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Editorial Note: Inclusion of practitioner initiatives or research summaries in this newsletter does not imply endorsement by NAPE. These features are intended to highlight emerging practices, local innovations, and relevant scholarship that probation leaders may wish to explore as part of their own professional judgment and organizational context.

LEAD STORY

A New Way Forward: The Blue Card Initiative Supports Neurodivergent Court Users

By Dr. Carmen Gomez, Deputy Commissioner for Pretrial Services, Office of the Commissioner of Probation, Boston, MA



Dr. Carmen Gomez introduces the Blue Card Initiative at its launch event in the Massachusetts Trial Court.

The Blue Card Initiative is a new program designed to better support individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and other neurodivergent court users who interact with court personnel. The initiative was formally introduced on Thursday, April 30, 2026, during Autism Awareness Month, with full implementation to follow in the coming months as remaining program details are finalized and the rollout is prepared across the Trial Court.

Modeled in part on the Blue Envelope Program used by state law enforcement agencies, the initiative is the first of its kind in the nation. It is intended to promote safe, positive, and effective interactions between court staff and court users who may communicate, respond, or process information differently. The Blue Card — a blue document holder used to store court paperwork — helps individuals navigate the courthouse experience while signaling to the court community that additional patience, clear communication, or assistance may be helpful. Every court location will have at least one Blue Card Ambassador responsible for supporting the initiative.

“One in five people interacting with the criminal legal system suffers from one of these conditions.”

As many of you know, I'm non neurotypical and have experienced firsthand the difficulties we face in everyday life. I've been very lucky because I've always had a strong support system, but I know that is not the case for many people. One in five people interacting with the criminal legal system suffers from one of these conditions.

For more information, please contact Dr. Gomez at carmen.gomez@jud.state.ma.us.

President's Message

“Elevating the profession by strengthening executive leadership, amplifying practitioner voice, and collaboratively shaping the future of probation.”



There's a line in “Grateful” by Hezekiah Walker that has stayed with me for years. It is a reminder that gratitude is both a posture and a source of strength. That spirit of gratitude has been on my mind as I reflect on our time together as a profession during the 51st American Probation and Parole Association (APPA) Annual Training Institute in Chicago.

I am grateful for the work we get to do together. Grateful for leaders across our profession who continue to show up with purpose. And grateful for every opportunity we have to help others “charge their battery” so their light shines bright in the communities they serve.

This year's APPA Institute was filled with unmistakable energy, commitment, and shared purpose. I was honored to represent NAPE during a plenary session and to connect with colleagues who are advancing probation leadership in meaningful ways.

My appreciation goes out to Marcus Hodges and Veronica Cunningham for their partnership and support. I am also thankful for the members of the NAPE Board of Directors who attended, and for Vanessa Farmer, whose coordination of our Board meeting and NAPE Members Reception ensured our presence was strong, organized, and welcoming.

We were proud to celebrate excellence in leadership during the conference. Congratulations to our 2026 NAPE Award recipients:

- **Kiki Farris** — Sam Houston State University Executive of the Year, Contra Costa County Probation
- **Dr. Carmen Gomez** — George M. Keiser Award for Exceptional Leadership, Massachusetts Probation Service
- **Cobi Tittle** — Dan Richard Beto Award for Distinguished and Sustained Service, Tarrant County CSCD

Each of these leaders reflects the best of our profession — dedication, innovation, and a deep commitment to strengthening community corrections.

“The work is meaningful, the impact is real, and the future is bright.”

As we look ahead, I remain proud to stand alongside leaders who continue to advance our field. The work is meaningful, the impact is real, and the future is bright. I'm excited about what comes next for NAPE and for the communities we serve.

Charles Robinson

President, National Association of Probation Executives

SPOTLIGHT

5 Questions With a Leader: An Interview with Susan Burke

Former NAPE President



Tell us a little about you. Why did you choose probation, and what experiences have defined your leadership journey?

My path into the field wasn't exactly traditional. After I earned my master's degree, I planned to work in the nonprofit sector. Instead, I accepted a community coordinator position with a newly created metro gang unit. I didn't have a criminal justice background, but I did bring experience working with communities.

Over time, I really grew to love the justice field. I had the chance to work with law enforcement, probation, corrections, and the courts. Later, I joined the Governor's Office, where I worked on criminal and juvenile justice policy, legislation, federal compliance, and grant-funded programs under four governors. That work eventually led me to roles as Assistant Juvenile Court Administrator, where I helped oversee statewide probation services, and then as Director of the Utah Division of Juvenile Justice Services, where I oversaw detention, secure facilities, parole operations, early intervention, and community-based services.

Along the way, I had mentors who encouraged me to take on new opportunities, even when I wasn't sure I was ready. Their confidence in me helped build my own confidence. I've tried to do the same for others by encouraging them to grow, even when that meant they moved on to new opportunities elsewhere.

Today, I channel my experiences into my consulting work, which currently involves helping two states improve their juvenile justice systems.

Looking back on your career, what was one of the most meaningful challenges you've faced, and how did it shape your perspective on what probation executives need to succeed?

I've seen the field go through many cycles—times when resources were strong, periods of deep budget cuts, policies that created real barriers, and policies that helped move us forward. One of the most challenging moments in my career was stepping in to lead an agency facing a \$6 million deficit. I had to make difficult decisions quickly while also earning the trust of a leadership team that was getting to know a new leader from outside the organization.

In some ways, being new made it easier to look at the situation objectively and make necessary changes. In other ways, it made the work harder because I did not yet fully understand how those cuts would affect the people we served or the staff doing the work every day. That experience reminded me that executives have to be willing to make timely decisions, even when they are difficult, and they have to communicate often and honestly with staff during uncertain times.

Most importantly, leaders need to stay grounded in mission and purpose. Those are the anchors that help clarify priorities, guide tough choices, and keep the focus on doing what is right for the people and communities we serve.

How would you describe NAPE's role in community corrections to a leader considering joining? Describe a time you've benefited from your NAPE membership.

Don't underestimate the value of national associations. I belong to several for different reasons, but they all keep me connected to national trends, emerging issues, and colleagues across the field. They also create space for meaningful connection. Leadership can be isolating, especially when few people in your community or state truly understand the role you hold. Through NAPE, I found colleagues who understood the challenges of executive leadership, helped keep me grounded during difficult times, and genuinely celebrated successes along the way.

If you think you don't have time, make the time. We step into leadership because we have something to offer, and sharing that experience benefits the broader field. Together, we can help move the field forward.

“Leaders need the courage to question the status quo, examine operations honestly, and make difficult decisions, even when those decisions are unpopular.”

For those stepping into an executive role, what advice would you give about leading with clarity, courage, and purpose in today's rapidly changing environment?

Staying focused on mission and purpose can be difficult, especially when history creates resistance and attention spans are short. Too often, we keep doing what is familiar simply because it is familiar. Leaders need the courage to question the status quo, examine operations honestly, and make difficult decisions, even when those decisions are unpopular. It helps to know the decision is grounded in the right reasons, aligned with the organization's mission and purpose, and consistent with your personal values. Still, those moments can be painful. I remember deciding to move a popular program to a new model we had tested and found more effective. The president of my board of directors, who had helped create the original program and was also a mentor, resigned shortly after the change. The data were clear: the program was no longer working, and change was necessary. I still mourn the loss of that mentorship, but I know I made the right decision.

What do you believe the future of leadership in community corrections looks like? What will the defining skills of a leader be in the coming years?

Future leaders will need to be adaptable in both their skills and their leadership style. People want to know not only what you know, but also what you believe and how you show up in the conversations shaping the field. That includes having a presence in spaces like social media. It is a way to share ideas, learn from others, and help people understand who you are as a leader. It's also an area that I have yet to fully embrace.

Leaders also have to be ready to step in and lead from day one. The work is too important, and leadership tenures can be short, so there may not be a long runway. New leaders need to stay focused on what matters, rely on a strong moral compass, and keep asking who their decisions are ultimately serving. At the center of it all are the people supported by our agencies, and we can never lose sight of them.

Bonus: What are you reading, listening to, or learning from right now that's influencing how you think about leadership and the future of probation?

I've been trying to read and listen to things that stretch my thinking beyond the day-to-day work. I'm especially drawn to how the work impacts the people we serve. How do people experience the system? Right now, I'm most interested in anything that helps enhance my understanding to help shape my consulting work. I'm frequently reviewing research, data, and reports online from sites such as the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the Council of State Governments Justice Center, along with newsletter subscriptions. One that I particularly like is a weekly newsletter from Better Allies called *5 Ally Actions*, which contains five simple actions to create a workplace where everyone can thrive.

EVIDENCE IN PRACTICE

Implementing Supervision Standards: Measuring Speed and Fidelity

By Faye S. Taxman, Ph.D., George Mason University, in partnership with the American Probation and Parole Association (APPA) — ftaxman@gmu.edu

With Veronica Cunningham, Executive Director, APPA, and Delores Johnson, APPA

Background

The American Probation and Parole Association (APPA) issued the first set of standards on evidence-based practices for adult probation and parole agencies ("Standards"), designed to improve the supervision of nearly 5 million adults under parole or probation supervision. The Standards are a precursor to APPA launching an accreditation process, and cover 11 areas: the goals of community supervision; sentencing to probation or release on parole; assessment; transition to community/pre-release efforts; supervision practices, including collaboration with external agencies and "hand off"; caseload size; engagement and relationship-building with partners; case management and planning; effective interventions; influencing behaviors; and performance measurement. The Standards aim to improve supervision quality through uniformity, equitable practices, and active diffusion of best practices, and are accompanied by performance metrics for how well an agency has implemented each standard.

George Mason University and the University of Wisconsin (Faye S. Taxman and Todd Molfenter, respectively), along with APPA, are evaluating the Standards' implementation—documenting the process, measuring speed and fidelity, and understanding what helps or hinders adoption.

The “APPA Speed Up” Study

This research uses an implementation science framework to understand what enables timely, effective adoption of the Standards in probation and parole agencies. The study documents: (1) perspectives on standards, including history with similar efforts and training on evidence-based practices; (2) characteristics of implementers, their settings, and recipients; (3) the external environment, including policies and resources; and (4) implementation and sustainability infrastructure, including staffing and monitoring systems. It is a 12-month project in which each of twelve selected pilot sites—representing diverse regions, sizes, and organization types—will work on up to three standards of their choosing.

Each site begins by assessing where its organization stands on each of the 11 performance standards, through a review of agency policy, staff and administrator surveys, a review of administrative data, and interviews on which standards to prioritize. A baseline report follows, after which each site selects an implementation expert to help facilitate and document its progress. The research team has also developed an online survey capturing practices across seven areas: agency support to staff, flexibility with clients, engagement in supervision, use of effective interventions, use of influencing behaviors, case planning, and use of risk-need-responsibility tools.

“The goal will be to identify pathways that optimize the implementation of the standards in supervision agencies.”

What This Study Will Produce

For APPA, the research team will develop implementation guides for using the Standards, review training materials, and produce a video explainer of why the Standards are needed. For participating sites, the team will collect measures, document implementation progress, and track fidelity and speed. The team will also produce research papers on speed-of-implementation issues across the various standards.

A new round of pilot sites will be recruited in fall/winter 2026. Agencies with questions may contact Dr. Faye Taxman at ftaxman@gmu.edu.

Questions for Leaders

1. Which of the 11 Standards areas would our agency prioritize first, and why?
2. Do we currently have the data infrastructure to measure fidelity—not just whether a practice is documented, but whether it's implemented consistently?
3. Who would serve as our internal “implementation expert,” and what support would they need to succeed?
4. How do we typically roll out new mandates today, and where do delays or inconsistency tend to creep in?
5. If our agency were selected for the next round of pilot sites, what would we most want to learn?

Professional Development Opportunities

Sponsor Professional Development Opportunity — presented by NCTI, in partnership with NAPE

Real Leadership Cohort: Building the Next Generation of Leaders in Community Corrections

Dear NAPE Member,

Community corrections needs leaders who communicate with clarity, lead with confidence, and inspire those around them. Send your staff who are stepping into leadership or serving as first-time leaders to build the skills needed to lead with impact.

The Real Leadership Cohort is a professional development experience created exclusively for probation and parole professionals. It combines the proven Real Colors personality framework with leadership strategies built for the community corrections field.

What They'll Walk Away With:

- Stronger communication skills across their team and partner agencies
- A clearer picture of their personal leadership strengths
- Practical tools tested against real community corrections scenarios
- A customized leadership plan they can put to work immediately
- Connection with peers who share their commitment to the field

No prior Real Colors experience needed — foundational training is built in.

Program Details: Four 3-hour virtual sessions via Zoom

Dates: October 1, 8, 15, 22

Enrollment is limited and expected to fill quickly. The last Real Leadership Cohort sold out.

Questions or registration assistance? Contact info@ncti.org.

Corporate Corner

SPONSOR SPOTLIGHT

Reentry Care: Helping People on Supervision Access Health Insurance

REENTRY
— CARE —

Reentry Care partners with probation, parole, and community supervision agencies to help justice-impacted individuals quickly connect with health insurance coverage and enrollment support.

For many people returning home from incarceration or navigating community supervision, access to healthcare can be a critical part of establishing stability. Health insurance can make it easier to access primary care, medications, mental health services, substance use treatment, and other essential healthcare services.

Reentry Care makes the process simple for both supervision agencies and their clients. The organization provides agencies with customized flyers, posters, QR codes, and referral tools that allow individuals to request free health insurance enrollment assistance from their phone. Reentry Care's team of licensed insurance advisors then helps each individual understand their options and, when eligible, enroll in coverage.

For probation and parole departments, Reentry Care can provide:

- Free enrollment assistance for clients
- Simple QR-code and digital referral options
- Customized outreach materials for offices and supervision staff
- No additional administrative burden for officers
- Referral and impact reporting for agency partners
- Support establishing a consistent healthcare referral process across offices or departments

“Health insurance can make it easier to access primary care, medications, mental health services, substance use treatment, and other essential healthcare services.”

Interested in bringing Reentry Care to your department or learning more about the program? [Request more information.](#)

Harley Blakeman

Founder & CEO • www.ReentryCare.org

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