achieve 180) – county coordinated program to assist individuals incarcerated in county jail with re-entering their community with supportive services.

San Mateo County calls the Service Connect Program a “collaborative interagency partnership” which means that the program is a joint venture of Probation, Sheriff, Health System, Human Services, and non-profit partners. With each department specializing in its own service, clients are able to receive a combination of benefits that can begin to address the complex issues that brought them to the correctional system in the first place. Probation Officers can maintain the strict level of case management services for “supervisees” necessary for maintaining public safety while social workers from the Human Services Department or psychiatric social workers from behavioral health concentrate on engaging with “consumers/clients” on an emotionally supportive level to build relationships and provide support. While the customer’s title can appear to change from department to department, this change in perspective is ultimately a benefit to the service recipient as many angles of the issue are addressed.

A prominent goal of the Public Safety Realignment Act is to reduce recidivism in the state prison system and fulfill the order by the U.S. Supreme

**FIGURE 1**  
**Service Connect Support Model**



Court to reduce the number of inmates in California’s state prisons. The Service Connect Program aims to achieve this goal through evidence-based services that address identified risk and need factors related to recidivism in the criminal justice system. The social service components of Service Connect’s re-entry services begin with key strategies based on addressing risks and need factors:

- **One-Stop Model** – multiple providers are located at one central location to streamline services and reduce travel barriers
- **Building Trust** – clients have direct connection with staff who work together across departmental lines
- **Employment Services** – referral to San Mateo County’s rapid employment model, “550 Jobs!,” to support development of soft skills and gaining employment history
- **Peer Support/Groups** – peer support from formerly incarcerated individuals who have successfully re-entered the community
- **Family Engagement** – provide positive opportunities for clients to reconnect with children and family members

With such a broad scope of needs, the re-entry population is a challenging group to serve when limited by the confines of a particular department's individual mission. The participating departments of the Service Connect Program work within their own department to provide relevant services but are able to collaborate by assisting one another with removing barriers as needed and supporting each other's services. For example, the safety net services provided by San Mateo Human Services Agency create a path to stability for the individual. This path makes mental health, medical, and substance abuse treatment more likely to occur and be effective. As other instability issues are uncovered along the way, the San Mateo Human Services Agency offers other services as part of the ongoing case management for the client throughout the program. Ultimately, each supportive service provided is a link to the next step in achieving stability and completing a client's probation supervision term.

### **Obstacles & Successes**

The San Mateo Service Connect Program is a functioning model for collaborative engagement in serving specialized populations. According to San Mateo County Probation, the previous quarter, January – March 2015, 79% of supervisees who were terminated from probation during the quarter successfully completed the probation term, meaning they had no felony law violations upon completion. However, marked social progress also comes with obstacles. Although departments work in collaboration, it is important to understand who is ultimately responsible for the client. As the mandated agency for Public Safety Realignment, the San Mateo Probation Department maintains the final word in managing individual cases. While sometimes counter-productive to a client's social need, this imbalance of power is useful for ensuring public safety is at the forefront of the program and individuals are held accountable for their actions.

Another challenge for the collaborative is case documentation. Due to mandates protecting the client's personal and criminal information, each

department must maintain its own confidential records and case documentation. Representatives from each of the departments involved in the Service Connect program indicated that limitations in sharing information can be one of the most challenging aspects of the program.

True collaboration takes commitment to be effective and healthy lines of communication are paramount to the effort. The departments involved in the San Mateo County Service Connect program maintain collaboration through regular operations meetings, in which, specific issues can be voiced and addressed as a collective. Representatives of the participating departments recognize the importance of these regular meetings to maneuver around obstacles and continuously develop the program. Due to the innovative nature of this program, policies and procedures are developed and tested regularly as a result of these collaborative discussions.

### **Recommendations**

Monterey County's Public Safety Realignment Program currently utilizes several of the collaborative ideas demonstrated by San Mateo County. Monthly Probation Providers meetings allow opportunities for group communication and inter-departmental support; however, Monterey County Department of Social Services does not play a role in ongoing case management services for the program in a way similar to the Service Connect Program in San Mateo County. Upon exploration of this different approach, it was found that Monterey County Probation works collectively with a broad scope of non-profit agencies throughout the county and ensures use of evidence-based curricula, such as Motivational Interviewing and Interactive Journaling, to provide a level of "social work" like services to program participants.

While the Public Safety Realignment Program is already an established collective within Monterey County, a collaborative engagement of services could be a productive method of service delivery for the Monterey County Department of Social Services to use with other specialized populations that need a re-formatted approach. Serving the homeless

residents of Monterey County has been an ongoing challenge due to high housing costs and low availability of affordable units in the region. The Service Connect model is an innovative approach that could be applied to work with the homeless population.

For application of the Service Connect model to the homeless population, a collaborative approach would need to include focused efforts from providers. Initial steps should begin with reaching out to other departments and building service relationships. These relationships should include mental and physical health providers, housing programs, local law enforcement, city governments, and boosted efforts from social services to provide social work-based care coordination. Due to the multi-layered and complex issues that can lead someone to become homeless, a multi-pronged approach is the type of sagacious strategy necessary to create the collective impact needed to make meaningful progress in this deep-seeded community issue.

The human services component of Service Connect in San Mateo County currently operates with eight full-time staff members, four part-time staff members, and one social work supervisor. This is a significant personnel commitment to a fully operational program; however, Service Connect began with only two full-time and one part-time staff from the county's Human Services Agency. By bringing together resources and staff from other departments, a budding new program could be established with a small number of initial staff to focus on the core services. Initial costs would primarily be for staffing to provide case coordination, but additional financial resources would be needed for direct services as the program grows. Funding for a new program's direct services would require significant coordination of existing resources and encouragement for isolated funding to be redirected into a collaborative effort. Additional focus would be necessary to identify program recipients and control caseloads as the program becomes established. A forum for all collaborating departments to meet regularly and build policy and procedure would be vital for program development.

These investments of time and staff to develop a synergetic partnership could prove valuable when compared to the public outcry for services to address homelessness as it continues to be a serious community problem that impacts safety, public health, and community well-being.

## Conclusion

San Mateo County's Service Connect Program offers an excellent model for building departmental relationships, breaking down silos, and coordinating efforts to improve services to specific populations. While Monterey County's Realignment program may not need an infusion of services from the Department of Social Services, programs serving other specialized populations, such as the homeless, could benefit from the Social Service Department's participation in such a collaborative model – particularly with new and motivated social workers entering the field from the nearby California State University Monterey Bay. A collaborative approach program that features the social supports of the Department of Social Services may be the infusion of energy the Monterey County community needs to overcome long-standing obstacles to social change.

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