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## Contra Costa Scrambles to Prepare for Prison Reform

Richmond police chief: “I don’t think my community has a hint of the tidal wave that’s coming”

By: [Julia Landau, HealthyCal](#)

“All of us are in frantic mode,” said Contra Costa County’s Chief Probation Officer Phil Kader. He spoke as he passed out a tentative budget to the 14 criminal justice and social service professionals who attended a recent budget meeting of the Public Safety Realignment Executive Committee for Contra Costa County.

On Oct. 1, AB 109, known as the Public Safety Realignment bill, will shift responsibility for people convicted of non-serious, nonviolent, non-sexual offenses to counties. The legislation was prompted by a Supreme Court ruling that California’s overcrowded prisons violated the constitutional rights of inmates by denying them adequate health care.

Kader became supervisor of the county’s realignment plans in June, as mandated by the state law.

“I see this as an extraordinary opportunity and an extraordinary challenge,” Kader said.

These discussions have brought together the disparate agencies that manage California’s convicts — mental health care and other service providers, sheriff’s deputies, judges, lawyers, probation officers and county administrators.

Prison realignment is a “culture change,” says Kader. “There are all kinds of new offenses that you can’t go to prison for.” The new law encourages counties to seek alternatives to lockup, including treatment for people who have underlying issues like addiction.

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“The goal is twofold,” Kader said. “Money will obviously have to go to compliance. There is a whole slew of folks who will be kept locally and this is an amazing responsibility. We have to have adequate

supervision and jail space to house the people who are going to be sentenced and not sent to prison. And we have to be aggressive with the delivery of services.”

Those returning from prison homeless, drug addicted or mentally ill, however, will find that slots for residential alcohol and drug treatment or psychiatric evaluations, and even shelter beds, are scarce.

“There are long waiting lists,” said Cynthia Belon, county director of Behavioral Health and Homeless Services. “You start to lose that window of opportunity if you tell someone to wait days or weeks.”

Belon and other advocates want to develop a “one-stop shop” to help people succeed with re-entry. The center wouldn’t provide all services on site, but could offer accurate information on services and eligibility requirements for assistance programs.

Currently, lack of transportation and information restrict access to social services. It is too common, for instance, for those with little money to go from place to place, only to discover they must return with this or that form.

Kader wants his probation officers to function as case managers, a transformation from law enforcement agent to re-entry link for returning prisoners. Kader adds, however, that it won’t be easy for the newly released to see their probation officer as an ally instead of an adversary, or “to get the message to our clients that we’re on their side and not there to send them back to jail.”

“This is a population who’s been alienated from services for a significant amount of time,” said Belon, who represents County Health Services on the committee. “Part of the skill set in working with people with chronic mental health and or drug issues is getting them to a place where they are wanting to seek services.”

Because Contra Costa imprisons fewer people than do most California counties, it also received less funding than counties that send people to state prison in higher numbers. Counties already pursuing alternatives to prison get punished financially, Kader said, echoing the complaint of probation chiefs in San Francisco and Alameda counties.

Treatment programs and social services will receive much less of the initial funding for AB 109 than will county law enforcement. Community-based organizations like Richmond’s go-to shelters won’t get any funding associated with AB 109.

Most initial AB 109 money — \$3.5 million out of a total of \$4.5 million — will go to the probation department, which will see an increase in its caseload and need to hire new officers; and the sheriff’s department, which must stock and staff the jails for the offenders moving to local custody, starting with an estimated 60 to 80 new offenders under local supervision next month.

Administrators are pursuing grants from private foundations and a federal grant of \$750,000 for a countywide strategic re-entry plan that focuses on rehabilitation and re-entry services rather than law enforcement.

Richmond police Chief Chris Magnus, however, questions such county-centric plans.

“This is going to disproportionately hit Richmond,” he said. “I don’t think my community has a hint of the tidal wave that’s coming.”

“There is a notable absence of any community participation,” Magnus said.

Richmond has a disproportionate number of “re-entering” residents — formerly incarcerated people, most of whom are required to return to their neighborhoods without employment help in a brutal job market and an inadequate social service cushion.

“It’s scary to watch it unfolding in this way,” said Magnus, although he appreciated Kader’s “difficult job.”

The police have lost a significant tool in combating street violence with AB 109, Magnus said. They will no longer be able to send people back to prison for parole violations.

“With retaliatory gang violence,” Magnus said, “one of the few measures we have is the ability to revoke parole and incarcerate.”

Nor will AB 109 help fund rehabilitation programs in Richmond. Seventy percent of Richmond’s re-entering residents are homeless, according to a survey conducted by the Safe Return Team. The research team, hired by the nonprofit Pacific Institute, is made up of formerly incarcerated residents who interviewed a hundred new parolees.

With its AB 109 allocation, the health department will reserve eight beds in the county’s two single-adult shelters for parolees with nowhere else to sleep.

“If 70 percent are homeless and nobody wants to do anything about affordable housing,” said re-entry researcher Eli Moore, “even if probation handles supervision a hundred times better than parole — if people don’t have a place to live, not much can change.”

Richmond Housing Authority director Tim Jones said, “The law provides an impediment to subsidized housing for people who are released with a felony hit.” People with felony convictions or arrests within the last five years are banned from public housing without a discretionary waiver from HUD.

Housing is essential, Jones said, but it is not enough.

“You can’t just say, ‘Here’s a subsidized rental, go live there,’” Jones said. “You have to start in the prison — so they’ve already taken on some of the considerations and life skills they’re going to need when they come out.”

Despite these challenges, Kader and many of his associates from the counties believe they can outdo

the state in helping parolees stay out of prison.

But it's an experiment, Kader said.

“The goal is to do things differently — our charge is to come up with a strategy that will help our new clients to stay out of trouble.”