

## Merced County Takes Comprehensive Approach for Managing Youthful Offenders

*“In California, most probation departments follow a law enforcement model. By implementing a DRC, my officers will learn evidence-based practices and ‘What Works’ in community corrections. There will be a paradigm shift in how they think about probation as they see offenders should be held accountable, but they can also change with good programming.”*

Brian L. Cooley,  
Chief Probation Officer  
Merced County Probation Department



*Merced County Chief Probation Officer Brian Cooley holds the Challenge Award plaque awarded to the county by the California State Association of Counties for Merced’s innovative Day Reporting Center. From left, Chris Bobbitt, Merced County Assistant Chief Probation Officer, Matt Moore, BI West Coast Director, and Jim Wiltshire, CSAC Deputy Director, were on hand when the award was presented at a county commissioner meeting.*

### **HIGHLIGHTS:**

- State funding helped Merced County launch Day Reporting Center designed to manage young offenders locally
- Juveniles and 18-to-25 year old offenders are being directed to intensive supervision and evidence-based programming supplemented with electronic monitoring
- BI was able to rapidly implement these programs to support local probation efforts
- Merced County won 2009 Challenge Grant award from California State Association of Counties for setting up this program

## CALIFORNIA CORRECTIONS PROBLEM IMPACTS COUNTIES

With California's prison system at almost double its capacity and the state facing a \$15 billion deficit for FY 2008-09, the state seeks solutions that will trim costs while maintaining public safety. One specific area where costs are off-the-chart is in state juvenile justice operations. The Department of Juvenile Justice once detained more than 10,000 juvenile offenders. Since that high mark, the state has purposefully tried to reduce the juvenile inmate population. Today, the state spends \$500 million annually to house only 2,000 juveniles—\$250,000 per juvenile inmate.

While the costly juvenile justice infrastructure is still in place, the juvenile offender population has dropped in large part because of California Senate Bill 81, legislation that shifted responsibility for all but the most serious and violent youthful offenders to county level supervision. SB 81 earmarked funding for juvenile and under 25-year-old offender programs at the local level.

Merced County, located in the Central Valley of California, was previously the largest per capita referral source to the state juvenile justice system. Due to a very small local juvenile justice hall and limited local services, Merced County typically sent juvenile offenders to the state for supervision. As the state ratcheted back on juvenile programs, Merced County was under pressure to fill the gap.

In addition, for years Merced County's jail system was taxed by a higher than average crime rate instigated by high poverty rates, a nomadic, transient worker population associated with the Valley's agriculture industry, serious and violent



gang issues, and rapid population growth. From 2000 to 2006, the county's population jumped almost 17%—one-third of that population is 18 years old or younger.

When SB 81 funding became available, it presented the county with an opportunity to expand juvenile and youthful offender services. While counties are using this funding in a variety of ways, Merced County implemented a unique Day Reporting Center (DRC) solution with the assistance of BI Incorporated.

### MERCED COUNTY SOLUTION SEEKS LONG-TERM BENEFIT

The Merced County Probation Department is responsible for supervising 4,500 adult and juvenile offenders on felony probation. With

this new funding option, the county was determined to jumpstart its community corrections program through the implementation of rehabilitative programming that could curb future criminal thinking and turn younger offenders into contributing members of the community. The Merced County Probation Department turned to BI to open the DRC in Merced due to BI's experience with operating evidence-based criminal justice programs; BI operates more than 30 DRCs nationwide. BI initiated a relationship with Merced County in 2007 as operator of a comprehensive electronic monitoring (EM) program, which includes a range of supervision technologies such as sophisticated GPS tracking.

The Merced County DRC for adult probationers and youthful offenders (18-to-25 years old) was opened in March 2008. After just a few months, the Probation Department approached BI about opening a similar program for juvenile offenders, ranging in ages from 13 to 18 years old. In June 2008, the juvenile DRC program was opened. Located on the same campus, these two centers have completely separate operations and staff to accommodate the different needs of the adult and juvenile populations.

### ADULT DAY REPORTING CENTER

The Merced County adult DRC program includes intensive supervision, treatment and training for offenders who typically recidivate at high cost to local taxpayers. Up to 50 adults and youthful offenders can be enrolled in the DRC today—within a few months, the program reached half its capacity. Almost all of the adult DRC program participants fall within the youthful offender category. The center is also co-located with the county's EM program. This can be helpful if DRC program participants become non-compliant and staff needs to apply the additional sanctions of a Violator's Track.

Offenders who report to the DRC go through a four-phase program that includes regular reporting to the center. Offenders are placed at different levels of treatment and training based on assessed risks and needs (LSI-R®). County probation officers administer the LSI and determine if the person is a good candidate for the DRC program. Typically, the department targets mid-range offenders for the DRC. Offenders report to the center seven days a week when they begin but progress to five-day reporting, then three, then one day



a week in Aftercare. Movement forward in the program, which includes more freedom for the individual, is performance based.

DRC participants are monitored closely with daily check-ins, advanced drug-testing techniques, computerized data collection and intensive case management. Failure to comply with rules and guidelines at the DRC results in increased sanctions such as tighter curfews, house arrest or return to incarceration. Participants typically go to the DRC for six months before beginning Aftercare.

The Merced County DRC is based on "What Works" in corrections research and is designed to help offenders:

- Gain structure and stability
- Change the way they think and behave
- Learn and practice new skills for living a responsible lifestyle
- Obtain gainful employment
- Abstain from alcohol and other drug use

### GROUP CLASSES AT THE DAY REPORTING CENTER

- **Moral Reconation Therapy® (MRT®):** MRT is a systematic, step-by-step cognitive skills rehabilitation system designed to confront criminal thinking and behavior.
- **Employment Readiness:** This class teaches employment-related skills. Clients also work independently on computers in the Employment Lab.
- **Substance Abuse Treatment & Education:** The DRC offers three levels of treatment to match different levels of need.
- **Life Skills:** This class covers communication skills, problem solving, decision making, anger management, conflict resolution, financial management, healthy lifestyles, parental responsibilities, sexually-transmitted diseases, employment skills, time management, HIV/AIDS, health care and interpersonal relationships.
- **Anger Management:** This class offers coping strategies for anger.
- **Parenting Skills:** This class teaches parents easy-to-learn techniques and logical strategies for parenting.
- **Community Connections:** This unique program within the DRC links offenders with local resources that can assist in stabilizing the offender in the community.

### JUVENILE DAY REPORTING CENTER

The juvenile DRC can currently manage up to 25 juveniles. It has most of the same elements of the adult DRC, with adjustments for 13-to 18-year-old population. Many of these juvenile offenders were previously housed at state facilities or at

