

**El Paso Times**

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300 N. Campbell  
El Paso, Texas 79901  
(800) 351-6007

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**OUR VIEWS****Key part of 'the system'****Probation officers in El Paso enhance community**

**P**robation officers have a key role in the criminal-justice system. Yet, the public hears very little about the oftentimes difficult and vital work these public servants perform in the community.

Probation officers in El Paso – and in most other cities – typically are overburdened with cases and underappreciated in the public eye. Yet, their role in law enforcement and in the community is invaluable.

These professionals keep tabs on the whereabouts of both felony and misdemeanor offenders. They supervise their community service and track whether offenders are meeting all the conditions of probation imposed by the courts.

That is not as easy as it may sound. And, it's far more important than some may think.

What makes the department's function so crucial to area courts – and to taxpayers – is that most probationers would be in jail if they weren't on probation. That would cost county taxpayers millions more in jail costs, which already hit about \$24 million annually.

The adult probation department

in El Paso directly supervises some 13,000 offenders with a staff of 290. Looking at these numbers, it's apparent why some probationers "slip through the cracks."

That's a problem that will improve with a reduced per-officer caseload, and that must be addressed by the state.

Locally, Stephen Enders, director of the West Texas Community Supervision and Corrections Department, points out that his staff does more than babysit errant adults. They work toward rehabilitation and help make sure probationers pay their court-ordered restitution to crime victims (\$500,000 was collected last year).

They also volunteer countless hours on various community projects, helping senior citizens, children and conducting blood drives.

El Paso's adult probation department is commended for its efforts to involve probationers in public clean-up projects, which provides some recompense to taxpayers.

The community should recognize the work probation officers provide, both on and off duty.

**An invaluable service**