

UNITED STATES PROBATION OFFICE

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted all aspects of the criminal justice system, including the operating procedures of the U.S. Probation Office in the District of New Jersey. The Probation Office implemented several operational changes early in the pandemic in an effort to protect staff while meeting the needs of the court and protecting the community. We continued our work with our client population to promote rehabilitation and prosocial conduct and addressed a variety of challenges exacerbated by the pandemic and restrictions put in place to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Prior to sentencing, a defendant is afforded the opportunity to participate in an interview with a probation officer as part of their presentence investigation. When the stay-at-home order took effect in late March 2020, there were 76 presentence interviews pending. Forty defendants were detained in eight different custodial facilities.

Although remote interviewing had been on the horizon for some time, the technological infrastructure was not yet in place for broad implementation. The pandemic propelled this initiative into reality. In less than one month, we were able to establish remote interview procedures with most correctional institutions. Procedures included telephone conferencing, video conferencing, and online video visitation. Revised operating procedures quickly fell into place with minimal issues reported. Probation officers continue to conduct remote presentence interviews, and all parties found these new procedures to be effective and efficient.

Pursuant to Standing Order #20-02, signed by Chief Judge Wolfson on March 16, 2020, which authorized video and teleconferencing for criminal proceedings, probation officers have attended over 500 sentencing hearings district wide. However, referrals for new presentence investigations have reduced as a result of the pandemic, by approximately 35 percent.

While the presentence workload slowed, the number of individuals released from prison increased significantly as a result of Compassionate Release motions being granted due to correctional facilities at high risk for the spread of COVID-19, resulting in increased supervision cases.



Violation hearings are also conducted remotely, and officers have redoubled our efforts to find alternatives to incarceration to address noncompliant behavior by individuals under supervision. Notably, Reentry courts in all three district courthouses have successfully transitioned to virtual models as well, providing participants with the support and guidance of their Reentry team. Two Reentry courts conducted in-person graduation ceremonies during this time, as participants achieved their supervision goals despite challenges posed by the pandemic. To maximize safety, Camden hosted an outdoor, socially distanced graduation ceremony and Trenton conducted a private ceremony with only team members present.

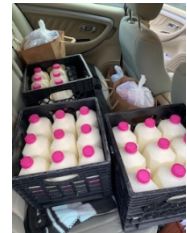




In addition, an increased number of individuals were released from prison under the Federal Location Monitoring Program (FLM). Under the FLM program, U.S. Probation Officers supervise Bureau of Prisons (BOP) inmates in the community. The program began in the late 1980s and serves as an alternative to the home confinement pre-release program provided by the BOP's contracted Residential Reentry Centers (RRCs). Our location monitoring specialists took every precaution to remain protected from COVID-19 while installing electronic monitoring equipment on individuals under supervision.



As the Probation Office has strategized to protect officers from COVID-19 transmission, the needs of individuals currently under supervision have increased. The employment rate of our client population decreased from 74% prior to the pandemic, to 68% currently. Additionally, of individuals under supervision who remain employed, many experienced reductions in hours and/or pay. Aside from the obvious implications for financial security of our client population, employment while on supervision, strongly correlates to successful outcomes on supervision. Additionally, our many individuals under supervision are especially vulnerable to mental health and/or substance abuse treatment needs, often detected by drug tests conducted by probation officers. As a result, officers continue to conduct field work, meeting clients at their homes and in the community, while utilizing best safety practices of masks, social distancing and hand hygiene. Officers have also utilized virtual contacts to monitor individuals under supervision, in addition to still going into homes. Because treatment needs remain prevalent, many contracted treatment providers are conducting mental health and substance abuse treatment virtually as well. In addition to our traditional duties, the Probation Office has made use of Second Chance Act funds to pay for emergency housing so that individuals under supervision remain safely housed through the pandemic. Some probation officers even make regular deliveries of emergency groceries to clients in need. In one instance, a delivery was made to an entire apartment building where one of our clients lived.



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Despite significant challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, the work of the United States Probation Office continues. Our operations have changed, but our mission has not. Our efforts to serve the court and assist individuals under our supervision in their rehabilitation are ongoing. The community is safer thanks to the efforts of our dedicated officers and staff.