

EL DORADO COUNTY GRAND JURY 2013-2014

SOUTH LAKE TAHOE PROBATION OFFICE

Case Number GJ-13-14

SUMMARY

The Grand Jury undertook an investigation into the work environment at the South Lake Tahoe Probation Department Office after local newspaper coverage indicated there was employee harassment and a pending civil lawsuit.

BACKGROUND

The Probation Department enforces court orders for persons convicted of crimes and persons released with pending criminal charges. Additionally, The Probation Department may attempt to rehabilitate probationers.

Most El Dorado County departments have offices on the west slope and in South Lake Tahoe (SLT). It is a recognized necessity; the two areas are separated by approximately 80 highway miles over a high mountain pass. The South Lake Tahoe Probation Department office is one of those departments. It's headquarters are in Shingle Springs on the west slope.

ACTIONS

Sixteen current and former Probation personnel were interviewed about the South Lake Tahoe work place environment.

DISCUSSION

The employees interviewed are intelligent, well spoken, and dedicated. They have college degrees and many years of probation experience. Yet, most described the work place environment as **toxic**. Supervisors and managers micromanage employees; fostering and allowing a *clique* system that identifies employees as either favored, or *shunned*, by management.

Many complained that those perceived in the non-favored *clique* are overly scrutinized and disciplined for minor administrative issues including requiring written explanations for approved sick days, incorrect punctuation in reports, work files with paperwork not in chronological order, who was (or was not) copied on internal emails or proper use of radios in County vehicles. Employees are unfairly disciplined and made to feel badly about their performance. Some observed that unqualified and favored employees were promoted instead of those qualified but disfavored. Both past and present officers reported they are subject to undue criticism, discipline and relegation to the disfavored *clique* because they choose to ensure compliance with court orders by visiting with probationers in the field. Management prefers they remain in the office without doing field visits. In many instances officers do not talk to other officers. Officers and other employees rarely talk with supervisors.

The cumulative result, described by employees and some managers, is poor morale in and dysfunction of the SLT Probation office as a whole, detracting from their overall mission to enforce court orders. Written bail reviews are often poor quality and there are failures to detect many parole violations.

The Grand Jury found several factors that highlight and perhaps exacerbate the poor workplace environment. All employees are required to read County discrimination, harassment and retaliation policies when hired, however, there is no additional more formal training. There are 11 managers and supervisors overseeing 33 workers; a ratio of one supervisor/manager for three workers. There is a perceived lack of management from headquarters in Shingle Springs, due to both physical separation and lack of interest in the SLT office.

El Dorado County hired a new Chief Probation Officer on December 2, 2013. A week after beginning his duties, the Grand Jury disclosed its findings about the working environment in the South Lake Tahoe office to him. Four months later the new Chief reported back that he had not found the toxic work environment and had made no substantive change to personnel or policies.

The Grand Jury then re-interviewed SLT personnel who reported that, in fact, the same toxic environment continues. However, they believe the new Chief to be well motivated and are hopeful he will institute changes to improve the working environment.

FINDINGS

1. The *cliques* that currently exist exacerbate an already toxic environment.
2. Unfair discipline, undeserved job promotions, making employees feel badly about their performance, harsh criticism and relegation to a *shunned* status is construed as bullying and harassment. It should not exist for many reasons, both legal and moral.
3. It seems incomprehensible that working from the office is preferred to working in the field.
4. The supervisor/manager to worker ratio appears out of balance.
5. The Grand Jury is hopeful that the new Chief will come to understand the dysfunction in the South Lake Tahoe office and will institute changes that result in positive results.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Eliminating the *cliques* should be an absolute priority.
2. Communication should be encouraged and open without recrimination, so that all employees feel vested in the entire workings of the office and department.
3. The existing dysfunction does not exist by happenstance. The skills of all current supervisors and managers should be intensively reviewed.

RESPONSES

Responses to both findings and recommendations in this Report are required by law in accordance with California Penal Code §933 and §933.05. Address responses to:

The Honorable Suzanne N. Kingsbury, presiding judge of the El Dorado County Superior Court, 1354 Johnson Blvd., South Lake Tahoe, CA 96150.

This Report has been provided to the El Dorado County Board of Supervisors and the El Dorado County Probation Department.

The Presiding Judge of the El Dorado County Superior Court additionally requests that the responses be sent electronically as a "Word" file or "PDF" file to facilitate the economical and timely distribution of such responses. Please email responses to the El Dorado County Grand Jury at:
courtadmin@eldoradocourt.org