

**VOLUNTEERS IN PAROLE:
REPORT TO THE LITTLE HOOVER COMMISSION ON HOW MENTORING CAN BENEFIT
WOMEN ON PAROLE**

Synopsis

Volunteers In Parole (VIP) is a unique mentoring organization. It was founded for one purpose – to mentor men and women on parole. VIP is the *only* program in California that recruits attorneys to be guides, advisors, friends and role models for parolees as they struggle to return to their communities and turn their lives around. Since its founding in 1972, VIP volunteers have helped thousands of former offenders begin new lives that are self-respecting, self-supporting, and crime-free. Women on parole have benefited as much as men. Over the years, VIP mentoring has saved the Department of Corrections and the Youth Authority millions of dollars in reduced re-incarceration costs.

Overview

VIP was founded in 1972 by local attorneys, the State Bar of California, and leaders in California corrections. Its mission combines the humanitarian goal of salvaging human lives with the social and economic benefits of building better and safer communities. VIP began as a program of the State Bar, but became an independent nonprofit in 1991.

The first VIP programs targeted Youth Authority parolees in Los Angeles and Santa Clara counties. These were followed by programs in San Diego (1975), Orange (1982), and three San Francisco Bay Area (1984) counties. VIP opened its first California Department of Corrections program in Fresno in 1989. This was followed by CDC programs in Orange County (1993), Kern (1996), Sacramento (1998), Riverside (2000) and Long Beach (2000). New CYA programs were created in the San Fernando Valley (1999), downtown Los Angeles (2004) and Fresno (2004). At present, VIP's 13 sites serve parolees in 12 counties.

In FY02-03, VIP mentored 270 Department of Corrections parolees. They were African-Americans (21%), Asians (4%), Latinos (30%), Native Americans (3%) and Caucasians (42%). Female parolees made up 42% of the mentees; 75% were parents. Half of the male parolees were also parents. Parolees who participate in VIP tend to represent the same range of commitment offenses – crimes against persons, property offenses and drug offenses – as all parolees.

VIP also successfully mentored 185 Youth Authority parolees in FY02-03. They were African-Americans (29%), Asians (17%), Latinos (41%), Native Americans (2%) and Caucasians (11%). Female parolees made up 23% of the mentees; 35% were parents. 18% of the male parolees were also parents. This report focuses on mentoring CDC parolees because the Youth Authority has only a small number of female parolees. In December, 2002, for example, there were 273 young women among the 4,158 Youth Authority parolees.

The goal of VIP mentoring is to help parolees become self-reliant, self-supporting, self-respecting and crime-free by providing an extra level of personal support during re-entry and adjustment to community life. VIP was created because attorneys expressed a strong desire to take on this mentoring challenge. There are many reasons to suggest that attorneys make very good mentors for ex-offenders. They are motivated and trained to communicate. They are familiar with community resources and the criminal justice system. They are knowledgeable, persistent, and skilled at analyzing complex situations. They are

already part of the justice system and established role models for men and women on parole.

Over the years, the endorsement of the State Bar of California and several local bar associations has helped VIP recruit mentors, enhanced its stature in the community, and expanded publicity for parolee success stories.

VIP's Rate of Success

Parole is a time of crisis for virtually all parolees. They face multiple obstacles. Emotional disorientation, rejection by family, addiction, enticements of former gang buddies, inability to find employment, – even a simple lack of understanding how to navigate this strange new world – all threaten to wreck a parolee's ability to start a new life.

Even when parolees desperately want to change their lives, the results are often tragic for the parolee, the parolee's family and the community.

But VIP's volunteer mentors have been able to reverse this sad situation. Historically, nine out of ten VIP mentees remain essentially crime free while working with a mentor. Three out of every four completed mentorships provide one year or more of crime-free progress on parole and advancement towards educational, work and family goals. For example, in a two-year study of all VIP mentorships initiated in 1999, only 13% ended because of parole violation or criminal behavior.

The results for VIP's California Department of Corrections parolees in FY02-03 confirm this positive history. 97% of the 270 VIP mentees remained essentially crime free while working with a mentor. Only 3% of all matches ended because of parole revocation or a new crime. Equally impressive, 71% of all completed mentorships provided one year or more of crime-free progress on parole and advancement towards educational, work and family goals.

Mentoring was definitely effective for women on parole. 97% of the 113 female mentees remained essentially crime free and 70% of all completed matches provided one-year or more of progress on parole and in meeting personal goals.

VIP emphatically does not pre-select those parolees most likely to succeed. VIP accepts applicants for mentoring if they are motivated to change their lives and not a danger to themselves or others. Even highly motivated parolees can be tripped up by the daunting obstacles they face and VIP, in fact, requires only a low threshold of motivation: Is the parolee willing to keep appointments and return phone calls? VIP philosophy emphasizes that individuals should not be stereotyped by their past offenses. The important thing is where they are in their lives now.

Statistics also confirm that VIP is highly cost-efficient. The prison system spends \$30,929 per year per inmate. A full-time VIP site costs approximately \$80,000 a year and assists, on average, 45 parolees a year. If each site succeeded in keeping merely three parolees out of prison for just one year, it would more than pay for itself.

Fundamentals of VIP Mentoring

VIP follows a simple program model. Each VIP site has one staff person – a program director – who is assisted by a local advisory committee and statewide administrative staff. VIP program directors recruit attorneys to be mentors, make matches and organize activities that support mentoring.

Attorneys are recruited through presentations, other forms of marketing and statewide recruitment mailings. A diverse group of attorneys participate. Historically, there were a high percentage of criminal defense attorneys, but now they are joined by prosecutors, other attorneys in government service, corporate attorneys, litigators, and others. Attorneys in solo practice or small firms tend to outnumber those in large firms; and like all mentoring programs, women are disproportionately involved. Attorneys in their early years of practice are particularly likely to sign up; once involved with the program, many will stay with it for years.

To create mentorships, VIP program directors interview potential mentors and mentees. They attempt to determine who might be good matches based on personality, interests and geographical proximity. Prospective matches are introduced to each other at an informal setting such as a meal. If they hit it off, the two agree to meet again on their own. After their second meeting, they decide if they want to be an official match.

Each mentor makes a long-term commitment that continues until six months after the parolee's final discharge or, which happens less often, until parole is revoked. We ask mentors to stay in contact with their mentees at least once a week by telephone and to spend from three to five hours a month minimum on activities of mutual interest. We tell mentors that the important thing is not volume, but dependability, consistency and sincerity. This guideline is both practical for adults and effective.

Both the attorney and the parolee in a VIP match are volunteers. Mentoring cannot be required as a condition of parole. Nevertheless, in choosing an appropriate mentor for each participant, VIP program directors work directly with parole agents. Our program directors are located in state parole offices. Although parolees may self-refer, their parole agents must eventually approve program participation.

Although VIP mentoring uses a Big Brother/Big Sister model, there are significant differences. VIP mentoring is about achieving success in the community or the larger society while youth mentoring programs address coming of age or cultural issues. Members of VIP matches often have different ethnic backgrounds and we also will match female attorneys with male parolees in appropriate cases.

There are no prescribed match activities; participants explore their mutual interests. For example, matches may meet at Starbucks or go jogging. They may visit museums or watch boxing on TV. Sunday mornings might find them in church together or playing basketball. Some mentorships exist entirely in the outside world while others involve the homes and families of the mentor and mentee. A high percentage of our female mentees have children (75% in FY02-03) and children are often involved in match activities. Mentors are not permitted to lend money or provide legal representation.

How VIP Mentoring Promotes Success on Parole.

There are four characteristics of VIP mentoring that are especially important.

First, VIP mentoring provides two ingredients essential for success: motivation and self-confidence. The strength of VIP mentoring comes from the emotional change that can occur in the relationship. The mentor, a respected member of the community, in effect, says to the parolee: "Yes, I know you just got out of prison. Yes, I know what you did many years ago. But here is a clean piece of paper. You now can put your past behind you and write your future on this blank sheet. I accept you ... and I'll help you."

This simple act of acceptance is a powerful motivator. As one mentee explained, "I had never had a relationship with an attorney, except the *get me out of here* kind!" Time and time again, parolees tell us that "My mentor told me I could make it. My mentor believed in me. VIP is people believing in unbelievable people like me."

Second, VIP mentors address whatever problems and issues their parolees bring to the relationship. VIP mentors focus on practical problem-solving, a growing knowledge of the community, and step-by-step achievement at the parolee's own pace. VIP does not provide services other than those that strengthen the mentoring relationship; thus, mentors do not promote one particular treatment or approach or philosophy of success over any other. Failure in a classroom or treatment does not mean the end of mentoring.

VIP mentees are frequently involved in other community programs – vocational, treatment and spiritual. VIP mentoring can support and facilitate participation in those activities but the success and constancy of the mentorship does not depend on the results of those activities.

Third, VIP mentors stay with the match even if the parolee suffers a setback or is returned to custody. Short-term re-incarceration occurs frequently; the mentorship should still be in place when the parolee returns to the community. As attorneys, VIP mentors can put the parolee's situation in perspective. It is also easier for attorneys to stay in contact with incarcerated parolees. Although mentors may not provide legal representation, they can serve as character references and assist in finding legal representation, if needed.

Fourth, VIP supports mentorships and parolees with activities that promote success:

Community and Parole Presentations. VIP is obligated by its CDC and CYA contracts to speak regularly to community groups, civic organizations, students, parolees and pre-parolees. Staff members, mentors and mentees all participate. Speaking engagements provide mentees with excellent opportunities to tell their stories, grow in confidence, become articulate, and feel good that they are giving something back to their community.

Group and Family Activities. VIP program directors organize social and educational group activities to introduce parolees to new ideas, demonstrate inexpensive ways to have fun and bring mentors, mentees, parole agents and their respective families together. These activities reflect the eclecticism of VIP mentoring. In the last year, VIP groups have gone to the theatre, visited museums, held barbecues in castles and parks and cheered at numerous sporting events.

Scholarships and Stipends. In 1999, VIP initiated Targeting Obstacles to Personal Success (TOPS). TOPS provides small scholarships and stipends of between \$100 - \$600 that help

parolees pay for such things as college fees and textbooks, vocational tools, tattoo removal, childcare, rent emergencies and repairing the car relied on to get to work. The amounts of money are not large, but when parolees lack funds to buy required vocational tools or pay for baby sitters while they get special training, these funds make an enormous difference.

Annual Recognition Events. Every VIP site holds an annual recognition luncheon or dinner where attorneys, judges, mentees, parole agents, correctional administrators and civic leaders gather to honor the year's most successful mentees, mentors, parole agents and mentorships. The impact of these events on those who attend is legendary. Judges who originally sentenced mentees show up to salute their discharge from parole. A parolee's entire family gathers for the conferring of the Parolee of the Year award. Attorneys admit that they learned much more from their mentees than they were able to teach. There are few events in public life which so ably demonstrate the American ideal of the ability of individuals to turn their lives around and the duty of diverse segments of the community to support that change.

VIP's Community Impact

Although a small program, VIP is capable of a significant community impact.

First, in a system where three out of four parolees fail, VIP parolees are symbols of success who serve as examples for other parolees.

Second, all VIP programs seek to involve the local media. Since the success of our parolees is of great public interest, nearly every program earns at least one solid newspaper or magazine article a year. The California Bar Journal also covers VIP.

Third, through VIP, members of the legal community demonstrate by their personal actions that people on parole are worthy of attention and respect. They make presentations that increase awareness of parole issues and can become articulate allies in the battle against the "not-in-my-backyard" (NIMBY) concerns that prevent the establishment of worthwhile services.

Finally, the cumulative effect of all VIP activities – presentations, group events, attorney involvement, recognition events – is to educate the public and its leaders about the possibility of success on parole. Many members of the community believe it is impossible for former offenders to turn their lives around. These hardened beliefs stigmatize individuals on parole and create additional obstacles to leading a crime-free life. This kind of negative thinking impedes progress on parole, threatens family welfare and, ironically, decreases community safety.

Expanding VIP Mentoring Programs

The Commission asked VIP to comment on how the state could expand VIP and other mentoring programs for parolees generally and for women on parole in particular.

Expanding VIP Programs. One thing should be clear. There is considerable capacity, in terms of potential attorney mentors, for existing VIP programs to expand. These new programs would significantly increase the number of female parolees with mentors.

First, women are disproportionately attracted to mentoring and this fact enables VIP's CDC programs to assist a significant number of female parolees. For example, in VIP

Pasadena, VIP Fresno and VIP Sacramento, women make up from 40% - 60% of the mentee population and 50% - 60% of the mentor population.

Second, VIP's focus on attorneys as mentors does not limit its growth potential. At present, VIP operates in some counties where the attorney population is not large; in Riverside and Kern counties, for example, we meet our goals by recruiting 1.5% and 2% respectively of the attorney population. Using these programs as models, we could justify one additional program in Sacramento and new programs in such counties as San Bernadino, San Joaquin and Santa Barbara.

Equally important, in many counties with high attorney populations, we meet or exceed mentoring goals with far less than 1% of the members of the legal profession. Examples are San Diego (77 mentors; .005%), and Orange (49; .003%). If we assume an outer limit on participation of 1% of the attorney population in larger counties, there is still capacity for at least 10 new VIP programs around the state:

Alameda – half-time program now; add one full-time program

Los Angeles -- 3.5 programs now; add at least three new programs. (Los Angeles has 50,000 attorneys)

Orange – one program now; add 1.5 new programs

San Diego – one program now; add 1.5 new programs.

Santa Clara -- half-time program now; add one full-time program

San Francisco – no program now; add two new programs

Third, creating these new programs would generate large savings for taxpayers. For example, VIP could add four new sites for a total cost of \$320,000. This figure takes advantage of economies of scale on such statewide costs as insurance, audit, administration, printing etc. These sites would have all the services of our existing programs -- one program director, community presentations, family activities, a scholarship fund of \$5,000 a year, annual recognition event, etc.

These four programs would assist around 180 parolees a year. Imprisonment currently costs \$30,929 a year. If these four sites, in total, kept just 10 parolees from going back to prison for one year, they would virtually pay for themselves. Based on a success rate of 70%, the total net savings in one year is over \$3 million.

In these new programs, female parolees would be well-assisted. As already stated, VIP draws most of its new mentors from the new and younger attorney pool and a study conducted for the California Bar Journal in 2001 found that nearly half of all attorneys under the age of 35 (45%) were women!

Expansion of VIP Mentoring by the Addition of Non-Attorney Mentors. This issue was examined by a VIP consultant in 1998 and the results were ambiguous. The consultant found that creating opportunities for others to be involved might be an effective way to build the strength of the program, but "the connection between mentors and mentees loses some of the clarity that current attorney-parolee relationships possess."

It would not be effective to simply add non-attorney mentors to current VIP programs. VIP is very attorney-identified. Some legal communities and bar associations have a sense of ownership and/or pride in their support for VIP and it would dilute the message to reach out to non-attorneys. Furthermore, each site is a one-person office. It would be very difficult for that person to maintain on-going cultivation of the legal community while networking with other groups as well.

However, VIP could operate separate mentoring programs for non-attorney mentors. Using the VIP model as a guide, these new programs would have the following characteristics and requirements:

1. The source of mentors would be professional associations and civic organizations that have community service as one of their objectives.
2. Commitment to VIP's key program elements:
 - Total acceptance by the mentor.
 - Ability to address, in a neutral way, whatever problems and issues parolees bring to the relationship.
 - Commitment to stay with a match even if the parolee suffers a set-back or is returned to custody.
 - An organized set of diverse activities that promote parolee success in the community and larger society.
3. Mechanism for recruiting community professionals to be mentors. One possible model would be to ask professional associations and civic groups to join a coalition for providing mentors to parolees.
4. An advisory committee made up of representatives of participating organizations and parole personnel. Existing VIP sites have advisory committees made up of attorneys in public and private practice, judges, parole staff and successful parolees.
5. Two additional program elements: (1) expanding the mentor training/orientation program to cover issues with which attorneys are already familiar; (2) additional background checks since these potential mentors have not been vetted by the State Bar of California.
6. Agreement by the CDC and the CYA to permit non-attorney mentors. VIP's current contracts require that mentors be attorneys.
7. Costs in the range already described for new programs.

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