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Program seeks to keep young criminals from reoffending

By: SARAH WILKINS

- Staff Writer

SAN DIEGO COUNTY

---- At 20,



*Probation Officer Randy Ream, left, talks with Marcum Antonizio of Oceanside on Tuesday outside the Vista Courthouse. Antonizio is part of a new Youthful Offender Reentry Program that begins the probation counseling a few months before release which may help the reentry process go smoother.*

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Marcum Antonizio has already spent nearly half his life under the watchful eye of the county probation department.

The Oceanside man was first put into juvenile probation at 13, and has been in and out of custody since. He was last released in July, after serving time for assault with a deadly weapon, but this time could be different ---- he is one of the first inmates released under the Youthful Offenders Re-entry Program, a county effort aimed at keeping "high risk" probationers from reoffending.

"Growing up, I made mistakes, I guess," said Antonizio, as he sat calmly but quietly with his probation officer during an interview last week. "I spent my whole high school on probation, on house arrest. I had to pay with my youth."

The effort ---- which started as a post-release pilot program in 2005 and added an in-custody component in April ---- requires probationers aged 18 to 24 years to participate in educational programs, alcohol, drug and behavioral counseling, and vocational assistance. It also requires probationers to meet with their probation officers prior to release and attend a class detailing conditions of probation.

The program is so new that no official statistics are available. However, preliminary numbers show that fewer than 10 percent of probationers involved in the program have since been re-arrested and sent to state prison,

probation spokesman Derryl Acosta said.

The program assists a total of 320 offenders on formal probation, includes men from the Descanso Detention Facility and women from Las Colinas. The women's program does not provide in-custody assistance.

It targets the 18 to 24 age group because such "youthful offenders" are notoriously high risk, making up 32 percent of the county's arrests even though they consist of only 13 percent of the population.

"Physically, they're men, but mentally, not yet," said John Keifer, a deputy probation officer at Descanso who works daily with the program's inmates. "Some have kids already, substance abuse issues are huge. That determines it for them, sometimes."

According to county statistics, arrests in the age group include 53 percent of all arrests for homicide and robbery, 48 percent for weapons, 46 percent for auto thefts, 42 percent for kidnapping and 34 percent for drunken driving. Housing these inmates costs more than \$5 billion annually in taxpayer dollars ---- a number that could eclipse what is spent on higher education within five years, probation officials said.

The program starts two months prior to an inmate's release. Inmates selected for mandatory participation in it must be considered at "high risk" of reoffending because of past criminal history, substance abuse or other factors, and are in custody for crimes including vehicle theft, burglaries and assault, authorities said. Some in the program are involved in gangs.

In California, authorities said the need to reduce the rate of reoffending is clear: Last year, 95 percent of all state prisoners were released, and 60 percent of San Diego County's freed prisoners ended back in custody within three years.

"(Jail) is kind of a breeding ground for more criminal activity," said Randall Ream, Antonizio's probation officer. "This tries to change their thought process in custody, to get (probationers) thinking of how to be successful."

As part of the program, probation officers create an individualized "case plan" that outlines post-incarceration goals, such as continuing education and attending substance abuse meetings. Traditional probation programs do not include goals or education plans.

Through this, authorities said they are trying to reverse the old model of the probation system, which gives probationers little help after leaving jail. Traditionally, offenders do not meet their probation officers before release, and are given no post-incarceration counseling or aid.

"When they get out of jail, they're not meeting with their probation officers," Keifer said. "We never see them, and they go straight to having a warrant, and go right back into the system."

Additionally, studies conducted by the California Policy Research Center reported that 42 percent of the state's inmates had a "high need" for alcohol-abuse treatment, and 56 percent had a high need for drug treatment. At the same time, the studies reported that fewer than 9 percent got any treatment.

In other cases, offenders don't know that they can still hold jobs despite their criminal records, or don't know where to start looking for employment, authorities said.

"Most of them didn't have nothing to look forward to when they get out," Antonizio, who had previously worked as a pipeline inspector in Alaska, said of his fellow inmates at Descanso.

Added Sean E. Cole, a supervising probation officer for the program: "There's a big disjoint between release and community supervision (outside of jail). This helps get over the disjoint."

As part of the program, probationers are under "intensive" supervision, meaning that they are subject to monthly visits with probation officers, random drug testing and fourth waiver searches. They are also checked to make sure that they continue schooling and pay restitution.

"He sees me so often he's on top of everything that goes on with me," Antonizio said of his contact with Ream. "He's able to see that I do everything right, and if I do something wrong, he knows about it. It's not a surprise."

Changing the relationship between probation officers and probationers, particularly by allowing in-custody meetings, builds relationships early, creating more accountability and giving offenders a clearer picture of the sometimes-confusing conditions of probation, authorities said.

"Enforcement is part of it, but that's not why I'm here," Ream said. "I'm here to make changes. If I can keep one person out of custody, that's a success."

Antonizio said that now, he is working toward a job in commercial diving, and is participating in weekly court-mandated classes.

"I needed to change what I was doing or spend my life in custody all the time," he said. "I was hindering my career by spending all my time in jail."

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