Article of the week #1

L.A. County struggles with issue of felons bolting from probation

*Nearly 20% of former state prisoners now under county supervision have outstanding arrest warrants for absconding.*

January 04, 2014|By Abby Sewell

Peter Azevedo is a hard man to keep on the straight and narrow.

Released from state prison in early 2012, he has been in and out of L.A. County jail at least half a dozen times, serving a few days, a few weeks or a few months for skipping out on probation, using drugs and carrying a knife. As of Christmas Eve, he was gone again.

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Two years into a major redistribution of responsibility for convicted felons, Los Angeles County officials are struggling to deal with a recalcitrant group of former state inmates like Azevedo, who keep absconding and cycling through an overcrowded jail system.

California's so-called realignment program, adopted to reduce state prison overcrowding, is redirecting tens of thousands of felons convicted of nonviolent crimes to local jails to serve their time. And local probation officials, instead of state parole agents, now monitor most nonviolent convicts exiting prison.

More than 18,000 ex-state prisoners have come under L.A. County oversight since October 2011. About 10,000 remain under Probation Department supervision and, as of last month, almost 20% of those had outstanding arrest warrants for absconding.

Though hundreds of millions of dollars in increased state funding has been allocated to the county for the realignment program, local officials say it's not enough to lock up, rehabilitate and keep track of the expanded population of criminals. Moreover, they contend that most of those the state indicated would be non-serious offenders have been assessed by local law enforcement officers to be high risks for committing new crimes.

County agencies are struggling to get the new, more hardened group of offenders to report to their probation officers and stick with mental health and substance abuse treatment programs.

"That's the labor-intensive piece of all this ... trying to chase those folks all down," county Supervisor Don Knabe said during a board review of the program last month

One measure of the challenge has been the use of a new tactic to manage repeat offenders.

Under realignment, local probation officers can, without a court hearing, send felons who violate the terms of their release to jail for "flash" incarcerations of up to 10 days. Previously, parole officers often sent violators back to state prison — a costly and some argue ineffective punishment for nonviolent offenders.

Use of the new tactic in Los Angeles County jumped nearly 300% in the second year of realignment to 10,000 "flash" arrests, a county analysis shows. Nearly half of those ex-inmates were incarcerated two or more times, with one jailed 13 times.

About 60% of a group of 500 felons shifted to county supervision in the first year of realignment were arrested for new crimes or violating probation — slightly higher than the 56% recidivism rate for former state prisoners overall, according to data from county and state studies.

Jeffrey Callison, a spokesman with the state's corrections department, noted that those statistics show a slight reduction in rearrests of former prison inmates. That is cause to be "cautiously optimistic" that the program will disrupt cycles of crime in the future, he said.

However, the figures also show more churning through the jail system among ex-prisoners like Azevedo. Since realignment began, the proportion of former state inmates arrested four or more times in the first year after their release increased from 7% to 12%.

That's partly the result of an increasing reliance on flash jail stays. They are seen as a less costly and less severe option for getting nonviolent offenders off the street — and getting probationers to change their behavior — than longer sentences that exacerbate overcrowding in county jails.

Supporters of realignment say the mini-sentences appear to be working: Most felons jailed for the short terms haven't been rearrested on similar violations. They also note that repeat offenders can be sentenced to three months in jail.

The flash arrest strategy drew criticism in at least one high-profile case last year. In June, two months after being released from state prison, Dustin James Kinnear, a 26-year-old transient, was accused of fatally stabbing 23-year-old Christine Calderon when she refused to give him money after taking his picture panhandling in Hollywood. Kinnear had a lengthy criminal record, a history of mental illness and had failed to report to his probation officer as required after his release from prison in April.

He had been flash incarcerated three times over two months and arrested on a new battery charge, but his probation was not revoked. A county probe of the case found breakdowns in communication between agencies and confusion in the Probation Department over who was responsible for initiating revocation of Kinnear's probation.

Officials say improvements have been made and an interagency committee now tracks cases of repeat absconders with mental health and other high-risk issues. In addition, five probation officers will soon be assigned to the Men's Central Jail to work with serial absconders.

"If there's anything we can do while they're sitting in the county jail, a captive audience, to keep them from absconding when those gates are opened, we're going to do it," said county Probation Department Assistant Chief Margarita Perez, whose agency sought a lead role in realignment and is getting $80 million for the program this year.

Ultimately, prison reform advocates and state officials predict the new system will encourage alternatives to incarceration, allow offenders to be near their families and help them break drug habits and patterns of criminal behavior that return them to state prison.

So far, that hasn't worked for Azevedo, 27, a self-described third-generation street gang member whose criminal history began when he was a child in the small northern Orange County city of Placentia.

"Me being from my family in the hood we're in, I just got involved in what they were doing," he recalled in an interview at a probation office in South Los Angeles after his most recent release from jail. The Times tracked Azevedo's case over several months with the cooperation of the Probation Department.

He served two state sentences as an adult for stealing cars. He landed back in prison in late 2011 after he bolted from a San Fernando music store with an antique accordion he hoped to sell for thousands of dollars.

After leaving Calipatria State Prison in April 2012, Azevedo ignored a requirement to report to an L.A. county probation officer and went back to the streets in Pacoima, where a girlfriend waited.

He was flash incarcerated six times and had his probation revoked four of those times. After each release from jail, he fled from county supervision. In August of last year, after his third probation revocation, a special team picked him up at Men's Central Jail and escorted him to a residential drug treatment facility in Downey.

Two weeks into that program, Azevedo praised the effort being made to get him back on track. "If it wasn't for that, I would have run," he told The Times. "I was just out there killing myself." He said then that he planned to remain in treatment three months, then move to a sober living home and get a job.

But three weeks later, he disappeared, officials said. Azevedo maintained he got kicked out of the program after a fight with another resident.

Either way, he was picked up by police in South Gate a few days later and put back in county jail on a short-term incarceration, before having his probation revoked again.

He was released again the week before Christmas. Probation officers escorted him to another residential drug treatment facility, this time in Santa Monica. Azevedo reiterated his desire to change during a second Times interview but acknowledged he might not stay out of trouble.

"It's like being on a fence and teetering back and forth," he said. "On one side of the fence, you got the good life. And on the other side, you got the life I'm used to."

Seven days later, he was gone. A new warrant has been issued for his arrest.

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