

Violence Prevention Initiative

Maryland Division of Parole & Probation - VPI Gains Public Recognition



In the details, catching the devil

By Peter Hermann
December 6, 2009

Baltimore County homicide detectives said they knew who pulled the trigger shortly after two men burst into a liquor store on Belair Road and fatally shot the owner in the head. The gunman had a stocking pulled over his head, but police said they could recognize him from a surveillance video.

Before making an arrest, they needed to assemble more evidence and build a conspiracy case against a gang police said was responsible for a string of city and county liquor store holdups that would total 16 in July. In the meantime, authorities wanted their prime suspect off the street.

So detectives turned to a program called Violence Prevention Initiative that was launched two years ago by state parole and probation agents to identify the area's most violent offenders and single them out for tight scrutiny. People on this list get arrested for violating the most minor rules they must follow to be released from prison and remain free.

The man police had identified as the ringleader in the July 16 slaying and the other robberies had been paroled on a drug conviction. The parole board ordered him to get a job as a condition of his early release.

He failed, and once police linked him to the killing, probation agents quickly obtained an arrest warrant to put him back behind bars.



He got out five weeks later, and detectives, along with senior parole and probation agent Phil Rossetti, who works side by side with officers in the county homicide office, found another way to get him locked up again. He had failed to register his car.

By early November, Baltimore County police had charged that man and five others in connection with the holdups and in the shooting of 57-year-old Joon Am Kang, who had owned Putty Hill Liquors.

Being able to keep the suspect in jail bought detectives time to fully investigate - and they said not a single robbery occurred after he was first locked up on the parole violations in early August. He was held until he was charged with first-degree murder and several armed robbery counts two months later.

With 70,000 [1] Marylanders under the supervision of state parole and probation agents, it's impossible and impractical for all of them to be closely monitored. Each state agent typically watches more than 100 [2] people at a time, and so-called "technical" violations, such as failing to register a car or get a job, might get noted and filed for future scrutiny at a hearing or by a judge, but rarely do such minor transgressions result in arrest warrants being issued.

Not so for the roughly 2,200 people in the Violence Prevention Initiative, more than

half of whom are in Baltimore. Agents supervising these offenders watch over no more than 35 at a time, and during the past 18 months, more than 1,200 have had their parole or probation revoked.

This program for the first time puts parole and probation agents in the same offices and in the same meetings as local police. Rossetti works on the 10th floor of the Baltimore County Police Department's Crimes Against Person section, which includes detectives investigating homicides, nonfatal shootings, armed robberies, sex offenses and other violent crime.

"Our number one priority is to get the most violent offenders off the street as soon as possible," Rossetti said. Working closely with police allows him access to their files and their thoughts, and he knows immediately when an offender on his list is suspected in a crime.

Parole and probation agents used to work in entirely separate worlds, keeping tabs on an overwhelming number of offenders and only knowing that they committed other crimes when reports made it to their files, sometimes weeks or months after an arrest.

Police complained agents didn't do their jobs because so many of their suspects were out despite numerous violations, and agents complained they were overworked, overwhelmed and got information from police too late to be of any use.

"We just didn't trust a lot of probation agents," said Baltimore County homicide

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[1] Original article stated 77,000.

[2] Original article stated 160.

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In the details, catching the devil *cont.*

Lt. Jim Monahan. He noted that when the initiative began, "We were a little apprehensive," noting that cops, especially homicide detectives, don't like to share information with anybody. With murder, Monahan said, "You don't get a second chance."

Now, at least with a core group of violent offenders, that bickering is over. Referring to the Putty Hill liquor store investigation, the suspect's parole violation "was minor stuff," Monahan said. "But it mattered big."

Baltimore County Police Capt. John A. Campbell, who runs the Crimes Against Person division, said that before Rossetti joined his team, the idea of even talking to a probation agent "was probably an afterthought. Now, it's one of the first things that's done when a detective has a name."

Lt. Michael Newton, who runs the Bal-

timore Police Department's Eastern District detective squad, said his officers recently learned the name of a man who shot at somebody but they didn't have enough information to make an arrest. They turned to probation agents for help. "He had a bad record and we were able to get one of the warring parties off the street," Newton said. "It gave us some breathing room. During that time, we were able to develop suspects and we stopped a number of violent acts from happening."

In another case, Newton said a suspect in a double shooting was on the Violent Prevention Initiative list and got picked up for a routine violation. "He is a stone-cold criminal," the lieutenant said. "The first thing I asked him was, 'What's the most time you ever got?' He told me had only done a year. I shook this guy up when I told him he's looking at 10 years."

But Newton said "the probation violation is the only thing we got him on now" and he hopes the guy's stint in jail will either give detectives time to build a case or persuade him to confess. "He knows we mean business," the lieutenant said.

It seems a no-brainer, given that most violent criminals shuffle back and forth between freedom and jail, that cops would work closely with the very officials who have the most contact with repeat offenders.

Defense lawyers may be wary of police using minor probation violations to throw people in jail to buy time to solve cases. But a violation is a violation, and enforcing it against the most proficient offenders seems reasonable. Some people have earned the right to be watched more closely than others.

Program keeps a close eye on most violent and prolific offenders

By Peter Hermann
December 27, 2009

The parole and probation agent had his gun drawn as he made his way inside the West Baltimore rowhouse. The man he was searching for was upstairs, according to relatives who answered the early-morning knock.

"Come down with your hands up," the agent shouted as he peered up the dark stairway.



The man slowly walked down, then was quickly handcuffed and seated on the living room sofa. He couldn't understand why eight armed officers had crowded into his rowhouse before 7 on a recent weekday morning.

He had been mandatorily released from prison (meaning he had served his time) on an assault conviction, but was still under the supervision of parole agents because he had gotten out

early with work and good-conduct credits. A fresh arrest on a drug charge meant he had violated the terms of his release.

That prosecutors had dropped the charges didn't matter. He can still go before a judge and could still be sent back to prison.

The suspect was one of more than 2,200 people recently released from prison under the supervision of parole or probation agents who have been put in the state's Violence Prevention Initiative program, launched by the Maryland Department

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Program keeps a close eye on most violent and prolific offenders *cont.*

of Public Safety and Correctional Services in July 2007 to keep a close eye on the most violent and frequent offenders.

Before this program began, infractions such as a missed meeting with an agent or even a new arrest might go unnoticed or be ignored as mere technical violations. Authorities now remind the parolees and probationers who are tagged as the worst of the worst that stepping out of line even by a nose hair can mean being thrown back into the slammer.

“These are the people who are wreaking havoc on the citizens of Baltimore,” said Chief Vernon Skuhr, the executive director of the Community Surveillance and Enforcement Program for the state prison system.

Skuhr started as a young probation agent in 1967, and he now leads squads throughout the state; even after four decades, the 61-year-old still straps on a gun and vest, climbs behind the wheel of an unmarked Chevrolet sedan and hits the streets with his teams.

The chief told me that in years past, prosecutors and judges were reluctant to lock up offenders for anything but the most serious violation. His job, he said, “was more social work than law enforcement.” Agents now work side by side with many police departments, including Baltimore’s, where more than half of the people in the Violence Prevention Initiative live. For detectives, the program gives them another way to haul in sus-

pects for questioning or keep them detained while they finish their investigation.

Of the 2,200 people designated for the initiative, more than 1,300 have had their parole or probation revoked. And the numbers are going up fast. There were 304 revocations in fiscal 2008 and 1,059 in fiscal 2009. In 2008, judges issued 1,176 warrants for people in the anti-violence initiative, and 1,898 in 2009. About 90 percent are successfully served by parole and probation warrant service agents [1]. But judges don’t always agree that the violator deserves to be back in prison, frustrating parole and probation agents who want everyone on board with their program.

For police, these offenders have served their time and gotten a break by getting out early. Failing to live up to their contract, with an infraction as serious as committing a new offense or as minor as missing an appointment with an agent, means they should be sent back to finish their sentences.

Baltimore’s police commissioner, facing a year in which not a dent was made in the homicide numbers, went on a public tirade this month about offenders roaming the streets, after police shot two felons in two days, one outside a courthouse, the other after he had taken a .50-caliber handgun to a meeting with his probation agent.

Even with hiccups, the Violence Prevention Initiative has energized parole and

probation agents who now feel the arrests they do make have new importance. There are 75 [2] agents assigned to the initiative. Fifty-five [3] work in the Baltimore metropolitan area. On a morning this month, eight warrant service agents [4] in a convoy of five cars hit houses from East Baltimore’s Remington and Harwood neighborhoods to a garden-style apartment complex in Baltimore County’s Perry Hall.

At the suburban address, the agents searched for a man on parole for assault who had failed to adhere to his 7 p.m. curfew, imposed as a condition of his release. His ankle-mounted GPS device had alerted authorities to the violation.

Back in the city, on East Lorraine Avenue, agents were looking for a man paroled on an assault charge who had gotten arrested again. The man’s aunt answered the door but insisted her nephew didn’t live there and hadn’t been there in weeks.

“He’s using this address,” one agent told her.

But when agents went upstairs, two children readily told them the man had slept there that night and had left for work just before the authorities arrived.

“Kids don’t lie,” said Capt. Roy Thumma. “He stays here. We may have missed him by 15 minutes. We just got to hit it again.”

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[1] ‘by parole and probation warrant service agents’ was added to the article by DPSCS for clarification.

[2] Original article stated 27.

[3] Original article stated eighteen.

[4] ‘warrant service agents’ was added to the article by DPSCS for clarification.