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Where hope thrives

An isle program that has cut drug abuse and new crimes by felons on probation might be used by other states

[By Susan Essoyan](#)

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A program that has dramatically reduced drug abuse and new crimes by Hawaii felons on probation is being considered as a model in several states and could soon double in size here.

"This isn't a program -- it's a revolution," said Mark A.R. Kleiman, a professor of public policy at the University of California, Los Angeles, who has studied the local strategy known as HOPE. "As a recidivism prevention program, it's unmatched, and as a drug treatment program, it's unmatched."

Started in October 2004 with 34 offenders, HOPE now includes nearly 1,500 of the roughly 8,000 felony probationers on Oahu. The program targets those who have consistently violated probation conditions, including drug, sex and domestic violence offenders. But recently compiled data show that people in HOPE are less than half as likely to commit new crimes or fail drug tests as those on regular probation.

The formula is simple: careful monitoring and swift, certain consequences for each infraction. Every mistake -- from a missed probation appointment to a failed drug test -- will promptly land an offender in jail for a couple of days, and more for repeat offenses. Drug treatment is mandated for chronic violators.

The quick incarcerations are a big change from regular probation. Traditionally, offenders rack up a string of violations for months and months with no consequences before eventually having their probation revoked and getting thrown in prison for five or 10 years.



"That's like ignoring your kid's misbehavior and then a year from now disowning them and kicking them out of the house," said Circuit Judge Steven S. Alm, who conceived of HOPE -- Hawaii's Opportunity Probation with Enforcement.



Nolan Ogasawara:
"I thought he was a mean guy in the beginning, but as I progressed in this thing, he gave me chance. I respect the guy."

"You've got to have a swift and certain consequence for rule breaking," he said. "With HOPE, they can put together the bad behavior with the consequence."

On regular probation, offenders get a month's notice before drug tests. On HOPE, they get just a few hours' notice. But the HOPE probationers, who must call a hotline every morning to see if they will be tested, do far better.

Take, for example, the 950 chronically noncompliant probationers assigned to HOPE who have been in the program for at least three months. While on regular probation, they failed more than half of their drug tests, even with plenty of advance warning. Within three months of joining HOPE, the failure rate dropped to 7 percent, according to data compiled last week by the state Department of the Attorney General. For people in the program six months, the rate falls below 5 percent and keeps dropping as time goes on.

"Some people that use meth and cocaine can stop on their own, knowing that there are certain consequences for violations," said Alm, a former prosecutor. "A number of people need to go into treatment, but not everybody. HOPE is a very good way of separating out those groups."



Kirkland Tabanera:
"Better just stay clean. But it took me a long time for think that way. I always thought I could beat the system."

Kirkland Tabanera of Wahiawa recently completed substance abuse treatment after being addicted to "ice" or methamphetamine for more than 15 years and getting busted for forgery. He said the HOPE sanctions helped straighten him out, especially after he was locked up last Christmas and New Year's. He said his 7-year-old daughter asked him, "Daddy, make me a pinky promise you're not going back to jail."

"Regular probation was more easier," said Tabanera, 47. "HOPE, it's more strict. You get immediate consequences. You go straight to jail. Even though you go to jail for a short time, it's still going to jail."

"I just hate going to jail," Tabanera added, shaking his head and looking at the floor.

He got to the point where he was so worried about whether he was going to fail a drug test and get locked up that "it just used to ruin my high."

"I started thinking, 'Why use and stress myself out?' Better just stay clean. But it took me a long time for think that way," he said. "I always thought I could beat the system."

Although it took jail stints and drug treatment for Tabanera, many probationers shape up right off the bat. HOPE starts with a warning hearing with a judge, setting out expectations.

"The majority of the improvement happens immediately," said Paul Perrone, chief of research and statistics for the Department of the Attorney General, who has been tracking the program's results. "By and large, all they needed was the judge to tell them these rules are going to be enforced, and their compliance rates just shot up."

In addition to cutting drug use by as much as 90 percent in six months and getting offenders to show up for appointments with their probation officers, HOPE has had another, far-reaching benefit. Preliminary data from a randomized, controlled trial funded in part by the National Institute of Justice shows that HOPE probationers committed less than half as many new crimes as the control group on regular probation.

"Putting somebody in HOPE instead of regular probation reduces the probability of his going back to prison by more than half," Kleiman said. "For the \$1,000 you spend on HOPE, you're probably saving \$10,000 in prison expense."

Kleiman and Angela Hawken, professor of economics and policy analysis at Pepperdine University, are principal investigators in that research.

As states face budget cuts and overstuffed prisons, HOPE may be an approach whose time has come. Kleiman touts it as a prime example in his book, "When Brute Force Fails: How to Have Less Crime and Less Punishment," just published by Princeton University Press.

HOPE's impact has already attracted attention across the country and even abroad. Jurisdictions in several other states are considering HOPE as a model, either in probation or parole programs, including Washington, Oregon, Nevada, New Mexico, Arizona and New Jersey, and there's also some interest at the federal level, according to Kleiman and Alm. (Probation is a sentence, an alternative to prison, while parole follows completion of a prison term.)

In April, Alm was invited to Lisbon, Portugal, to present the HOPE program to the International Society for the Study of Drug Policy, and the Swedish Carnegie Institute has invited him to Stockholm in November to discuss it.

"The whole world has this problem and nobody's come up with a clever answer," said Dr. Larry Schlesinger, president of Friends of HOPE, a new nonprofit formed to support the

program. "All of a sudden, out of a little court in Honolulu comes a clever answer for the rest of the world."

A new grant of \$420,000 in stimulus money will help expand HOPE locally by covering the cost of two more drug testers, two more probation officers, a deputy prosecutor and a deputy public defender position devoted to the program.

"I'm hoping to add another 1,500 probationers, maybe double the size of the program," Alm said. "If you have something that works, that's reducing crime, let's put our foot on the gas and get more people into it. We're helping all of these offenders, we're preventing people from being victimized and we are saving taxpayer dollars."

While the theory behind the program is simple, it is tough to pull off, requiring coordination among multiple agencies and personnel, streamlining paperwork and expediting hearings. Everyone has to work together, including probation officers, judges, court staff, sheriffs, police officers, prosecutors, public defenders, jailers and treatment agencies.

At first there was resistance to what looked like a larger workload, but the quick results soon won people over.

Surveys of probation officers show that "overwhelmingly, they love it," Perrone said. "They feel like they're actually able to help these people," he said. "How can you help people who are physically absent or high as a kite? But if he's sitting in front of me sober, I actually have a shot."

Probationers, too, seem to appreciate the straight talk they get from Alm and the other judges, who have all had similar results.

"I thought he was a mean guy in the beginning, but as I progressed in this thing, he gave me chance. I respect the guy," said Nolan Ogasawara, a former carpenter now completing drug treatment. "I think he's really fair. He knows what he's doing."

HOPE-FUL RESULTS

HOPE has shown striking results for different groups of probationers.

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» After six months in HOPE, as compared to baseline data before HOPE:

- * 84 percent reduction in missed probation appointments
- * 90 percent reduction in positive drug tests

» Non-HOPE control group after six months, as compared to baseline data:

- * 20 percent increase in missed appointments
- * 6 percent reduction in positive drug tests

*Source: Crime
Prevention and Justice
Assistance Division,
Department of the
Attorney General*

General Probation Unit

» HOPE probationers compared to control group, in a randomized trial:

- * More than 50 percent fewer arrests for new crimes
- * More than 50 percent fewer missed probation appointments
- * More than 50 percent fewer positive drug tests

*Source: "Research
Brief: Evaluation of
HOPE Probation,"
preliminary results, by
Angela Hawken and Mark
Kleiman, February 2009.*

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» www.hopeprobation.org

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