



Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

Probation's failures threaten public safety

Posted by James Alan Fox, Crime and Punishment May 23, 2010

Someone ought to send the Daily Beast a link to today's Globe Spotlight Team's exposé on the Massachusetts Department of Probation. Just last week, this well-known news and opinion website ranked Massachusetts 46th in its overall list of most corrupt states--that's 46th from the top, meaning we are one of the least corrupt! And in terms of the Beast's public corruption sub-scale, the Bay State landed in the middle of the pack. Perhaps the Beast's analysts might want to rethink things a bit after today's revelations about patronage at Probation.

As a citizen of the Commonwealth, I, like presumably most of you, found the level of nepotism and favoritism in hiring and promotion decisions in the Probation Department to be absolutely appalling. As a criminologist, concerned about community alternatives to incarceration, about efforts to direct wayward youth in more positive directions, and about the importance of assisting families and children in need, I found the extent of corruption to be inexcusable.

The Spotlight Team is quite right in citing the stellar reputation that the Department of Probation once enjoyed. Under the stewardship of former Commissioner Donald Cochran and former Deputy Commissioner Ronald Corbett, Jr., the department was widely regarded for innovative approaches and for launching programs that were models for the nation. Most notably, Operation Night Light, which paired probation officers with police officers to make late-night house calls ensuring that young probationers were in compliance with court-ordered curfews, was a significant piece of Boston's success during the 1990s in reducing youth violence. Named a promising program by the U.S. Department of Justice, Night Light was copied in many cities across the land.

Today's Spotlight piece does an excellent job of documenting how the best people have often been overlooked in favor of the best connected. As is carefully documented, questionable employment practices have impacted the state's already strained budget. However, the Globe report is silent (at least through Part One) on the larger problem: the countless number of

probationers who may not have received the best services and supervision possible, as well as the threat to public safety when probation fails to do its job.