

SENATE OFFICE OF OVERSIGHT AND OUTCOMES

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'A Courtroom Unlike Any Other':

New report examines a promising tool to halt prisons' revolving door

SACRAMENTO – A Superior Court judge is on a crusade to improve California's prison recidivism rate one parolee at a time. A new report by the Senate Office of Oversight and Outcomes examines the judge's proposal – to set up Parolee Reentry Courts in every county in the state – from both sides of the bench.

The report is a case study set in the bustling Santa Clara County courtroom where Judge Stephen Manley presides. The title, "A Courtroom Unlike Any Other," comes from Manley's welcome to new parolees as he introduces them to life in his Department 64. The report focuses on a day in Reentry Court, showcasing Manley's singular judicial style. It explores the court's collaborative approach through interviews with parole agents, prosecutors, defenders, psychologists – and one very candid parolee. Finally, the report considers whether Manley's success can be replicated in other jurisdictions.

Manley is a pioneer of the Parolee Reentry Court. There, high-risk offenders get a second chance at redemption. If it works, everybody wins: the parolee rebuilds his life, his community is safer, and taxpayers save the thousands of dollars it would cost to return him to prison. If it fails, he is one more statistic in California's dismal recidivism rate.

California has the worst record in the nation for re-incarcerating parolees, with 70 percent returning to state prison within 3 years. Criminologists say California is the epitome of what they call "revolving door justice." As a remedy, Manley is proposing that Parolee Reentry Courts be established in every county in the state. He says these courts will save money and reduce prison recidivism. In Santa Clara County, certainly, the model is working. His offenders – all of them hard-core parole violators -- have a recidivism rate of 20 percent.

The judge's timing is good. Gov. Jerry Brown's 2011-12 budget calls for turning parole of lower-level offenders over to the counties. In response, the Legislature passed a bill in March making the courts responsible for deciding parole revocations, rather than the state Board of

Parole Hearings. Then, last week, the U.S. Supreme Court ordered California to reduce the number of state prison inmates by 33,000 to alleviate chronic overcrowding.

Manley's Parolee Reentry Court is one of six pilots set up under a 2009 state law (Senate Bill X3 18) to test whether a drug-court model can reduce recidivism. The specialized courts target parole violators with drug addiction and mental illness, people who would otherwise face certain return to state prison. Instead, the Reentry Courts place them under the intense, protective supervision of a judge who has access to an array of treatment, housing and custody options.

In these courtrooms, a team approach is emphasized rather than the traditional adversarial system, which pits prosecutors against defenders under the gavel of an impartial judge. When it comes to the parolees, Manley is anything but impartial. "I want you to do well," he tells them. "I don't know if any one else does. What I want is one thing only – for you to succeed. You have to do the work, but I can help."

The non-partisan Senate Office of Oversight and Outcomes was created in 2008 by Senate President pro Tempore Darrell Steinberg (D-Sacramento) to bolster the Senate's ability to gauge government performance. "A Courtroom Unlike Any Other" is available online [here](#) or at the oversight office's web site: <http://sooo.senate.ca.gov>

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