Week 1: First Step in the Door

I had never written a blog before! When my internship coordinator asked me to write one based on my internship experience at Hays County Adult Probation, I was a little anxious about it. It is one thing to learn about criminal justice by the textbooks and assignments one might read in class, but it is another world when you apply those traits to practical application in the workplace! This first day was exciting. I knew I had 120 hours of internship ahead of me to experience and participate in all different aspects of working as an adult probation officer. I was positive it would be more exciting than sitting in a classroom just reading about it! I was ready to represent Texas State University as a Criminal Justice Intern.
The Hays county community and prospective interns should know that the new government building off of Wonderworld Drive is a very secure and respectable facility. Since it encompasses adult probation, juvenile probation, district and county courts, and all the personnel that come with it, there are no corners cut when it comes to the safety of everyone in the building. After I entered the new building, I was greeted by security staff comparable to airport security. These professionals were fast and friendly in doing their job and I was very appreciative of them. When I entered the Adult Probation section of the building, I was greeted by Gil Ortiz; department supervisor and respected veteran of Hays county probation. (Just don’t hold him being a Texas Longhorn against him.) After a short discussion on policies and procedures, I was introduced by officer Buck Fitzgerald to the rest of the staff. Thanks, Buck! These included the line officers, pre-sentence investigation officers, indirect officers, receptionists, high risk officers and also the community service and program personnel. After that, I felt very comfortable in knowing everyone and what they did for Hays county probation.

Soon after the introductions, I was assigned to Michelle Acosta as her intern. Michelle was very kind, resourceful and accommodating to a million questions I had regarding department functions, processes, etc. It felt great being surrounded by patient and knowledgeable staff, ready to help out or answer any questions. I knew right away that Michelle and everyone else here took pride in their job.

Week 2: Off and running

It didn’t take much time before I realized how busy a probation staff can be. I monitored office visits and an initial meeting that Michelle had with probationers almost right away. I was very diligent to take notes on how Michelle interacted with the defendants as well as the unique
conditions that each person had to comply with as part of their probation. These included community service, county and court fees, as well as participation in programs designed to rehabilitate offenders. We even had to have a probationer arrested upon his arrival for warrants in another county! It went very smooth because there were two officers on hand ready to transport the individual to Hays county jail. Being exposed to that so soon in my internship was great. It felt very significant and representative to the office’s mission to protect the county and its citizens by whatever means possible.

Week 3: Learning the ropes

One of the things Michelle taught me was the importance of risk assessments to be performed on probationers. The risk assessment is significant to determine what risk the probationer is to the community and what level of probation he/she should be placed on. I believe these are extremely useful to gauge the offender as their level may change or they may be harm to the public. We saw my first maximum risk probationer and it went well! I felt a little leery about it at first, but realized that we were in a safe and controlled environment and that I shouldn’t be concerned about safety.

Week 4: Curious about Pre-Sentence Investigations....

Since Michelle had Substance Abuse Evaluation (SAE) training, I spent a few hours with Karen Law learning about Pre-Sentence Investigations (PSI). These are utilized on defendants before many court processes to investigate the criminal, drug, family, educational and employment history to determine what actions the court may take on the defendant. It also determines what level and needs the probation department should consider for the offender. Very cool stuff! When I monitored the evaluation, I was surprised to learn how in-depth these PSI’s are and how each office visits may take up to two hours to complete!
Week 5: Site visits

An important component to probation is the site visits. Michelle and I had to leave the office a few times to locate probationers who we need to either verify residential status or to find probationers who have failed to report. We visited job sites, apartments, houses and even hotels! It was refreshing to know how hands-on Hays county will let their probation officers get to accomplish their job. I really enjoyed this part because who wouldn’t mind taking the office outside every once in a while???

Week 6: Taking the Reigns

I started taking office visits myself under the supervision of Michelle. I was a little nervous and apprehensive at first. But if I ever had a question or missed an important detail during the visit, Michelle was right there ready to help out in any way she could. During this time, I learned how to chronicle a visit, or “chrono” after seeing a probationer to document certain things. I would also chrono any site visits, internet, mail or telephone conversations. These would include their demeanor, progress, problems, and future dates presented for office visits, community service dates or class dates (such as a DWI class). At one point, another officer went home ill and I saw 6 probationers on her caseload by myself and without supervision. I was a little nervous at first, but with the right preparation, I was ready and did the job well. I enjoyed this aspect as it involved a lot of typing and a very thorough account of the office visit for documentation purposes.

Week 7: Branching Out

To get all the experience I could, I also witnessed and participated in a Victim Impact Panel (VIP). These are designed to encourage DWI offenders to not recommit their crimes by listening to a panel of people who have been affected personally by an intoxicated driver. Many
probationers of this type are required to attend as a condition, and these classes only come around every few weeks. I first attended a VIP in New Braunfels to get a grasp on what it was about and why it would be advantageous to probationers. I really enjoyed how Marvel Maddox, the program director and lecturer, maintained order in the class and also told his personal story of tragedy as it related to the actions of an intoxicated driver. Learning from this, I told a personal story of mine a few weeks later to a crowded room of probationers. Some people cried and many were responsive to what I had to say and why I wanted to become a probation officer. It was great having an effect on a class that needed to hear what may happen from poor decision-making.

Week 8: All Hands on Deck

Throughout my internship, I noticed how many different aspects and people there are that make probation possible. Relationships that probation officers work closely with are the program and CSR staff. As a probation officer, you must refer offenders to community service obligations and programs that assist in their rehabilitation and retribution to the community. Individuals such as Michael Hartman and Ray Castillo help to facilitate the probationer’s success by their relentless dedication to their work. I was constantly impressed by their patience and professionalism when dealing with probationers.

Week 9: The Job in Jail

I went to jail with Michelle to conduct visits with probationers. I monitored multiple visits that Michelle had with her probationers that reoffended and were transported to Hays county correctional holding. From what I’ve seen, jail is a lot cleaner than people realize and is very safe with experienced personnel on staff. When we needed to see an offender, a corrections
I went to Hays County district court with Michelle Acosta and Karen Law. One day, I was handed a case docket and was seated with Michelle and Charles Deleon perpendicularly left of the judge’s bench. The probation department is present at court, (usually from 9-12 in the morning), to testify, provide information, and supply pre-sentence investigations to attorneys. When an offender is given probation, an officer must document the conditions and communicate with the offender post-decision to get the probationer started on the process. I learned that the courtroom atmosphere is very formal and that you will find the adversarial process that
constructs the judicial system very rampant. I actually enjoyed this process the most in my internship experience because of all the legal jargon and interesting cases.

Week 11: Handling the Hard Ones

I spent some time monitoring and conducting office visits on probationers with Marco Rangel. Marco is an intensive supervision officer with Hays county probation. It was interesting seeing how Marco had to be very thorough and no-nonsense with these offenders. These types of offenders do need a little bit of encouragement and a whole lot of supervision to safeguard the community and themselves from recidivism. When I conducted a few office visits on these offenders by myself, I took a page from Marco and was pragmatic, practical and patient. I enjoyed my time with Marco and what he taught me about his background in corrections and how one can relate those skills to a probation position. Thanks Marco!

Week 12: A Great Experience

I assisted probation officer, Mondo Vega on a site visit. We also had to transport a probationer from Hays county corrections to adult probation so the individual could set up a time to have his PSI conducted. I monitored senior Vega’s office visits and learned from Mondo that the transition from Texas State University to the probation field is a very practical one as long as you put the work in. I enjoyed working with Mondo because his approach to his position and the work he does is very effective and straightforward. I believe that every probation officer has their own methods and that diversity is one of the things that make a department like Hays county probation a successful and admirable place to work.
(Left: Mondo Vega-Texas State University Masters Graduate and Community Supervision Officer, Right: Yvonne Troyano-Texas State University Masters Graduate and Community Supervision Officer)