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Features

Parole officer training at TDCJ

As Parole Officer Vicky Smith makes her way through the busy office, her supervisor quietly pulls her aside.

“The sheriff’s department just called. There’s an arrest warrant for Darryl Johnson and he’s your next meeting. You need to keep him in your office until the police arrive.”

She opens the door to the waiting room and sees the parolee, waiting. He doesn’t look happy. “Darryl Johnson, please come with me.”

As they walk back to her office, she keeps the conversation light. She heard that he can lose his temper and even walked out of last month’s meeting when things didn’t go his way. How was she going to keep him occupied for however long it would take for the police to arrive?

Experienced parole officers know how to handle these situations, but how can new officers learn to anticipate and respond to sudden and significant alterations to their normal job routine? One strategy recently employed by the Parole Division involves adding a 16-hour block of mock home and office visits to the curriculum at the Parole Officer Training Academy (POTA) in Beeville.



Senior Parole Officer Wayne Boehm, right, plays a distracted parolee during a mock office visit. Such scenarios prepare parole officer trainees for their real-world case load.

Before newly hired parole officers attend the six-week training academy, they are partnered with seasoned officers at their assigned field office for two weeks. These officers serve as a mentor for the new employee, guiding them on their way to becoming a TDCJ parole officer. During this time, the new employees see how cases are worked, what real-world field and office visits are like, and how the Offender Information Management System (OIMS) is used to record and track offender activity.

After field training, new officers are sent to POTA where they are taught a core curriculum comprising 216 classroom hours of instruction on topics such as techniques for offender supervision, officer safety, motivational interviewing, ethics, administrative

responsibility and OIMS training. Parole officers also receive training on state laws and agency policies and procedures. In fiscal year 2012, 203 new parole officers graduated from POTA.

By role-playing through challenging work situations, trainees receive an important supplement to classroom training. “Our goal is to provide parole officers with a solid foundation, through the utilization of experiential training, emerging technologies and conceptual development,” says Edward Almeida, director of the POTA, “A well-trained front-line staff is a key component to the success of any organization. Parole casework doesn’t always end at five o’clock. They need to be prepared for the unexpected.”

Role-play scenarios are based on a variety of offender supervision scenarios. Each trainee is assigned a parole caseload of three “parole offenders,” roles enacted by veteran officers. Trainees must complete several visits with these “offenders,” which may involve a simple office visit, a more complicated home visit that indicates parole rule violations, and even after-hours emergency scenarios. For example, as trainees get ready to leave for the day, they’re informed of an incident involving a parolee and are only allowed to leave af-

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ter the task is complete. These real-time scenarios reinforce what trainees have learned in class, and actually experiencing the event gives them a strong foundation to build upon as they leave the training environment and enter field service.

TDCJ relies on innovative and effective training techniques to prepare parole officers for the challenges they'll meet in the real world, and role-playing scenarios conducted under the controlled conditions of the Training Academy have enhanced the performance of the agency's most recent parole academy graduates. ●