

Federal Judicial Center
Off Paper - Episode 12:
A Conversation with U.S. Probation Community Resources
Specialist Clark Porter

Mark Sherman: From the FJC in Washington, D.C., I'm Mark Sherman and this is *Off Paper*. In 1986 17-year-old Clark Porter of St. Louis went on trial in federal court for robbing a post office at gunpoint. He was convicted and sentenced to 35 years in prison. Because the then new U.S. sentencing guidelines were not yet in force, Clark was released on parole after serving 15 years. Following his release while on parole, Clark took classes at Forest Park Community College and then Washington University. He went on to get his master's degree in social work at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. For the past 11 years Clark has been the community resource specialist for the U.S. Probation Office in the Eastern District of Missouri, the very same office that recommended his 35-year prison sentence to the court and the very same office that supervised him on parole.

In this episode of *Off Paper*, I'll talk with Clark Porter about his life before and after his conviction, how he ended up working for U.S. Probation, and what it's like to now be assisting people who are in the same position he was in not too long ago - folks who are leaving federal prison and reentering the community on supervised release. So we've got an ex-felon turned social worker, turned federal court staff member in the

house today folks. Sounds crazy? Well, it is sort of crazy. Crazy good. Clark Porter, welcome to *Off Paper*.

Clark Porter: How're you doing?

Mark Sherman: Thanks so much for being here. I want to begin by asking you what your life was like before you were arrested at 17 on the post office robbery charge and what were some of the things that were happening in your life at that time. I know it was all a while ago, but if you could tell us some of the things that were happening in your life at the time and how you ended up getting involved in the robbery.

Clark Porter: Well, I'm basically the typical social service project, if you will. I started off in the foster care system from the age of 4 to 15 due to severe neglect. My father was an alcoholic. My mother, she was illiterate. She can't read or write and she had limited intellectual capacity. So that's why I ended up in the system. While I was in the system there was more the same abuse and neglect. At the age of 15 I was tired of the system so I basically walked off from a group home. I ended up on the streets. My sister just gave me the rough overall. She said, you know, you have two choices. You either hustle or go to school; which one is it?

School wasn't an option for me because I need to put food in my mouth literally. So I started hustling, doing petty things and ended up meeting my co-defendant when I was about 16.

I was just fascinated with him. I mean he had a pocketful of money, he always kept a gun. And he had him a hustle. So I kind of latched onto him and ended up in the Division of Youth Services for what we called boosting back then. Isotoner Gloves and I got in there. I got back out. And then he and I got back together again. My situation was just as dire as it was when we first met one another. He was like, hey, I do robbery; you want to go do some? I started off doing small things and then it escalated into the robbery of the post office.

Mark Sherman: So you were 17 years old and being tried as an adult in federal court. Sort of moving a little bit fast forward through that, when you found out that you would be sentenced to 35 years in prison, what was that like?

Clark Porter: I needed to figure it because it wasn't real to me.

Mark Sherman: Sure.

Clark Porter: I was going to trial just because it was just an option. After Judge James Meredith hit the gavel and said 35 years, that's when I realized I had 35 years. I understood the magnitude of it then. But during the process, I didn't understand what was going on. I didn't really understand the procedures half the time.

Mark Sherman: Right. So there you were, you were slapped with a 35-year prison sentence. You're 17 years old basically

being tried as an adult in federal court and convicted. So you go off to the BOP. What was that like for you? What were some of the things you remember? At what point, for example, did you make a decision that you wanted to get back in school and go to college? I mean that seems like a big leap for somebody like yourself who was coming from where you were coming from.

Clark Porter: Well, college wasn't the idea. It was more something that just came about. It came about two ways. One, I had a guy whose name was Pork Chop. He was like the leader of the hall. He was pretty much doing life on the installment plan. And he said, man, you ain't doing nothing. Why don't you go get your GED? I said I can't get my GED. I don't want to be bothered with it. He's like, I'd bet you \$10 you can get your GED.

So I went up there and I took the test and passed it. They said, what do you want to do? I said I'll go ahead and take the GED. Afterwards, it was like a week later, I got a call from the UNICOR Factory by the teacher. He said I just need another body to sit in here and take the GED test, you want to do it? I was like, yeah, I guess I'll do it. I flunked it by four points or something of that nature. And he was like, hey, take it again, we got another one coming up. And he said take the whole thing because they're averaging your score up. So I took it and I passed it.

As far as college goes it was more of something to do within prison to pass the time. I wasn't committed to it. It wasn't real to me. That's when I was at FCI Oxford. It wasn't until I went to Leavenworth that it became real to me. I started focusing on and really trying to do something with it.

Mark Sherman: When you say that it became real to you, you ended up -- you were transferred to Leavenworth. It became real to you at that time. So what was happening just sort of in your own mind that sort of enabled it to become real to you?

Clark Porter: The people that I was around. Because back then, when you did federal time, you were at federal, I mean most of them were highly intelligent. Most of them were very sophisticated criminals. Most of them were at large organizations. These are the type of criminals. You have Michael Milken types, you had the Bernie Madoffs. You had John Gotti. You have real life terrorists with real world views on how they saw the world should be ran. So these are the types of guys I was around.

So to pass time in prison was, hey, Clark here's a book and the book would be on something like Tolstoy, it would be on the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. You know, these were the books given me - Walter Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. All these are - just like a think tank. It's like in order to be a part of the think tank, you have to pursue

intellect. So I ended up going back to college and doing well in Leavenworth.

Mark Sherman: I'm very interested to know sort of about the next step because the next step eventually, at least, was returning to the community. You ended up doing around 15 years. That's a long time to be outside of the community. It got you three hots and a cot. You've got basically -- your whole life is programmed, as you know, while you were in prison. So 15 years later you were returning back to the community. What was the hardest part for you?

Clark Porter: I was apathetic about being back. What I mean by that is whereas let's say someone was gone in camp for 15 years, they're fascinated by, you know, the Dairy Queen is no longer there. It now has an apartment building [indiscernible] dealer on it. Those things, you know, it's kind of like odd. Well, not apathetic but I was in denial about how long I had been in prison I think as a form of a defense mechanism to get me through it because I didn't really look at the magnitude of how long I had been gone. My focus was just on how I got to start executing the plan because no one is going to see me and provide for me. I have to stand up on my own and take responsibility for my life.

So that was all my focus, rebuilding. It was not on let me go find a date, let me go find all the fellows I left behind. It was never about that.

Mark Sherman: As you were sort of transitioning into the community, at some point obviously you reported to U.S. Probation. You had to start your parole term. I wonder what that was like for you just in terms of starting that supervision process and meeting your PO, how that relationship started out. How did it evolve or did it evolve over time?

Clark Porter: To be honest with you, I had expectations of what a PO was. And there was the expectation where I was going to see a white guy from rural America trying to tell me about life and how to live life. And my attitude, basically it's going to be, if I got that law enforcement, push back something, my attitude would have been f.u. Plain and simple. I mean, there's no other way to say it, you know, because that's what we were used to, that cops and robbers relationships. That's all my life, how to deal with the system. I wasn't expecting any support or any help.

But what ended up happening is I ended up with a probation officer, African American, looked just like me came from the same community as me, and understood the same struggles, understood my struggles. I think to Chief Burris's credit, it wasn't just about the -- let me just state that it wasn't just

about the diversity in terms of skin color or race or gender. It was all about the diversity of ideals that he interjected into the agency.

So when I met this guy, he was all about rehabilitation. He was all about finding a way. He made a comment the other day which was Troy Stewart who was my probation officer. He made a comment that you always got to make it, put the onus back on the offender. Meaning that what is it that you want for yourself, not what I as the probation officer wants, but what do you want for yourself. That was the approach he always took with me, and it just so happened that it worked for me.

Mark Sherman: Was that how you ended up deciding to pursue community college? Was it the support in part, at least that you were receiving from and the encouragement you were receiving from your PO?

Clark Porter: Yeah. Because it really was a discussion with him, and he said, the first thing he said was, you know, you've got to make some changes. So I want you to know to let go of the prison mentality. You've got to have to humble yourself to a lot of things out here. I was like I won't do that, I won't do it, and I won't do that. I will be me. I will keep it real. You know, okay, so he let me do my own thing. He allowed trial and error to take place. When I got into

community college I realized, man, I'm not in prison no more. You can't get upset when someone bumps you.

Man, I got these long dreadlocks. It's not allowing me even though. It's kind of a trend now. It still limits people. So I said, okay, it's time to cut the dreadlocks, time to have that white bread look of khaki pants, a polo shirt, casual dress shoes. I started taking on that approach and attitude, you know, and I allowed myself to be criticized by well-meaning people. I learned along the way because I'd been gone. I stopped my development stopped when I was 17 years old. I walked out at 32 when I still had the mind of a 17-year-old.

Mark Sherman: Right. One of the things I want to ask you also is -- because, as you know, based on the work that you do and certainly I have observed over the many years that I've been doing the work that I do is, it's very difficult for somebody who's returning to the community to extricate themselves from sort of the --

Clark Porter: The older crowd [sounds like].

Mark Sherman: Yeah. You know, the bad influences back in the hood. I'm wondering how you were able to navigate around that to not get sucked back into it.

Clark Porter: Well, and this is no knock but the halfway house was located right on the stroll. You got your drug dealers in the neighborhood; you got the drug dealers in the

halfway house. You're not going to avoid it. What it did teach you is that you can be in it but not of it or vice versa. What I mean by that is when I got my first apartment it was \$295. It was right on the corner of Goodfellow and Clara where they sold dope outside of my apartment. So I could be in it or of it. My thing was I got to be more, working for a job. I was on the bus at 7:00, at school at 8:00. I spent my whole day there. Then I was from 9:00 to work, back home by 11:00. That was my routine. I was not part of the community. I lived in the community.

That's what I say for a lot of guys just because of where you come from doesn't matter. You know, you got to start doing things that are more pro-social in nature. Until you can get a grip of where you're at because they're social environment is standing in the corner smoking a joint. Now you got to learn how to go to the art museum and look at art. Or go play handball on the handball court with guys who are doctors and lawyers.

Mark Sherman: So how on earth did you end up working with U.S. Probation in St. Louis?

Clark Porter: A combination of my probation officer and Doug Burris. I knew my probation officer I could do school or something like that. I was like, officer, I'll graduate. He said, what do you want to do? I said I'm thinking about working with the juvenile offenders. He said, no, don't do that. He said, you got to get the 25-year-olds. He said, yeah, you got

to get them at 20 - 18 to 25. He said work with adults. I said I can't do that. He told me work with adults. It's where you'll have more success than you have with juveniles because they're not ready yet.

Anyways, fast forward, I was working with College Bound. Doing a cognitive group with students. I was volunteering with -- what's the name of the place? There's a place on -- it was Project Hope where they provide housing to ex-offenders. They needed another person to do a training on a -- I think the training was, it was a two-day training. Miniature training OWDS, I forgot the name of it. I think it's OES, Offender employment specialist, that's the training, absolutely. Yeah.

Mark Sherman: Right. Yes.

Clark Porter: Yeah. So anyways, I needed a job because I was graduating. I was looking and looking. I got interviewed but no job. I saw Quincy Fountain's name on the card that said employment's specialist. So I called and said let me drop my card off to you, drop my resume off to you. And if you find anything, let me know. So he said sure. So when I dropped my resume on to him, I decided to give the chief one as well because he got me employed with - Connections to Success a nonprofit organization. I said, hey, if you got me there, you might find another place for me.

Then the next day, it was a Saturday, I was working with the College Bound kids. I see the 244 number. All right, what's the deal you calling me? It must be the chief. He said, where are you trying to work? I said right now I have in mind with juvenile offenders but I'm over right now. He said come see me Monday. Then he offered me a part-time position. So I'm going to offer you a part-time. And I would take it because it's like he already figured it out and saying work for federal probation. I said, okay, I'll take that. He said give me time. Then later on he said, me and Judge Jackson talked and we decided we're just going to bring you on. So that was how it happened.

Mark Sherman: Wow. And this was after you had graduated from social work school. Is that correct?

Clark Porter: Yup.

Mark Sherman: Okay. So my next question is really about how the staff in U.S. Probation reacted to having you as a colleague at the very beginning.

Clark Porter: Frustration and fear, because I think the frustration was how did he deserve this job. And the third was, you know, is he still an ex-offender, you know, does he still have that prison mentality. And then I think a lot bigger than that was everyone at the Marshals Service. I didn't have a badge for a year. I had to go through the metal detector. My

only badge, my badge only worked at the probation office. They came down and explained to me you're never going to have a badge, so just deal with it. Because you are an ex-offender, am I responsible?

Because it's 2000 now, so I got a job and the economy is not hiring. I'm not worried about the badge. I can deal with it. So I had those three things against me. You know, the fear of the officers, the anger about me being hired, then dealing with the Marshals. Then nobody knows what to do with me because the position, it was a new position with all the districts.

What I did was - Doug allowed me to make the position what I wanted to make it. Him and Scott both. So what I did was starting to create, I never allowed anyone to tell me what I couldn't do. They all said, well, can he drop? I'll live by that they're [indiscernible] giving the latest they're always doing drops. So everybody was like, he's doing drops. I'd been doing it for about a month now. He's just now figured it out.

So those are things that I did to get myself integrated enough, and totally creating programs with Lisa White for mentoring, intensive supervision and other things.

Mark Sherman: Obviously you've been there now for I guess 10, 11 years. So things have evolved for you. How have things changed since those early years? I mean at first it must have been just weird for everybody.

Clark Porter: Yeah.

Mark Sherman: How have things evolved for you in the department since those early years?

Clark Porter: Good and bad because they trust my judgment. Bad because they think I know everything. That's like as it relates to community service resources because it's like, people coming to me asking, how do I get this guy medical coverage? I'm like I don't know. How do you get housing? I don't know. But for the most part I do know my role and my position. I'm very involved with a lot of things. I'm very abreast with a lot of things that I take, where I would go with those to take place in the community. Sometimes people kind of I guess take it for granted that I was supposed to know everything because I'm well informed about a lot of things. So it's kind of like if you don't know, I guess it don't exist or it's not possible.

I get a lot of people coming to do those scenarios and they ask me what should they do. For the most part I can give them an answer and there are times I can't, and I'll admit it. I'm like I have no idea how to do that, you might have to look - not to be funny, you might have to look it up on the phonebook or something of that nature.

Mark Sherman: It sounds like one thing that hasn't changed for you has been the support that you've gotten from

your chiefs. First you mentioned Doug Burris and now his successor Scott Anders are big supporters of you. I suspect that that has been fairly constant the over years.

Clark Porter: Oh yeah. Because I think in my position, like I said, it's still even though to my knowledge I have no - - the community resource specialist is at least 10 or 12 years old. I still get calls. I still am hearing too why don't they allow me to work directly with offenders, they don't allow me to do this or do that. You know you're hampered. Whereas, with Scott and Doug, it was like here's a job, here's a computer, figure it out. I will assist you along the way, but pretty much you got to figure it out and find your way. It wasn't in a rough-handed way.

The position is new enough to create, to make it what you want to make it. For the folks in reentry - I'm heavy on reentry. I'm heavy on education. I'm heavy on training. They allow me to do that, and then they allow me to do other things. Then it becomes a thing where it's about now you're just another person in the office. I don't mean that as a criticism. But you really are, you're just another person in the office. You're not the ex-convict. You're not the community resource specialist who don't know the job. You're just another person in the office. You got to go by the same rules which is do more with less. I hear that a lot.

Mark Sherman: Clark Porter, a social worker and community resource specialist with the Eastern District of Missouri's U.S. Probation Office is my guest. When we come back, I'll ask Clark to delve more deeply into the challenges faced by reentering citizens and about the programs and resources he has developed and used to assist some of the highest risked people on supervised release. You are listening to *Off Paper*.

Lori Murphy: Hi. I am Lori Murphy, a colleague of Mark Sherman and head of the Executive Education group at the FJC. We have a podcast that focuses on leadership in the federal courts called *In Session: Leading the Judiciary* that I think you'll like. Each episode features current research and cutting-edge insights into leadership.

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Mark Sherman: Welcome back. Clark, I want to take some time here and ask you to go a bit more deeply into discussing the challenges faced by people who are reentering the community from prison. First maybe talk about when in your opinion reentry begins and what happens from there.

Clark Porter: Ideally you want reentry to begin from the day that you walk out. But that's not realistic for most people because they're not looking at what's ahead for most guys coming out. So typically a guy he starts looking towards reentry six months to a year before getting out. The problem is that's not enough time for him to process what's going to take place. So a guy, as soon as he gets out, they make all these pledges and promises to themselves. But when the door opens, it's like they're off and running and did not focus.

That's where the problem is for most of them, they don't get focused. Then most you have an addiction and they start falling back into those same patterns, back to the same routine. They go back to the same community, they look up the same friends, and then they're right back in that cycle again. So they don't know how to remove themselves in those environments, removing themselves from those friends. I mean

because even though you say change people, places and things, it's not an easy process. I'll explain that to you later as to why it is not an easy process or I can explain it to you now.

Mark Sherman: Yeah. Let's talk about it now. It sort of goes back to the question I had asked you earlier just about your own experience and about how you did not get re-involved when you went back to the neighborhood. You had said you can either be in the community or of the community, and you said you were living in the community but you did not feel that you were of the community. So let's talk about it now.

Clark Porter: For me, I made the decision that I wasn't going back. So that was step one. Step two was I had to replace it with things realistically. So I immersed myself in education and I did the same thing that I did in prison, I programmed. My program was like get up in the morning at 5:00. I worked out. I was on the bus at 7:00. I was at school by 8:00. That was where I stayed until my class until 9:00. That was my routine.

I did everything to keep myself away and along the way I developed new relationships. I never opened up those old doors. I mean I didn't looked up anybody. If I had to see somebody I knew from years ago, hey, man, how are you doing, can I get your number, I give the wrong number. Or they wouldn't get my number at all. So those are the things that I

did to protect myself. I kept myself in the structured environment with everything I did. The minute I wanted to get high, I found a way to replace it.

In my case, I started volunteering a lot within the community. I started working at food pantries with the Urban League. Then becoming a court appointed special advocate for the community. They get to choose or assign us to a county. Then I did a host of other things along the way so I'd stay confident. Then I learned you can pad your resume with these volunteer jobs and can help me with the rest as well as to give back to the community. At the end of the day, when you ask me, what did I do to make a change? I made myself a part of the community, that's what I would say, rather than allow myself to exist on the margins of the community.

Mark Sherman: That sounds extraordinarily difficult to do-

Clark Porter: It is.

Mark Sherman: -- and I suspect that you in your work now, you are sort of helping folks navigate that. I'm going back to that issue of when reentry begins and that folks in your opinion don't start thinking about it until it's sort of too late. You're getting folks when they are starting supervision. I'm curious to know what techniques you use with folks who are

reentering the community so that they can try to navigate the community and reentry as you did.

Clark Porter: First I do the things that were done for me or what weren't done for me. For the things that were done for me, that was a form. They used to give us free books. I think it was that thing of someone who sends free books to prison or I think that you write them. You just tell them the topic and they'll send you a book close to what you wanted. One day they sent me a couple of books and they had a form that said send \$25 and we will send you a list of resources in your area. So I asked my aunt. I said, hey, can you do this for me and pay for this? She was like, okay.

So when I got the form back, when I got the information back, it was everything I asked for. Mental health, going to college, substance abuse, medical care. They gave me several pages of addresses to write. So I started writing a campaign. I wrote Wash U. I wrote Armstrong [phonetic]. I wrote a community college. I sought in my writing campaign the information on these places on services that I'll need when I get out. So when I came and worked with the probation office, I said that is something that is needed. I said, how can I do that?

What we did was I got together with the employment specialist which is Quincy and he had people who specialized in

different things and created a form. That form asks you about your educational background, and it asks you do you want to go training or education. It asks you what are your needs for medical to dental, to housing and you check it off. All you do is to check it off and put it in the mail addressed it to me. Those things that you asked for is what you would get in the mail from me.

So if you asked for a two-year college and you live in Cape Girardeau I'll find a two year college in Cape Girardeau, and, I'll send it to you. If you would ask for medical and dental, and you being St. Louis City or a county area, I get as close to your area that you live and send you that information. Those are some of the things we do at reentry.

Mark Sherman: You've been doing the work for about 11 years and you're on the frontlines. You're working with both returning citizens and their POs. You're sort of helping to negotiate that relationship. I think our audience would really be interested to know what the outcomes have been for particular types of programs and for folks on probation and supervised release in terms of their specific needs. Based on your experience, what types of programs and resources that you've developed and used, just like the one that you've described have worked well but also what hasn't worked so well?

Clark Porter: Sadly the program we developed for the crack releasees and for the -- after the crack releasees. I mean it's still well. What was that number, 828, that people get?

Mark Sherman: Yes. I want to say 742, but I could be wrong about that.

Clark Porter: Yeah. I think that group of guys because these guys were basically -- they were career-based criminals. I mean just for lack of a better term. They were too rooted in their criminal behavior and thinking. So when they got out on the crack release, they just said no these guys want to get it together. Systematically all of them with the exception of two -- we started out with a group of 20. All of them either revoked or re-offended, whatever, with the exception of two. Three. I think it's three. Of those three, they all know and see that in common. They went back and got retrained. It's - they're now in career jobs. And there were two, those two started their own businesses. They're still out there doing well, all three of them. But the rest, I can't say that. They just couldn't get around being so I guess in that criminal thinking and behavior, they couldn't get past it. So they ultimately became failures.

For some of our biggest successes which surprisingly was a good number, not odd number but numbers from data that's out

there in the community is with family visits. Each year Caritas and the Greek Orthodox community get together and they fund a free trip to the federal prison. Most families go to Leavenworth. We'll pay for the hotel, pay for the bus, pay for all food expenses, and bring food into the institution that do family visits and programming. I haven't ran the numbers on everybody or looked them up, but to my knowledge only one person got revoked under a new charge. The rest of them, they're just still there waiting to get out and the other half are out and doing well. Some of them had done their family visits two or three times with us. Today the data shows that the more visit they got the less likely they are to come back. So it's been going really good with that. Then we have a couple of other things for CDL training that we do on second chance.

Mark Sherman: So that's the commercial driver's license program?

Clark Porter: Uh-hmm. Guys get employed despite their records. We go before the judge and advocate for them to get the blanket travel and get off and running. Those guys, except for one, they need a drug test or they need to do something for you. They living their lives. One of them I'm especially proud of. I'm trying to remember his last name. I think his

name was Mark. And this guy, he got out of prison. That's all he talked about, was trying to be a CDL driver.

We got him in. The next thing I know I get a call from him one day. I haven't heard from you and asked how he's doing. The guy says he lives in Florida. Now he lives there and rent. I got a bank account, I do everything. He said I got my bank account with the credit union, I did this, I did that. I cleaned up my credit and now I'm going to buy a house in a couple more weeks. We were like, wow. I think what fascinates me the most is not the guy that's sitting there in the front row listening. It's the guy when you're walking down the street going to the Walmart said, man, I remember you from Leavenworth when you came up there. I did everything you said. And I cannot remember his name. I'm like I didn't even know he was in the crowd.

Mark Sherman: So the people you least expect to succeed are often those who actually do.

Clark Porter: Yeah.

Mark Sherman: That's interesting. I want to ask you, Clark. The two most difficult aspects of reentry for returning citizens in our system are when returning folks have to make the transition from a BOP facility to a residential reentry center or halfway house, and then again when they have to transition from the halfway house to supervision. You have

been doing a lot of work on your district on what's called in-reach with the Bureau of Prisons. That's in order to improve how the agencies work together and hopefully get folks thinking about reentry before they get out. Describe what some of that work is like.

Clark Porter: Well, we've been fortunate particularly with Scott he always pushed for cognitive therapy within prison before the guys get out and we've been fortunate that we have Greenville as close as we do. It's like 45 minutes away. Once a week we go there and we do a trauma-based therapy using the MRT model. We do it for eight weeks, then we'd take a break for like a week. Then we're back at it. It's all year round.

We constantly run this trauma-based therapy with these guys, but we're not just doing the therapy. We're also doing things like, hey, what do you need? Well, I need information on housing or I need how to get child support resolved. We're doing these triage things as we're doing the cognitive stuff with them.

Mark Sherman: You're going into the institution, into the BOP institution and you're doing this work. So this is well before their release then?

Clark Porter: Right, she usually...the reentry affairs coordinator, she usually gives it to me six months to two years release and she makes it mandatory for all. I said, well, we

have volunteers. She said, no, I don't need volunteers. It's mandatory. So she calls about doing this with the St. Louis guys, Illinois guys, and whatever other guys she identified who needs it.

Then there are three of us within the office that go to the prison constantly. And just work with these guys. We go the men's side, and then we go the women's side. We repeat it until the six weeks are up. We meet guys at the halfway house with the officers. One of the officers is in charge of assigning cases. So what he'll do, he'd send me a guy or a girl about to come to the halfway house. We'll work with the halfway house to have all those guys for a weekend or for 74 hours. We go on there and we'll provide them with community resources or training and education, how to get their Social Security cards, how to get their ID. Then we'll go on to generate orders with them and have them sign all the necessary paperwork. So we're out of there. That's part of the getting introduction to us but also getting some of the paperwork done. So when they come out, then I send it off there before 24 hours trying to get some things just before they get to start with their life.

Mark Sherman: So have you found, Clark, that the in-reach work that you're doing by going in and doing the programs at the institution and working more closely with the halfway house,

have you found that that has sort of eased the transition onto supervision for folks?

Clark Porter: Yeah. It took away the fears. Because I mean, it takes away the fears. It's that if I'm constantly seeing a Sly Stuart [phonetic] or Lisa White [phonetic] or Quincy Fountain [phonetic], and I constantly see these faces and names.

Mark Sherman: These are the probation officers coming to you, isn't it?

Clark Porter: Right, these are probation officers in our district. If I constantly see people's names and faces, then I know who to ask for when I get in trouble. And I'm not talking about trouble when they're gonna drop dirty. I'm talking about I can't make rent, about to be homeless. Things like that, they'll come to you quicker because for a long while for like a year some of the people I named they went to the prisons once a month for various reasons. Quincy, he handled all the employment and educational stuff. I handle all the resources. Another probation officer handled all the family issues that are going on outside of the prison that the inmates can't handle.

So it got to the point they knew us by face. So when they got out of prison, their probation officer might have been a Joe Smith but they asked him for Quincy Fountain because they know what he specialized in. They ask for him specifically because

he knows how, and they know that he knows how to address their needs. It's a collaboration that's taking place.

Mark Sherman: I'm talking with Clark Porter of the United States Probation Office in the Eastern District of Missouri which covers St. Louis and the entire eastern portion of the state. After a short break, we'll wrap up with the discussion about how the work Clark is doing corresponds with evidence-based practice in U.S. Probation and some program areas he'd like to address better. This is *Off Paper*.

Male Voice: In 2017 FJC probation and pretrial services education introduced ten competencies for experienced U.S. Probation and Pretrial Services officers. Each competency contains a definition of a set of accompanying behaviors and an outcome that describes what the competency looks like in action.

To assist officers in furthering their professional development, the FJC recently created the experienced officer competencies' toolkit. The toolkit includes links to the Charter for Excellence, the competencies for experienced U.S. Probation and Pretrial Services officers for self-assessment, a professional development plan, and FJC programs and resources for experienced probation and pretrial services officers. The self-assessment and professional development plan are fillable PDFs, meaning you can download, complete, and save the form on your computer or device.

The toolkit also includes brief videos designed to help officers deepen their appreciation of the connection between excellence as envisioned by the charter and the competencies. The videos can be streamed or downloaded for use at training events, meetings, district retreats and the like. The experienced officers' competencies toolkit can be found by clicking on the education menu tab on the fjc.dcn homepage and then clicking on probation and pretrial services education.

Mark Sherman: Clark, as you know, for the past ten years or so, pretty much for the entire time you've been working with U.S. Probation, the system has been emphasizing the use of evidence-based practices specifically in the area of post-conviction supervision which is the subject matter area you and your colleagues focus on.

The primary emphasis has been on using actuarial risk and needs assessments with each returning citizen so that his or her risk of recidivism can be determined as well as his or her most pressing areas of need. Then the probation officer can develop a case plan to address all of that by using core correctional practices that are specifically designed to help returning folks do so successfully.

The framework used by officers is referred to as risk, needs, and responsivity. And I suspect the work that you do really comes into play in terms of responsivity where probation

really needs to adapt to the situation of the client in order to be most helpful. So can you describe specifically how your work as a community resource specialist fits with the risk-needs-responsivity model of supervision?

Clark Porter: Well, I mean really it's usually Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. You're supposed to have this trajectory up that stratification level to where now you reach your self-actualization. But how can you closely reach your self-actualization, when you can't even do the basic things with food, clothes and shelter, that's where we're at with these guys. And so we focus on getting them beyond food, clothing and shelter because right now they're mostly in survival mode. And that's all they've ever been doing. Then it's not so much as there's a conflict there, but there's a familiarity there. So you've got to get them to move beyond that.

And as a reach community resource person, if I'm going to do something to relieve a burden such as get a guy a bed, have a guy pay for his toothache and get it pulled and things like that. Now you can get some buy-in from him. Whereas before it was all about you're going to do as I say and you don't want to crack the whip if you don't and I'm gonna revoke. You don't want to do so because back in my early days of supervision, not so much mine, but when I was in the system, I would see a guy

one day, he's back in prison 30 days because he had three dirty drops and he's out. Three and out.

Now they understand that that's not the solution because he's still an addict. When you get through sending him back, with three dirty drops. So now you have to work with him. And so the thing of it is you still have to find out what's going on with him first to cause him get high in the first place. So you start finding out things. You've got to come from behind that desk and you've got to say what is wrong, what do you need as opposed to the judgment and commitment order that says you're not supposed to drop dirty. You're not supposed to engage in the illegal use of drugs. Don't nobody want to hear that when I got other issues going on. My issue is I might not be able to read or write. My issue is I got a daughter who's on her death bed and I don't have any medical coverage for her. So, real life hits people.

Just like our lives hit you and I, but we're more functional that we could deal with it. We got medical coverage or we could go to the 401(k) and resolve it. Or we can ask for something. We have resources that get different things going for us because we are functional in our society. These guys aren't. You take the guy from the beginning. At 35 years old or 40 years old he's beginning his life that he's been incarcerated for ten years. That's not an easy process.

Because it's easy for you if you lose your job right now due to a layoff, to go out and get a job.

But how about if I take you to the same individual that's used to living in a suburban lifestyle with a career job and say I'm going to take all of that from you. Now go on sell some dope and get by? How successful do you think you're going to be? Whereas, the same thing goes for you guys, you take the dope away from him. It's like go out there and manage in society and make it work. This is a rugged individualism; it's not going to work. You have to give him his tools.

Mark Sherman: Yeah. So I think that's really an important way of thinking about this because I guess the way that we do supervision now in the federal system, in order for it to be as effective as it can be, folks need to get those basic needs met first I guess is what you're saying.

Clark Porter: Right.

Mark Sherman: That's kind of where you come in to just sort of help them meet those needs so that the actual core correctional practices can actually have their intended effect. Is that fair?

Clark Porter: Right. I think the mission of this office is what has always driven me. I mean that quite literally, it's the mission of the office, say of the United State Probation Office of the Eastern District of Missouri is the fair

administration of justice. To facilitate and encourage the process of long-term positive change for those who are now under our supervision and to contribute to a safer community. To facilitate takes a long term -- to facilitate and encourage in long-term change. It's where I'm stuck at. It's what my focus is because if I can facilitate not tell you to change, not direct your change but facilitate it.

So sometimes I'm okay with evidence-based practice. But my social worker in me says meet them where they're at. Then start working with them. But if we don't meet them where they're at and we just tell them what we want, that's not going to help them. The reason it's not going to help them is because that's not what they want. You want to him to go and excel and go do to Harvard. He's just trying to make it through community college first. Everything else is all in play after that.

Mark Sherman: And he's just trying to get a bus token so that he can get to the community college.

Clark Porter: Exactly.

Mark Sherman: I mean this is sort of where I wanted this conversation to go with you because there is sort of the ideal, the evidence-based ideal in terms of how we want to assess and supervise people. I think that's obviously an important part of our system, a central part of our system, and we need just to do that. But there's also you've got to meet the client where they

are, as you say, and you've got to get them to the point where they can actually be responsive to those evidence-based practices. Right?

Clark Porter: Exactly.

Mark Sherman: So one of the things I wanted to ask you, Clark because there's been some, a degree of inconsistency across our system. It's a large system from sea to shining sea plus all the territories in the federal system. There's been some inconsistency within the districts about, for example, the use of Second Chance Act funds. Right?

Clark Porter: Uh-hmm.

Mark Sherman: This is an area where you have expertise because those funds can be used to fund community resources to get people reentering the community to the point where they can get their basic needs met. So talk about how you all have been using your Second Chance funds and just any advice you might have for how those funds could be used by other districts.

Clark Porter: Well, we use our Second Chance Act funds it's primarily for training, emergency needs, and employment-based needs. So we focus on those three areas. Emergency need - a guy doesn't have any money to get his tooth pulled 75 bucks will do that. Oh, gosh, he's got a job, a great job. But he wants to have \$300 worth of tools. Now he doesn't have a job and he barely got enough money for the bus fare to get there.

So as a result we get you your bus pass, we get your \$300 worth of tools, and we send you out there. Because it's the small things that matter more than the big things.

You just kind of remind me of my parish. They want to raise \$50,000 just to help someone, when sometimes \$500 is just as effective as \$5,000 or \$50,000.

We've come to understand that as we can get these guys trained with let's say \$5,000 and we can put them on a CDL truck and send him on his way, it only cost us \$2,500 to pay for his CDL license and instruction, we got a success because we don't have to worry about him coming back no more because he got to a way to feed himself. He got a career job. He's got benefits.

As opposed to saying taking a Second Chance fund - we're going to put it all into drug treatment. Yeah, drug treatment is fine, but I'm being honest with you. I'm not a big fan of how we do drug treatment because sometimes we just take what the community offers. Why I can offer you the lowest then. I can just filter too, we're down when we say we give them drug treatment. I'm more down with the Betty Ford process even though we can't afford it.

So those are the things I look at. And I think many of us in the office will look at if we can get these guys, if we can get you that post-secondary education or a viable training that's going to get them beyond that minimum wage and we don't

have to worry about them no more. They are all going to succeed. We just got to get them to finish. Therefore, we invest so much time and money into our Second Chance dollars because I don't have to worry about you no more if I can get you in a CDL truck and you can successfully get on the road with no problem.

Mark Sherman: So you're really looking at the use of the Second Chance funds kind of in a return on the investment sort of way.

Clark Porter: Yeah that's it.

Mark Sherman: And you're being very targeted in the district about how you're going to use those funds and it's not -- as you say, it's the small things. So if the person has got a job where they are going to need the tools but they don't have the money to buy the tools, using the funds to help them purchase the tools so that they can do the job. To use the funds to pay for a CDL training course so that they can get their licensure and then have a decent paying job with benefits. You end up with somebody like the gentleman you described before who is in Florida and doing quite well.

Clark Porter: Yes. That's really nice, yeah.

Mark Sherman: But it was interesting though is that you all have taken this sort of very strategic targeted approach to the use of these funds and you're doing it in a way to get

people to the point where they will have an opportunity to succeed and then sort of work while they're on supervision. Work with their PO, you know, so that the PO can then use the core correctional practices in a way that will address whatever dynamic risk factors they may be presenting with.

Clark Porter: Exactly, because our objective is not to see you again. You know in a nutshell. I don't want to see you four or five years from now, two years from now, or I'll retire and you're still on supervision. The objective is to get you moving in a whole other directions and to get you into that mainstream society because, you know, guys function on the margins of society. You're only limited to the welfare system or the supervision system. They're limited to these systems. The ones that get out there in the mainstream segment of society, they realize they don't have any limits. They realize all of a sudden their signature, will get them a car as opposed to going to a buy here pay here and paying a \$100 a week for a car that's 20 years old. Now, they see more and they have more opportunities for themselves. Once they get more opportunities, they're least likely to recidivate.

Mark Sherman: Uh-hum. Well, there. And you used the magic term. I mean there's all this talk about reducing recidivism. Right? I mean not just in our system but across the country and in criminal justice reform circles generally.

That's the goal of post-conviction supervision and of the criminal justice system. At least part of that system is to reduce recidivism. But the way that you're talking about it is in a very real way. It's okay to have evidence-based programs, but you got to be able to get focused to the point where they can really take advantage of those evidence-based programs.

Clark Porter: Exactly.

Mark Sherman: So I think the work that you're doing in that sense within the probation department in Missouri Eastern is really about getting folks to that point where they can succeed and where you won't see them again in the future. With the higher risk folks, we know that there's a good chance that we may see them again. But then going back to the point you made earlier in our conversation, it's like you got to work with them. You got to expect them to fail, you know.

Clark Porter: Exactly.

Mark Sherman: And they may fail several times. But if the support is there and the tools that you're using have been shown to work and are effective, then there's a really good chance that sooner rather than later they will succeed.

Clark Porter: Right. Then you've got to be careful how you measure. What I mean by that is that you are a high functioning individual. My expectation of you is you're supposed to have a master's degree. You're supposed to be

teaching somewhere, at Harvard or somewhere like that. That's my expectation of you.

But I can't have that same expectation of someone who can barely read and write, or someone who got mental health issues, of someone who have substance issues. My expectation of them is what they bring to the table.

So your success is you stop using drugs and you're working at Chick-fil-A. That's a success to me because you're not using. You're working. It's not much but you're out of trouble. You're not recidivating. One woman, some people think she's a success because, I called her so she came to mind. The Bureau of Prisons wanted to know who do we have that was successful. So I called her because she came to mind. She did the cognitive group with us. I said, how are you doing? She said, I'm going great. I just bought a car. I'm working at Domino's. Right now I'm a shift manager. I'm hoping they'll make me a manager one day.

Now to the other person it is Domino's. But it's more than that to her because now she can take care of herself in a way that she hasn't been able to do before and she's drug free. Now if you want to push her further, say, nah, that's not good enough. You need to go take this training or you need to go and get this education here because Domino's is not going to do it for you. It's not sustaining. Then you just cracked her shell.

Mark Sherman: I think that really says it all. Now, before you go Clark, I want to ask you this. What would be your one professional wish if you had access to unlimited funding to do your work?

Clark Porter: Well, I can do it for better like the State of Missouri does. They have probation officers designated in each state facility. I'd like to have a probation officer at federal level stationed in those facilities and take on some of those responsibilities that the case managers do. You know why? Because things fall through the cracks. And also you would then let that collaborative relationship with a probation officer take place early on rather than later. Because I feel that the sooner it takes place, the less fear there is that they have with the a probation officer. That's one. And least likely for that relationship to be adversarial where it's just a cops and robber relationship. It's much more than that.

Mark Sherman: Clark Porter, thank you so much for talking with me.

Clark Porter: No problem.

Mark Sherman: My guest has been Clark Porter, a social worker and community resource specialist with the U.S. Probation Office in the Eastern District of Missouri. If you're interested in learning more about the cutting edge work Clark

and his colleagues in St. Louis are doing, just visit the probation officers website at www.moed.uscourts.gov/probation.

Off Paper is produced by Jennifer Richter. The program is directed by Kris Mark [phonetic]. And don't forget folks, you can subscribe to *Off Paper* wherever you get your podcasts and you can stream all episodes of the program from either fjc.gov or the uscourts.gov YouTube channel. I'm Mark Sherman. Thanks for listening. See you next time.

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