



BJA Fact Sheet

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JAMES H. BURCH II, ACTING DIRECTOR

Back on Track: A Problem-Solving Reentry Court

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Program Overview

In 2005, Kamala Harris, District Attorney for San Francisco, launched Back on Track (BOT), a reentry initiative aimed at reducing recidivism among low-level drug-trafficking defendants. Combining strict accountability with real opportunities for self improvement, BOT reports that less than 10 percent of its graduates reoffend—a success achieved, moreover, at a fraction of the cost of traditional prosecution and jail time.

BOT participants are young adults, ages 18–30, who are facing charges for their first felony offense¹ for a low-level drug sale. At charging, prosecuting attorneys refer potential participants to BOT.² Candidates attend a program orientation and participate in an intensive community service program for a 6-week probationary period. Only defendants who complete 6 weeks of community service and decide to participate are eligible for enrollment. They plead guilty to charges and have their formal sentencing deferred and, after enrolling, start a rigorous, 12–18 month program with goals set by an individualized personal responsibility plan (PRP). The PRP mandates concrete achievements in employment, education, parenting, and child support and requires participants to perform up to 220 hours of community service. In addition, enrollees are closely supervised. They meet three times per week with a BOT case manager and appear in BOT reentry court three times per month, at which a superior court judge and prosecutor track their progress in meeting program requirements and completing the PRP.

To graduate from the program, participants must find employment, enroll in school full time, and comply with all the terms of their PRPs. At graduation, the court dismisses the original case, leaving the graduate with a clean record.³ If an individual still enrolled in the program is charged with a new crime or fails to meet BOT requirements, he or she is removed from BOT, and a judge can immediately impose a jail or prison sentence.

¹In California, all drug sales cases are felonies rather than misdemeanors.

²Eligibility requirements follow: first-time low-level offenders ages 18–30 with no history of guns or gangs, no sales or possession at or near a school, and no prior violent history who are charged with sale of or possession of less than 5 grams of a controlled substance.

³At graduation, the defendant's case is dismissed and the record sealed.

⁴Criminal justice problem solving seeks to respond creatively and effectively to local crime and to the individual problems that often fuel crime. For an introductory fact sheet, see [www.courtinnovation.org/_uploads/documents/Problem_Solving_Justice_in_the_US\[1\].pdf](http://www.courtinnovation.org/_uploads/documents/Problem_Solving_Justice_in_the_US[1].pdf).

MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

The Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) strongly supports the use of problem-solving and community courts and the implementation of such strategies through communitywide collaborations. Research has demonstrated that, if implemented properly, the problem-solving approach⁴ can reduce crime, improve coordination among justice agencies, enhance services to victims, and increase public trust in the administration of justice—results that are distinctly in line with BJA's mission to achieve safer communities. Bearing this in mind, BJA persists in its search to find and showcase evidence-based programs that effectively implement problem-solving practices. Funded through a BJA grant to Goodwill Industries of San Francisco and San Mateo and Marin Counties, Back on Track is one such program: a promising approach for prosecutors nationwide who want to redirect low-level, nonaddicted drug sellers away from incarceration and into productive, crime-free lives.

KEY POINTS

- Over a 2-year period, Back on Track (BOT) has reduced recidivism among its graduates to less than 10 percent. In comparison, 53 percent of California's drug offenders return to prison or jail within 2 years of release.*
- 100 percent of BOT graduates complete up to 220 hours of community service, working in such diverse settings as soup kitchens, shelters, senior facilities, and mortuaries.

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KEY POINTS (cont.)

- Paving the way for systemic change in corrections practice, BOT has:
 - Challenged the assumption that incarcerating low-level offenders is the best way to achieve public safety.
 - Been adopted by the National District Attorneys Association as a model program.
 - Been replicated in Atlanta, is under replication in Dallas, and is being considered for replication in other communities.

*California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation Office of Research, Recidivism Data, 2004, 2005, 2006. See www.cdcr.ca.gov/Reports_Research/Offender_Information_Services_Branch/Offender_Information_Reports.html.

Participant Benefits

BOT provides its participants with a full range of opportunities:

- While in the program, participants have access to:
 - Job training and placement.
 - Union-based pre-apprenticeships.
 - Intensive case management.
 - Goodwill Industries' paid Transitional Jobs Program.
 - Educational opportunities, including GED (general educational development) classes and assistance with applications and financial aid at San Francisco City College and other colleges.
 - Interactive monthly life skills workshops.
 - Parenting support.
 - Mental health services.
 - Other referral services as needed.
- Upon successful completion of the program, graduates:
 - Have their case dismissed.
 - Can have their arrest record sealed.

Partners

BOT brings essential organizations together to link supervision and accountability with opportunity. Partners include:

- San Francisco District Attorney's Office.
- San Francisco Superior Court.
- Goodwill Industries of San Francisco, San Mateo and Marin Counties, and other key community-based services.
- Other community agencies.
- The business and labor communities.

Cost Savings

BOT costs approximately \$5,000 per participant, compared with \$10,000 to adjudicate a case and nearly \$50,000 per year to house a low-level offender in prison or jail.

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