

Ventura County Realignment
AB 109 Client Engagement
Summary of Findings
August 2022



Prepared by

EVALCORP
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

EVALCORP would like to thank the Ventura County Community Corrections Partnership (CCP) and Ventura County Probation Agency (VCPA) for the opportunity to partner in conducting an evaluation of Ventura County's Assembly Bill 109 (AB 109) realignment efforts. Special thanks are extended to Michelle Steinberger, John Robles, Elida Rexach, Aaron Parry, and VCPA staff for their support with data collection and client engagement. EVALCORP also would like to thank all of the AB 109 clients who participated in the Client Survey and focus groups. This evaluation would not have been possible without their participation.

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INTRODUCTION

Overview of AB 109 Client Engagement Initiatives

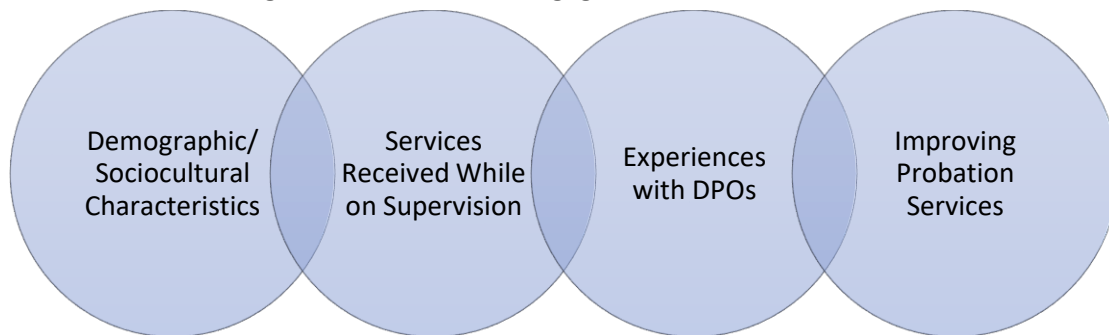
Purpose. The Ventura County Probation Agency (VCPA), on behalf of the Community Corrections Partnership (CCP), contracted with EVALCORP Research and Consulting (EVALCORP) to continue implementation and outcome evaluation efforts associated with Ventura County’s realignment efforts.

As a part of the AB 109 evaluation activities conducted during Ventura County’s fiscal year 2021/2022, an engagement initiative was conducted with AB 109 offenders (herein “clients”). The client engagement initiative included the administration of a survey and focus groups among the current AB 109 client population, and aimed to address three primary needs for information:

1. Assess for AB 109 client participation in services and perceptions of services while on AB 109 supervision;
2. Measure satisfaction and perception of experiences with VCPA Deputy Probation Officers (DPOs); and,
3. Identify any unmet needs in service engagement among AB 109 clients.

In order to capture the requisite information, the client survey and focus group items fell within the four themes illustrated in Figure 1:

Figure 1. AB 109 client engagement initiative themes



AB 109 Client Engagement Methods

Survey Administration

The AB 109 Client Survey was administered from April 4 through April 29, 2022, across each of the three probation sites (i.e., Oxnard, Simi Valley, and Ventura), among AB 109 clients meeting with their DPO.

EVALCORP staff collaborated with VCPA staff to develop the survey, as well as plan and execute the data collection process. Prior to the administration of the survey, EVALCORP staff trained Administrative Staff tasked with the survey administration at each of the three sites to ensure systematic and standardized data collection. Along with the training, EVALCORP staff created a Survey Administration Script that was to be read to each client asked to complete the survey. Survey Administration Guidelines also were

developed, which outlined key information for staff to ensure high-quality survey administration and data collection across sites.

Participation in the survey was voluntary (i.e., not mandated, as clients were able to refuse to participate) and anonymous, as respondents placed their completed surveys into a sealed data collection box. VCPA staff identified whether the client completing the survey was a Post Release Community Offender (PRO) or an 1170 (h) Mandatory Supervision (1170(h) MS) offender before clients were handed the survey, so that EVALCORP staff could conduct comparative analyses of the two groups to identify any differences. VCPA staff also kept tracking logs to ensure duplicate survey completion did not occur. Any client who declined the initial invitation to participate in the survey was eligible to complete the survey at any point within the administration window.

A total of 83 surveys were collected across the three probation sites. Of these surveys, 65 respondents were PRO, 9 respondents were 1170(h) MS, and 9 respondents did not have a client type indicated. Due to this difference in response rate, comparative group analyses were not possible.

Focus Group Recruitment and Administration

At the end of the survey, there was an opportunity for clients to provide contact information to participate in supplementary focus groups to share more about their experiences under community supervision. If interested, clients provided their contact information (telephone number and/or email address) on a form that was included as the final page of the survey. Clients were offered a \$25 gift card for participating. Flyers were also distributed at probation sites to continue recruiting focus group participants, along with online opportunities for focus group participation to ensure as many clients as possible were aware of the invitation to share their experiences in a focus group setting and receive a gift card.

In total, two focus groups were conducted in-person: one at the Simi Valley probation site and one at the Ventura probation site. These focus groups lasted approximately 75 minutes. Due to client engagement limitations, focus groups were supplemented with individual interviews, which were conducted over the telephone and utilized the focus group protocol questions. These interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes.

Client engagement in the focus groups may have been limited due to the focus groups taking place during the typical workday (9am-5pm), lack of interest, or other factors unknown to VCPA and EVALCORP. This workday limitation was expressed by one telephone interview respondent who stated that they had to decline the opportunity to participate in the focus groups because the times offered conflicted with their work schedule. Upon learning this, EVALCORP offered four additional focus groups in the evening and no clients signed up to participate. In all, a total of five clients participated in the focus groups and five clients participated in supplementary interviews. These 10 clients¹ will be referred to wholly as “focus group participants,” as the focus group protocol was utilized during both data collection efforts.

¹ Clients were provided with multiple opportunities to participate in a focus group through multiple outreach efforts. Incentives were provided.

AB 109 CLIENT SURVEY FINDINGS

Survey Respondent Characteristics

Table 1 presents characteristics for the respondents who provided demographic information. These data provide a description of the clients surveyed. Of note, the response options in Table 1 are in the order presented to respondents on the survey.

- More PRO clients than 1170(h) MS clients completed the survey (88% PRO vs. 12% 1170(h) MS).
- Most respondents were male (87%); and between 25 and 44 years of age (74%).
- Nearly 40% of all clients reported living in a family member’s home, while 18% reported having their own house or apartment.
- At the time the survey was conducted, employment status was primarily split between clients being employed (with either full-time or part-time work) or unemployed but looking for work (55% vs. 34% respectively).
- Over half (56%) of the clients who completed the survey reported that they had been on community supervision for one year or longer.

Table 1. AB 109 Client Survey Respondent Demographics

Demographic Characteristic		Count	Valid Percent
Client Type	PRO	65	88%
	1170 (h) MS	9	12%
Probation Office Location	Oxnard	20	24%
	Simi Valley	25	30%
	Ventura	38	46%
Gender	Male	71	87%
	Female	10	12%
	Gender Variant/Non-Conforming	1	1%
	Other gender identity: _____	0	-
	Prefer not to answer	0	-
Age Group	18 – 24	2	3%
	25 – 34	28	34%
	35 – 44	33	40%
	45 or older	19	23%
Race/Ethnicity*	Asian	0	-
	Black or African American	5	6%
	Hispanic	50	60%
	Multiracial	2	2%
	Native American	1	1%
	White	28	34%
	Other: _____	1 ^a	1%

	Prefer not to answer	0	-
Languages Spoken at Home Most Often*	Chinese – including Mandarin and Cantonese	0	-
	English	78	94%
	Mixteco	0	-
	Spanish	26	31%
	Tagalog – including Filipino	0	-
	Other: _____	1 ^b	1%
Current Living Situation*	Family member’s house or apartment	34	41%
	Friend’s house or apartment	7	9%
	Own house or apartment	16	20%
	Homeless: Outside	4	5%
	Homeless: Shelter	3	4%
	Homeless: Vehicle	0	-
	Homeless: Other: _____	0	-
	Hotel/Motel	2	2%
	Residential treatment facility	13	16%
	Other: _____	4 ^c	5%
Current Employment Status	Full-time employment	30	36%
	Part-time employment	16	19%
	Not employed, but looking for work	28	34%
	Not employed, not actively looking for work	9	11%
Time on AB 109 Community Supervision	Less than 3 months	19	23%
	3 – 6 months	10	12%
	6 – 11 months	8	10%
	1 – 2 years	16	19%
	2 – 3 years	7	9%
	3 years or more	22	27%

* Respondents were able to select more than one option. Totals will be over 100%.

^a “Other race/ethnicity” written in by respondents included “Mexican.”

^b “Other languages spoken” written in by respondents included “Spanglish.”

^c “Other housing” written in by respondents included “Renting a room” and left blank.

Services Received While on Community Supervision (Post-Release from Custody)

The second portion of the survey asked clients to reflect on the programs/services they have participated in during their current supervision term. An analysis of post-release services for survey respondents was conducted to better understand:

1. Service participation rates across different lengths of time on probation
2. Whether services were perceived as helpful, and
3. If services met the different cultural, language, and gender identity needs of clients

Nearly 4 in 5 respondents (79%) reported participating in one or more community-based service(s) at the time the survey was conducted. **Figure 2**, on the following page, illustrates that regardless of the length of time on community supervision, the majority of survey respondents (63% - 90%) indicated that they had participated in at least one service.

Figure 2. Percent of AB 109 Client Survey respondents, within each time on probation group, participating in at least one service

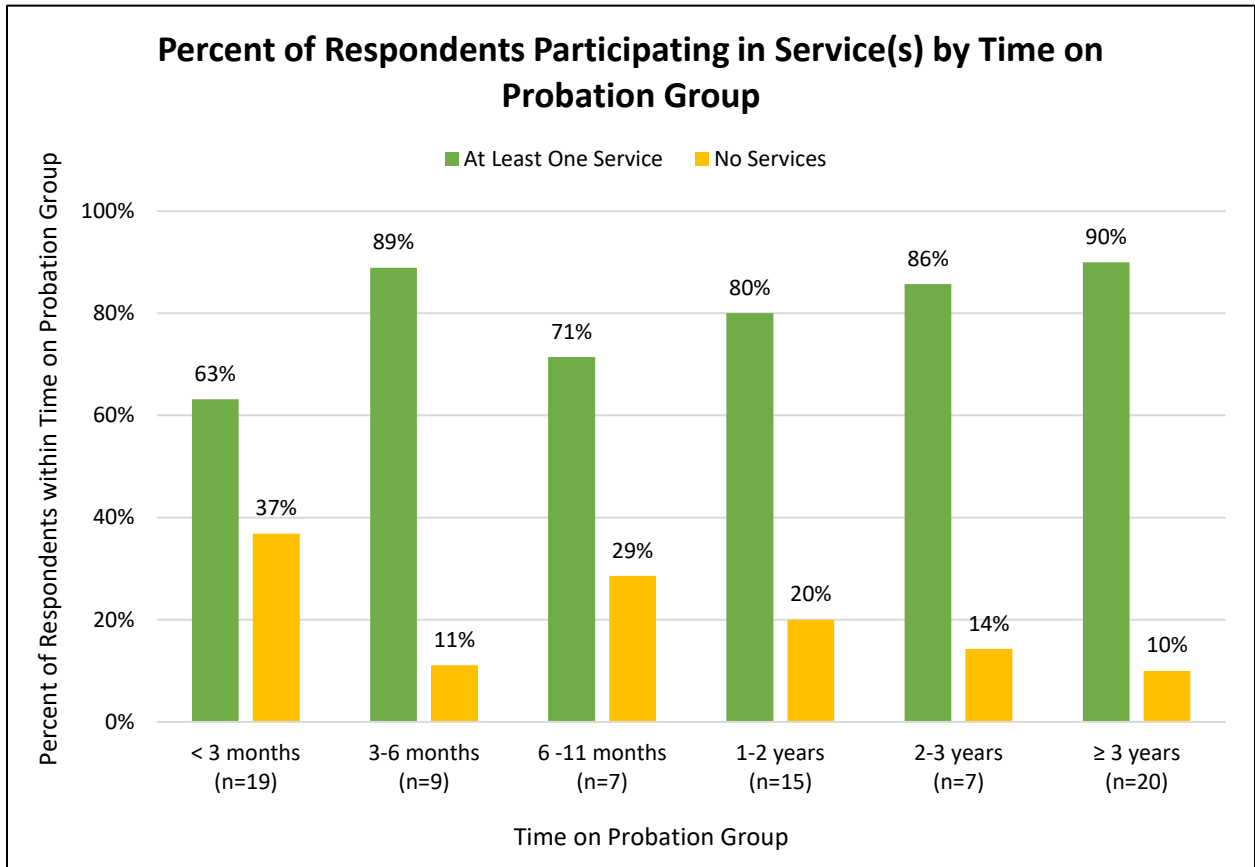
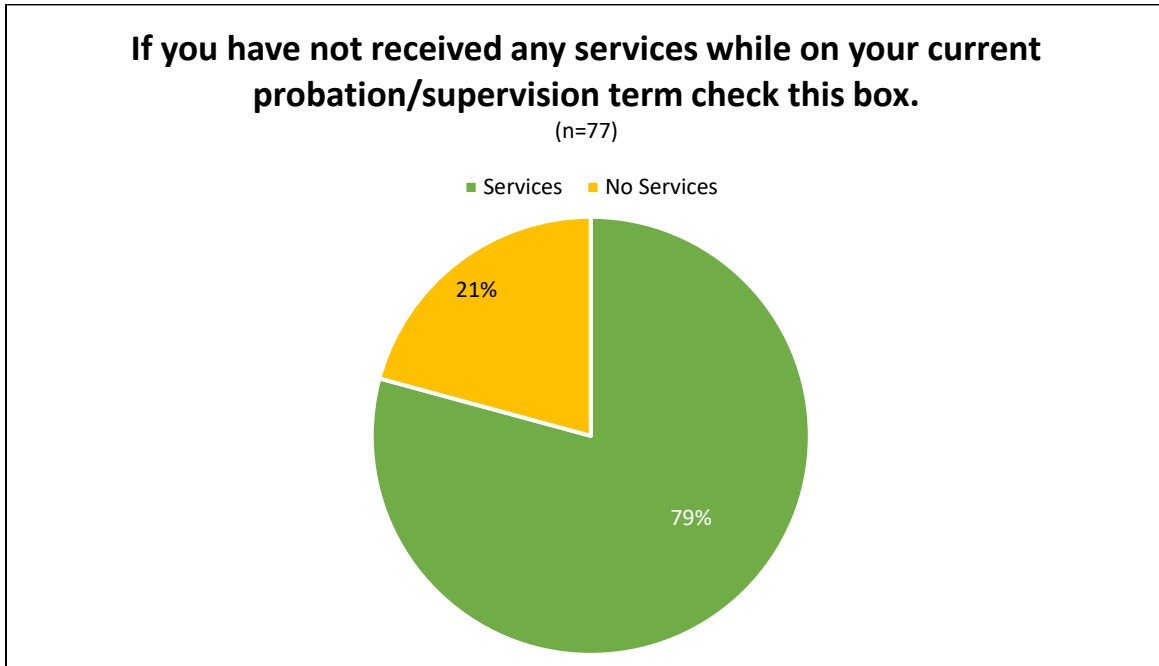


Figure 3 on the following page displays the percent of respondents who indicated they participated in at least one service.

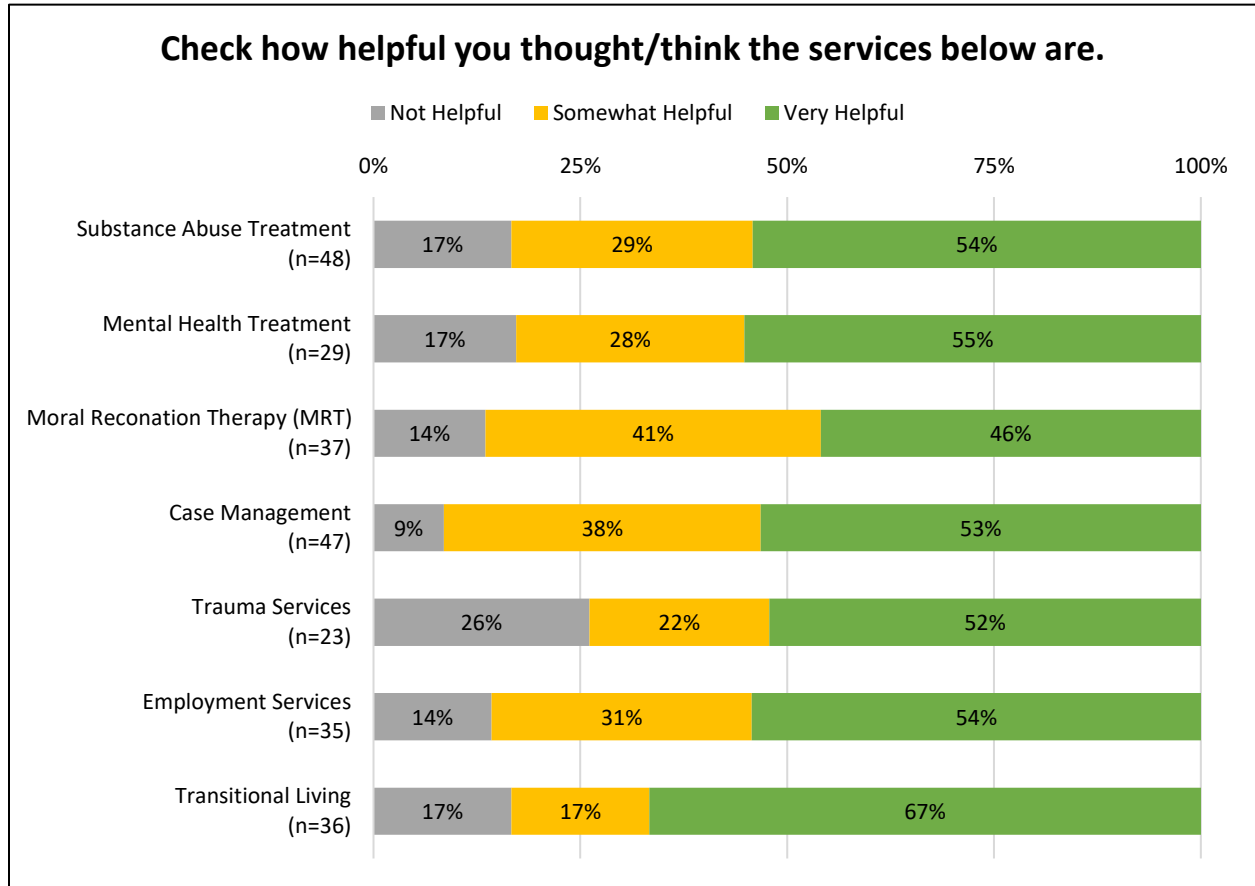
Figure 3. Percent of AB109 Client Survey respondents who received at least one service



Clients also provided information on the helpfulness of specific services in which they participated. **Figure 4**, on the next page, presents the survey respondents' perceived helpfulness of the service that they received.

- For nearly all seven services included in the survey, over 80% of respondents found the services that they engaged in to be helpful (i.e., at least "Somewhat Helpful").
- Over half of respondents indicated that the following services were "Very Helpful:"
 - Transitional Living (67%)
 - Mental Health Treatment (55%)
 - Employment Services (54%)
 - Substance Abuse Treatment (54%)
 - Case Management (53%)
 - Trauma Services (52%)
- Across all services some respondents indicated that they were "Not Helpful" (9% - 26%), with Trauma Services having the highest percent of survey participants (26%) responding this way.

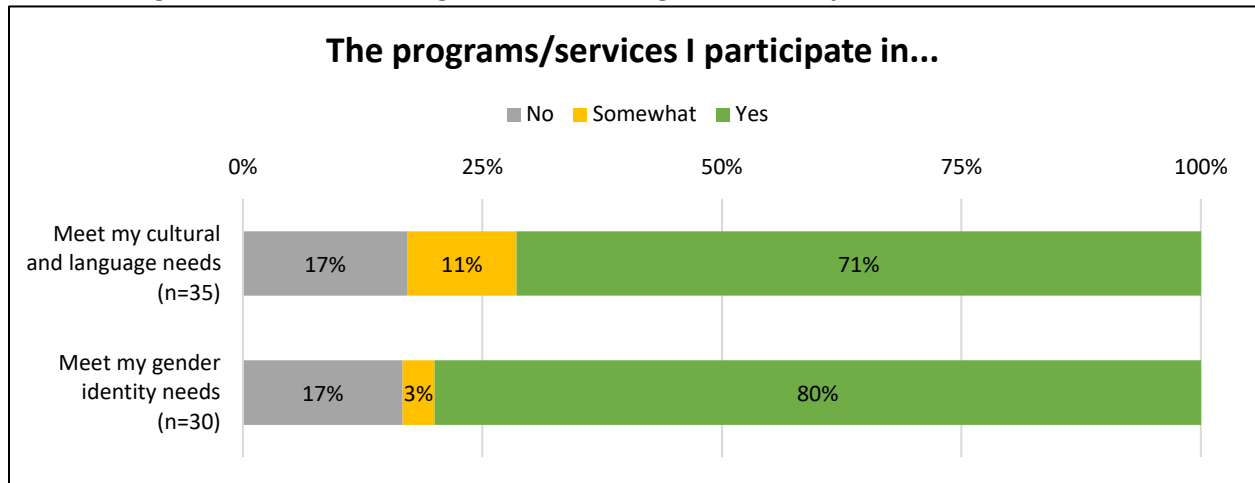
Figure 4. Perceived helpfulness of services among AB 109 Client Survey respondents



Additionally, clients provided information on whether the services met their different cultural, language, and gender identity needs. **Figure 5** presents responses to items that were focused on whether services were delivered in a manner that met their unique cultural and language or gender identity needs.

- Among respondents who answered these survey items, most indicated the services that they participated in met their cultural and language needs (71%) and/or gender identity needs (80%).

Figure 5. Services meeting the cultural and gender identify needs of AB 109 Clients



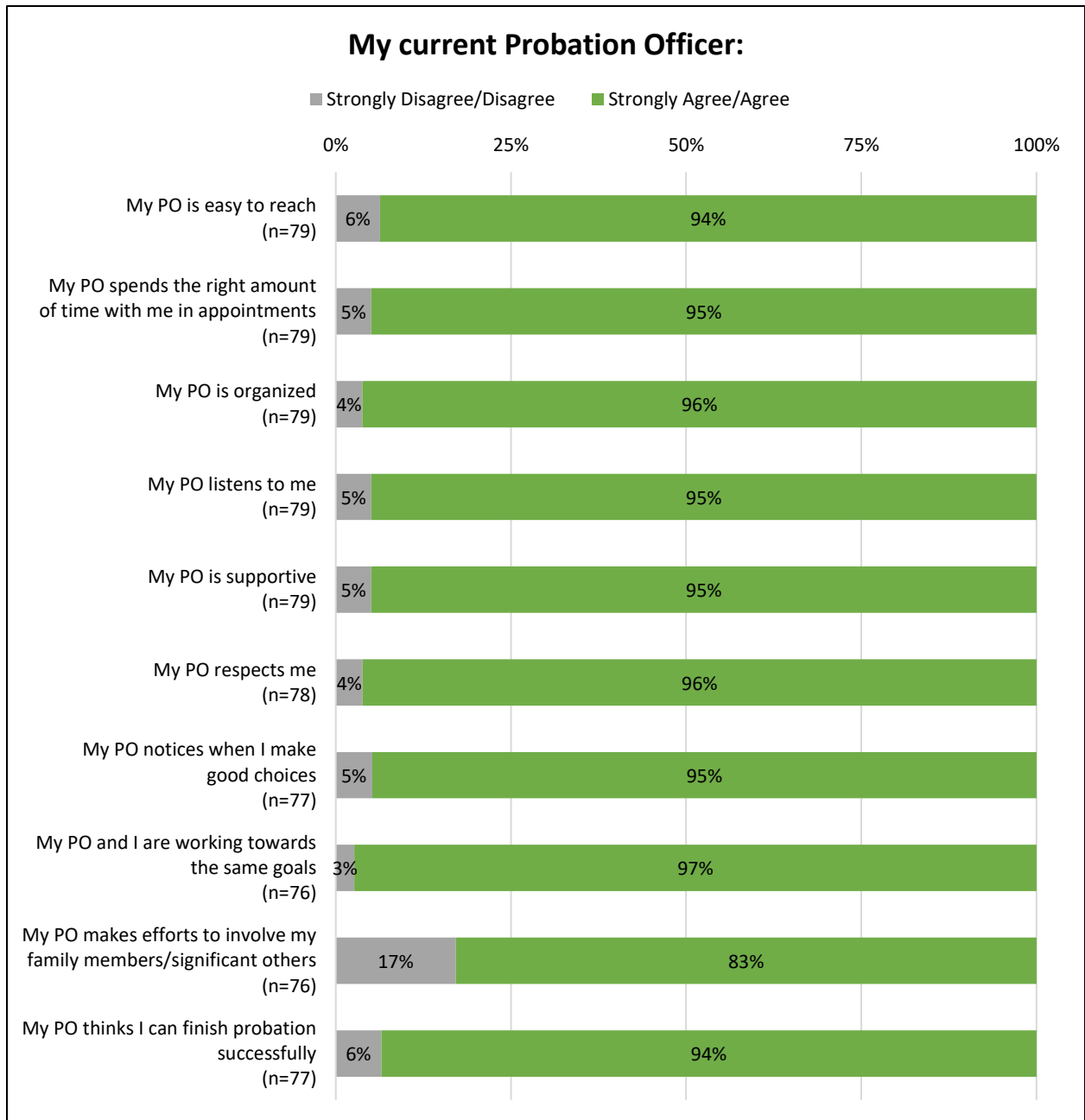
Client Experiences with Deputy Probation Officers

The third portion of the survey asked clients to consider their experiences with their current DPO. An analysis of respondents' perceptions of their DPOs was conducted to better understand:

1. Levels of agreement among survey respondents regarding their interactions with their DPOs
2. Frequency of incentives for successes and treatment for probation violations

Figure 6 illustrates that a majority of respondents have positive feelings towards and perceptions of their DPOs.

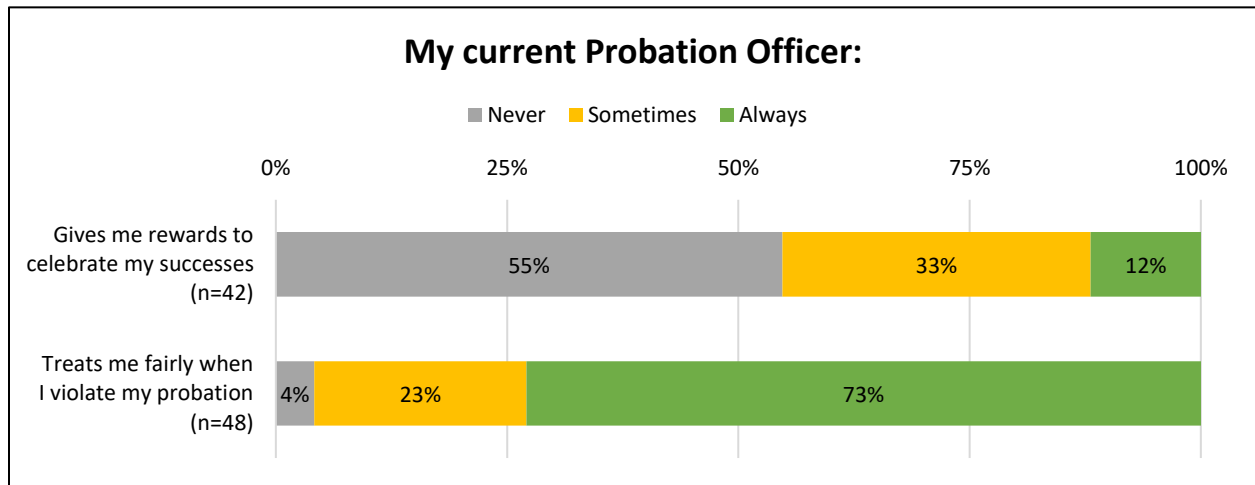
Figure 6. AB 109 Client Survey respondents' experiences with their current Deputy Probation Officers



Clients also provided information on the frequency of (1) incentives given for successes and (2) fair treatment when there are probation violations. Figure 6 presents clients' responses to survey items that were focused on how often incentives were given and how often there was fair treatment in response to probation violations.

- Among respondents who answered these survey items, most indicated that while their DPO always treated them fairly when they violated their probation (73%); however, over half reported that their DPO never gave them rewards to celebrate their success (55%).

Figure 7. Reported frequencies of incentives and fair treatment from DPOs among AB 109 Client Survey respondents



Client Recommendations for Improving Probation Services

The fourth and final portion of the survey asked clients to share their suggestions for improving probation services. Clients also were asked to describe if there were any services they wished they would have received.

Forty-one survey participants provided comments in response to the question about recommendations for improving probation services. Presented below are core themes along with illustrative quotes.

<p>No Recommendations, Positive Feedback (n=21)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “They do everything very well.” • “N/A. They are doing a good job already.” <p>Adjustments to Probation Length/Services (n=10)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “By lessening the amount of time they keep people on probation.” • “Coffee and donuts. Change the video.” <p>Treatment before Incarceration (n=6)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Stop incarcerating people with drug ‘addictions’ and give them some treatment as first step(s) before incarcerating them!” • “Helping out with alternate ways instead of jail with individuals with drug addictions (it’s a sickness not a crime).” 	<p>Interactions with DPOs (n=3)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Hear me more.” • “When having a drug problem be more supportive.” <p>Other (n=1)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I’m not here for telling ‘F Up’.”
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When asked if there were other services they wished they had received but did not get, 16 respondents said there were and, among those respondents, 13 indicated which services they would have liked to receive. **Table 2** lists the types of services that were mentioned by survey respondents.

Table 2. Desired probation services provided by AB 109 Client Survey respondents

Desired Service	Quotes from Survey Respondent
Basic Needs Services (n=6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Gift cards, hygiene products because I'm homeless and in need of things” • “Housing services” • “Housing/ food/bus passes/phones” • “More funding towards work and transportation” • “Rental assistance (Help w/ rent)” • “Vouchers for work clothes and work boots and vouchers for ID/drivers license.”
Substance Use Disorder Services (n=4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Drug court/housing” • “I can't get into certain sober living because I'm on methadone which I think is awful and I'd really like you guys to advocate for me my success has been tremendous and I think that should be changed!” • “Steps, please?” • “Treatment (drug)”
Vocational Training (n=2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Some type of computer multimedia/ or graphic arts training” • “Truck driving school barber school”
General Counseling Services (n=1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Counseling services (speak to therapist)”

AB 109 CLIENT FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

In addition to the AB 109 Client Survey, a series of focus groups were offered to clients to further understand their experiences on probation and learn about any unmet needs.

It is clear from the focus groups that participants want to better themselves, increase their knowledge, and their autonomy. While on community supervision they expressed efforts to build supports around themselves with a strong social circle to increase their success while under community supervision. It should be noted that while one respondent shared that they grew up in a family where all members were involved in the justice system, most others had not.

Services

Focus group participants were asked about the services and supports available to them to address the problems and barriers they encounter while on community supervision. Responses reflected a strong appreciation for programs and services that address housing and employment barriers as well as a strong relationship with their Deputy Probation Officers (DPOs).

Services cited as critical supports for successful reentry into the community included programs that assist with access to low-income housing, employment assistance services that provide access to computer technology, and mental health services. One client obtained employment through a VCPA-sponsored job training program they were enrolled in, and ultimately led to full-time, gainful employment. Specific programs mentioned to address other barriers participants encounter include “One Stop”, “Alternative Action Program”, and “Bridges 2 Work.” These programs offer resources from clothing to medical, dental, and mental health services and treatments, and financial assistance for job trainings.

When asked if the AB 109 services provided help them “stay out of trouble” and from returning to jail, respondents shared that knowing where to access resources, such as housing, are very helpful. In addition, there was a strong sentiment shared that having a DPO that seemed invested in their success was meaningful and helped them feel personally motivated to stay out of trouble.

One participant shared that he was happy with how quickly he was placed in low-income housing that was sufficient and took pride in that he was persistent and motivated to get documents and applications in quickly.

Relationships with Deputy Probation Officers

Respondents not only receive resources and referrals to programs from their DPO, but they value respect and support given to them as well. They shared that this personal support gives them “another reason to stay out of trouble,” one participant sharing “I don’t want to let him (his DPO) down.”

Respondents highlighted the importance of their relationship with their DPO. They specifically shared their appreciation for being acknowledged as a “human first”, not “written off” or reduced to nothing more than someone with a criminal history. Simple gestures, such as DPOs making eye contact with

clients and showing interest by asking clients how they are feeling at a given moment, were highlighted by clients as important factors in making them feel comfortable, welcome, and respected.

Participants also stated that they did not feel DPOs limit their ability to access necessary services based on personal or cultural characteristics (i.e., gender identity, language spoken, sexual orientation, race, etc.). One respondent, who has a chronic illness that can affect her ability to attend scheduled meeting times with Probation, stated that she is motivated to succeed under supervision because of her DPOs understanding and willingness to make accommodation due to her chronic condition and medical visits.

While some focus group participants found their relationship with their probation officer to be supportive and beneficial to their success under supervision, others felt that the probation department was more concerned with what they could be doing wrong than with helping them succeed., “It’s like they are fishing under the assumption that you are doing something wrong.”

Unannounced visits and certain unspecified terms of release were mentioned as creating higher levels of anxiety and psychological pressure. Participants shared feeling like these visits bring unwanted neighborhood attention and place a stigma on them, impacting their reputation and causing embarrassment. One respondent who seemed to have frequent run-ins with the Sheriff’s Office shared the frequent check ins are a disruption to his progress and momentum of trying to build his life.

*“I found a therapist through my DPO and if more people were like him,
there would probably be more success stories.”
-AB 109 Focus Group Participant*

Additional Barriers

Focus group participants were asked to identify the “typical” problems they’ve encountered while on community supervision. Housing, employment, relationships with probation officers, lack of technology knowledge, and social supports were topics that were mentioned by some focus group participants.

Not all respondents felt that the services provided help keep them out of “trouble.” Participants felt that there are many circumstances that work against them to undermine the hard work and progress many people have been working towards, including some of the terms of their community supervision. An example of this given was when those not sentenced for a drug related offence are still required to not have drugs or alcohol in their homes or will otherwise be sent back to jail.

Additional Barriers: Housing

Focus group participants shared stories that show housing as a one of the most serious barriers that they face. Participants shared several personal anecdotes about how, prior to release, they experience a “panic period.” For example, though residential treatment facilities were often available, several focus group participants found affordable housing difficult to obtain, particularly for those whom sobriety was not a primary need. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this issue, with inflated rent prices, eliminating many low-income housing options. Another participant mentioned having to find somewhere else for his young son to live because the Salvation Army Homeless shelter does not allow men and families to stay together.

Additional Barriers: Employment

Employment also emerged as a meaningful barrier, with focus group participants expressing this as another one of their top priorities when beginning probation that brings several challenges. Participants shared that they struggled with securing employment due to their resumes and background checks which they feel automatically eliminates their opportunity for the job.

One participant shared that they were rejected from one job without reason. Another shared that employment programs are in “bad areas” and when trying to access these services they experience harassment and exposure to negative things that make them feel like “they are setting me up for failure.”

“[There are] too many rules at those places especially after having been in prison so long, it’s not cool being in that situation. It’s contradictory, it’s like being in prison again.”

-AB 109 Focus Group Participant

Additional Barriers: Lack of Technology Skills

Another challenge for those on community supervision is catching up with the technological advances that have happened while they were incarcerated. One participant shared that he only knows the basics and it makes things like searching for jobs and housing difficult since everything is now done online.

Additional Barriers: Social Support

A participant shared that while incarcerated, people fail to get what they need and when they are released without any systems set up to support them. It was expressed that this can make them feel that they have no choice but to return to the same friends, family or circumstances that led to their incarceration in the first place. Circumstances making it especially difficult to “stay clean” and get their new life started.

Recommendations

Participants were given the opportunity to share their thoughts on any additional support or services that would support their success. Items shared include opportunities for training and increased opportunity to feel empowered over their life decisions. Credit assistance, technology training, and trade school were all mentioned, and opportunities interviewees would value, as each of these would help them secure meaningful and consistent employment and housing.

When discussing opportunities for increased empowerment over life decisions, participants expressed a strong desire for active engagement in social programs, like the veterans’ program, to be matched with a mentor, and for support in feeling more supported and empowered with mental health related issues. Responses clearly reflect a desire for independence and ownership, toward a commitment to achieving probation goals.

*"I believe there should be a place where people who are in our position should have a voice. This could be a platform for complaints, suggestions, for example like a hotline phone number. Yes, we're on probation but we can have certain rights and dignity."
-AB 109 Focus Group Participant*

Respondents had much to say when asked if they had any advice to offer to someone on community supervision. Advice reflected both concrete advice that would keep an individual out or help them get out of the system as well as encouragement they feel individuals in supervision need. Examples of concrete advice include:

- Don't use drugs or alcohol
- Change your surroundings
- Tend to mental health needs, and,
- Find a non-judgmental community or a mentor that can help, such as at a church.

Social advice shared included: address your underlying issues, be open minded, and believe in yourself. Some example quotes were:

- "Believe in yourself, life is not always going to be easy and it's a fight so fight your hardest and the work will pay off."
- "If you're doing what you're supposed to be doing, you'll be fine and get through this."

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

Through implementation of the client survey and focus groups, AB 109 client participation in services and perceptions of services while on AB 109 supervision were assessed.

Services

Nearly 4 in 5 respondents (79%) reported participating in one or more community-based service(s) at the time the survey was conducted. Most of the AB 109 Client Survey respondents think highly of the community-based services in which they participated with over half indicating that the following services were "Very Helpful": transitional living; mental health treatment; employment services; substance abuse treatment; case management; and trauma services. Among respondents who participate in services, most indicated the services that they participated in met their cultural and language needs (71%) and/or gender identity needs (80%). The highest percentage of clients who are not participating in any services are those who have been on probation less than 3 months, indicating greater recruitment efforts should be made for this group.

Needs

Some requests were made through the open-ended items on the survey and the focus groups including adjusting the length of community supervision and community-based services, and attending substance use disorder treatment prior to incarceration. When survey respondents were asked what other

community-based services they desired, nearly half requested services to help address basic needs (e.g., housing assistance, transportation vouchers, hygiene products, etc.). Nearly 1 in 3 respondents requested additional services to help address issues around substance use disorders.

Experiences with Deputy Probation Officers

There was an overwhelmingly positive perception of survey respondents' Deputy Probation Officers (DPOs). Compliments and encouraging feedback about the probation department were evident throughout many of the write-in response options included in the survey and the responses from focus group participants.

Recommendations

Primary concerns of participants are the need for housing and transportation assistance as well as substance use disorder treatment and hygiene products, particularly for those experiencing homelessness. Providing additional resources to support these needs being met could contribute to greater levels of client success while on supervision.

Directly addressing respondents' requests may be beyond the reach of the CCP's current resources; however, small and/or incremental changes may demonstrate that the information gleaned through the AB 109 client engagement initiatives has been heard.