


Back n Track

LOS ANGELES



BACK ON TRACK:

It takes a village to keep repeat offenders on the straight and narrow

Despite his multiple arrests, June 21, 2015 was the first time that Leonard Lemos spent Father's Day in jail away from his daughters, and it hurt. It was also the first time he spent any effort contemplating what brought him behind bars—again. Lemos and nearly 80 of his fellow inmates in Pitchess Detention Facility dug deep inside themselves to talk about what it meant to be in jail on Father's Day—on any day—in a program called “Back on Track-LA” (BOT-LA).

“Back on Track” is a unique anti-recidivism and re-entry pilot program launched in Los Angeles County in February, 2015 by the California Department of Justice, led by Attorney General Kamala Harris in partnership with Los Angeles County Sheriff Jim McDonnell and Los Angeles County Probation Chief Jerry Powers. The program, administered by the AG's Division of Recidivism Reduction & Re-entry (DR3), is based on the same principles as AG Harris' original “Back on Track” program she created and instituted as District Attorney of San Francisco. As DA, Harris' Bay Area program's combination of strict accountability and real opportunity for self-improvement led to the successful re-entry of participants into the community, with less than 10 percent of graduates reoffending. All this was done at a fraction of the cost of traditional prosecution and jail time. The BOT-LA pilot is funded by the Ford Foundation, Rosenberg Foundation, California Wellness and a grant from the U.S. Department of Labor.

With the dedicated participation of its Los Angeles County partners in the BOT-LA program, DR3 aims to offer a comprehensive blueprint to reduce recidivism in all of California's 58 counties. Although California counties vary in size and population, the model was built to be easily replicable, and thus be of value statewide.

Leonard Lemos and other inmate-students in BOT-LA have said the program is like nothing they have encountered before. James, in his forties and married, has been arrested dozens of times. But five months into his BOT-LA's classes and one-on-one support, James could envision a meaningful life beyond his cell. “I've always been gang-banging since I was 18,” he told DR3 directors. “But this time there's something in me that makes me want to change my life, to make me the better man I know that I am.”

“It hits you in a deep spot when you really have to look at what you've done,” said Leonard. “I'm an all-or-nothing type person and that's not good. Back on Track helped me find the in-between and helped me find balance. Now I realize what's important.”



While high-risk offenders are at the center of BOT-LA, it's the program's partners—and dedicated individuals—encircling these men that make BOT-LA a vanguard method to stop the revolving door of arrests, jail time, and re-release into unstable communities. Partners from LASD, Probation, state and local child support services, departments' of motor vehicles, social services, and health services, Five Keys Charter School, community colleges, community based organizations and the Los Angeles County Chamber of Commerce, collaborate to develop a model and implement an in and out of custody case plan specific to each participant.

Bringing the Men Together

L. A. County Assistant Sheriff Terri McDonald represents the Los Angeles Sheriffs Department Custody Division, one of BOT-LA's county partners. With more than three decades of experience in custody and corrections, she is very familiar with the mindset that Leonard and James have battled daily as they make their way through the 6-12 month program. "Hopelessness and fear of failure are such dangerous things. These men have to be taught skills on how to recalibrate their expectations, how to get hope, and how to re-correct themselves once they backslide," she said.

Over 150 offenders will participate in the two-year pilot program while housed together at Pitchess Detention Center. McDonald believes that Los Angeles County was a perfect launch pad for a BOT pilot because of the sheer numbers—Los Angeles County operates the largest jail system in the United States with a recidivism rate of roughly 60 percent for non-mentally ill offenders. The group would be drawn from a population of medium-high risk offenders—inmates with dozens of arrests—for non-sexual, non-violent crimes, in the AB109 category. Most are serving sentences for drug offenses. Participants must be incarcerated for at least 7 months and have an established release date.

LASD contributes to the success of the program by providing funds coordinating with the Department's existing education-based incarceration programs and involving the extensive system-wide bureaus necessary to operate the in-custody comprehensive BOT-LA program

With so many recidivism programs operating around the country, L.A.'s Assistant Sheriff was most enthusiastic about the Attorney General's BOT-LA pilot, calling it a sophisticated, evidence-based approach. "This program looks at what they need, not necessarily what they want, and at what dosage. While they're incarcerated, the program uses trauma-informed principles and cognitive behavior work," she said. "Once they're released there is mentorship and real support. These men need a safe community that is rooting for their success and confronting them on their tomfoolery. It makes a huge difference."

Working from the Inside Out

Time and resources are precious commodities. Any program that requires a number of partners—and one shot at trust-building—needs evidence that it works. The Attorney General enlisted the expertise of Dr. Edward Latessa, the nation's "godfather" of corrections research at the University of Cincinnati Corrections Institute. His life's work has been to translate in-depth research on changing offender mentality and behavior into practical methods that can be applied in the corrections setting. Dr. Latessa's program design of BOT-LA involves a multi-pronged approach for at least 6 months while inmates are locked up.

“These inmates have a lot of risk-factors, not just one. You can’t just get them off drugs,” said Latessa. “Their peers, their thoughts, their environmental factors all have to change in order for them to change.” Latessa’s blueprint for BOT-LA is based on social learning theory which includes cognitive behavioral therapy. Change happens dynamically from the inside out, and outside in. So while inmates are learning a new way of being, they are called “students.” Weekly classes teach life and coping skills where the men practice and rehearse real life situations, learning how to change the way they deal with issues and events that trigger negative behavior.

“I was shocked by the negativity in the beginning,” said Dr. Shanley Rhodes, deputy director at Five Keys Charter Schools, a BOT-LA partner that administers the educational component of the program. From the start, Dr. Rhodes realized she wanted to be hands-on, getting to know the students individually to understand how the program would help change them. “It’s a difficult thing that these men are doing, facing demons, looking in the mirror. It’s hard to change, but that’s why this program is amazing. They can’t just start it and give up.”

At first some students would become resentful of being taught basic life skills, anger management, and how to cope with negative thoughts—“baby stuff” they would call it. They soon realized that they don’t actually have those basic skills. They also learn to create more positive relationships through working with their counselors and each other. Dr. Rhodes said the BOT-LA program coursework and relationship-building dynamics create a culture that inspires these inmates to greater maturity.

In the trenches helping these inmates mature are four deputy probation officer-coaches who serve as out of custody case managers for these BOT-LA students. Reaver Bingham, Deputy Chief of Field Services for the Los Angeles Probation Department has these case managers in his chain of command. He has seen the relationships built between the probation counselors and students while attending the BOT-LA program inside create the bonds needed to ensure they stay on track after they are released.

Probation coaches act as bridges between the student and the world outside the jail cell. Coaches help them navigate life skills and craft the roadmap, or “personalized exit plan,” they’ll use once they are out, including connecting inmates to specific referrals for housing, jobs, vocational training, higher education, even teaching them how to get a birth certificate or Social Security number.

This positive one-on-one relationship with a probation coach is especially important since there is no mandatory supervision of the students after release—they have to want to stay in contact.

“We dissuade them from old peer groups and get them with pro-social groups,” said Bingham. “We see the importance of developing and establishing this therapeutic alliance right away, at the beginning of the program. We convince them to stay positive. It has a positive impact on the community and the individual.”

Building a New Foundation—Outside

With a personalized exit plan to build a new life, inmates feel a renewed sense of hope and self-confidence. But within the Back on Track program, that exit plan is not the end of the road to recovery. Dr. Latessa’s research has shown that connecting these men with continuous positive support outside helps them overcome the inevitable bumps they will encounter in the community.

Latessa’s blueprint for the program includes a new and unique component called “Influencer Training.” In this component, Dr. Latessa’s research associates visit communities and conduct a 6-hour skill-building training session for the people who have the greatest influence and proximity to an inmate—spouses, parents, ministers, siblings, employers. It teaches influencers specific counseling skills that help a former inmate stay positive, focused and on track.

“It’s a completely new approach to helping these men with re-entry,” said Jodi Sleyo, a trainer and one of Dr. Latessa’s lead research associates. “By training family members and others in their lives with the same skills we used to train probation officers and case managers, we’re ensuring a better foundation for their successful return to the community.”

A successful return to the community often includes very practical solutions to real problems—inmates will often need a job, housing, continued counseling and substance abuse rehabilitation. Finding those solutions for inmates is a passion for Dave Bates, a retired former Deputy Sheriff, and now Director of Job Development for BOT-LA partner Five Keys Charter Schools. Bates relays story after story about individual inmates and how the BOT program opened their eyes to what they were missing in life. It’s a testament to Bates’ investment in the program and these men.

New Horizons

Assistant Sheriff Terri McDonald says expecting recidivism to drop to zero at any time is not realistic. But she says lowering it from 50 percent to 30 percent is a miracle—a new horizon that is possible in this “village” approach to post-release support. It’s an approach in which she actively participates, regularly facilitating the “Keeping It Real” class by bringing in former inmates to encourage a new perspective. She was there on the day of the big Father’s Day discussion, a day when it seemed to her and the BOT-LA students that a new narrative was emerging.

“As men, that forum on that day let us take off our jail uniform in our minds and just be dads,” said Leonard Lemos. “We don’t normally open up like that, but we were in a different environment, and it allowed us to be our real selves.” Lemos wants to return to BOT-LA to speak to students as a former inmate, helping them create a new, redemptive story for themselves.

McDonald and the other BOT-LA partners agree that their investment in the program fosters a belief in these men that they can finally invest in themselves, and restore a community to wellness. “From the first day I met these men, many were agitated,” she recalled. “Today, the group can talk about deeper issues. They’re changing.”

