

# Community Service Links Corrections to Volunteering

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*A 21 year old college student is required to provide fifty hours of community service in lieu of prosecution as the result of a retail theft/shoplifting charge. She works in an American Red Cross donor room to fulfill her obligation.*

*A young man convicted of driving while intoxicated (DWI) is directed by the courts to spend sixty hours of community service working with residents in a state institution for the developmentally disabled.*

*A fifty-five year old man convicted of forgery and placed on probation is ordered to serve one hundred hours of community service renovating and repairing low-income housing for the elderly through a local community-based program.*

These people are part of the increasing trend towards the use of community service volunteering as an alternative to traditional court/jail procedures for minor, or non-violent crimes. A typical community service program places accused or convicted offenders in unpaid positions with non-profit or tax-supported agencies

to perform a specified number of hours in a given period of time, and provides the necessary monitoring and evaluation to make the volunteer effort a success (Jones, 1981). The following study was conducted to assess the impact of the referral and supervision of offenders performing community service.

## BACKGROUND

Restitution is often ordered by agents of the criminal justice system, whereby the offender is asked to take responsibility for his or her actions and, in doing so, to make amends to those injured by the offense. For the purposes of this study, restitution refers to community service in which the offender provides volunteer services to the community and for the "general community good" (Gandy, in Galaway & Hudson, 1977:199). Community service is a form of symbolic or service restitution, as opposed to monetary restitution where the victim is reimbursed directly for damages or losses inflicted by the offender.

Offenders can be assigned community service in at least three stages of criminal justice processing: (1) pre-trial diversion or deferred prosecution; (2) court-ordered in lieu of

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paying a fine or jail time; and (3) court-ordered as a condition of probation. In Dane County, Wisconsin, for example, community service is often included in a deferred prosecution contract when a first-time offender is under a period of supervision. If the defendant successfully completes community service, he or she avoids the court system and a subsequent conviction record. Deferred prosecution has been referring defendants in Dane County into community service positions since August, 1980.

A second major source of community service referrals is through the Dane County Traffic/Criminal Courts. Within the last eight years, a number of states including Wisconsin have developed legislation, authorizing judges to invoke volunteer-community service hours in lieu of fines or jail terms. Community service as a sentencing alternative has most often been applied to those offenders found guilty of traffic violations. The recent crack down on drunk driving has led to a large number of community service referrals and placement of volunteers in local public and private community programs.

Finally, the courts have the option of imposing a community service order as a condition of probation. The disposition handed down places the defendant on probation, and orders the offender to perform a set number of community service hours while under supervision by a probation and parole officer.

Different agencies or individuals in a given community may be responsible for the administration of community service programs. Administrators may be community service coordinators working in alternative programs such as deferred prosecution. Other administrators include defense attorneys, probation and parole agents, social workers from the county jail or in halfway houses, and local voluntary action centers.

Some of the programs administering community service are more organized than others. The Deferred Prosecution Program in Dane County has been actively referring community service volunteers to local agencies since 1980. Program staff have implemented a systematic intake, screening, referral and monitoring process where defendants are supervised by deferred prosecution staff.

## FOCUS OF THE STUDY

Community service can be a positive alternative for individuals who have been accused or convicted of a criminal offense. This alternative has many potential benefits to the defendant, the community, and the justice system.

*The process of matching a person to a program, or connecting people with people, through community service provides the offender with many and varied learning opportunities throughout the greater community. The community service experience can potentially enhance the person's sense of self-esteem, give the individual an opportunity to amend "a wrong" in a visible manner, and give the person the sense of being a productive member of society providing a needed service. (Hanson & Henderson, 1983-4:16)*

In addition, work experience in the form of volunteer service is also cited as a means to overcome lack of experience in the job market. Occasionally, a community service placement leads to permanent employment.

Community service benefits the victim as well as the community at large. Victims of crime are repaid indirectly through symbolic restitution in the form of volunteer service with little cost to the taxpayer. Volunteer agencies are better able to serve their clientele with assistance of community service volunteers.

Both offenders and the agencies in which they are placed can benefit from the positive psychological effects of working together in a constructive effort to provide service to the community.

Often through community service, a defendant is able to learn more about him or herself as a person and comes to know his or her own potential as a human being. Such discovery of new potential or capability may very well emerge through a change or readjustment in personality which often accompanies a positive experience with community service work. Learning experiences such as community service can provide help adult offenders feel more competent, autonomous, and unafraid as they face the remainder of their lives.

This study was conducted to assess the impact of community service in Dane County, Wisconsin. Specifically, the study focussed on identifying the nature of the problems and concerns community programs and public agencies were experiencing with the present system of community service referral and placement, and their recommendations to improve the situation. The study also focussed on determining if community service volunteers make a contribution in their program goals and if the volunteer program staff perceive community service as a positive alternative over the traditional system of sentencing in the criminal justice system.

The following questions were addressed through the study:

(1) What are the attitudes of volunteer agency staff towards the various referral mechanisms used by each of the seven community service referral sources in Dane County?

(2) What are the attitudes of volunteer agency staff towards monitoring and supervision procedures used by each of the seven community service referral sources in Dane County?

(3) Do volunteer agency staff in Dane County think adult offenders performing community service contribute to meeting their program goals?

(4) Do volunteer agency staff in Dane County think the community service alternative has a positive effect on the adult offender as a result of his or her community service experience?

## METHODOLOGY

The population for the study consisted of seventy-one agencies in Dane County that had experience working with community service volunteers. In November, 1983, the Volunteer Service Bureau (VSB) mailed a short questionnaire to volunteer agencies from their volunteer referral bank. One of the items on the questionnaire asked if the program accepted court-ordered community service volunteers. From those who responded that they had accepted community service volunteers, a list was compiled and combined with those programs used for placements through the Dane County Deferred Prosecution Program/First Offender Unit.

The survey was mailed to 71 volunteer programs in Dane County. Seventeen of the volunteer programs indicated no experience working with community service volunteers. Of the remaining fifty-four agencies, 44 returned a completed survey yielding a response rate of 81%. The remaining ten respondents indicated they were too busy or simply did not want to fill out the survey form.

The high return rate was encouraging. However, there are volunteer programs working with community service referrals that did not take part in this study. As indicated earlier, the sample list of agencies developed originated with returns from the November, 1983 VSB survey. VSB staff expressed concern over the low response rate they had received, indicating some programs in-

volving community service volunteers in Dane County did not respond to the survey and, therefore, were not included in our sample and are a possible source of bias.

A second methodological problem with the survey sample deals with the high number of programs (17) indicating they had no experience with community service. It raises the question of the accuracy of the VSB furnished list. However, because of the size of the sample, the authors believe the sample is a representative sample of volunteer agencies.

## RESULTS

### Question 1

The returned survey data were tabulated and showed a mixed review of community service programming by the Dane County volunteer community. It appears that private and public supported agencies have had experience with community service for quite some time. Most of the programs (34%) responding to the survey had worked with community service volunteers for one year or less. Thirty-two percent reported having worked with such volunteers three years or more. Twenty-seven percent of the respondents have worked with community service volunteers for one to three years. In addition, several programs (9%) reported they had dealt with community service volunteers sometime in the past but were not presently working with such referrals.

Given the long history of community service involvement with some of the volunteer programs, the authors sought to determine which court-related program enjoyed the most use by the volunteer community. Sixty-five percent of the respondents indicated working experience with the Deferred Prosecution Program/First Offender Unit's community service project. Of these volunteer programs, the majority had worked with first offenders and also with court-ordered community ser-

vice in lieu of fine or jail (65%). A smaller proportion (25%), had worked with court ordered community service only. And six percent had worked with community service as a condition of probation only.

Over half (55%) of the referrals for volunteer placement originated with a criminal justice agent. The rest of the referrals originated with the Volunteer Service Bureau, an attorney, walk-ins, or a combination of the above. There was evidence of concern over the amount of information received and who was responsible for the offenders' accountability. Respondents indicated that better compliance was achieved with formal referral and pre-placement counseling.

### Question 2

A related monitoring issue is the handling of offender problems during their volunteer service. The results suggest that two-thirds of the volunteer agency staff will either call the referring agency or handle the problems themselves. Often a telephone call or the generation of a warning letter by the community service administrator will stimulate the offender to continue his or her community service involvement.

If the problems continue, the offender is told that the program no longer needs his or her services and is terminated as a volunteer. Program staff seem to make every attempt to restructure the situation within their program limitations. They talked about alternatives. If the situation was not resolved and no contact person was available from the criminal justice system, the program staff person said the offender was simply released from the community service position and the action reported to no one.

The last monitoring issue addressed in the study was the presence of and type of report-back procedure used when the offender completes his or her hours. The majority of volun-

teer agency staff indicated that they filled out an evaluation form or wrote a verification letter which included the number of hours completed and comments regarding the defendant's ability, dependability and responsibility towards the volunteer position. In cases where no report-back procedures were used, volunteer agency staff commented:

*The court assumes compliance unless I tell them otherwise.*

*We can only assume that the volunteer him/herself is reporting back to the court but could say nothing. No one ever verified with us.*

*Probation doesn't send any form for me to fill out. It would be nice to have one uniform form.*

The survey concluded by asking several questions regarding the volunteer agency staff's thoughts and opinions regarding the present state of community service as it is currently administered in Dane County and what effect community service with offenders had on meeting volunteer program goals and individual goals of the community service volunteers. The data show that 61 percent of volunteer agency staff have a positive or qualified positive response to community service.

A number of the respondents commented on the program:

*Very good. We have had several excellent volunteers placed with our program and many have continued on after completion of their hours.*

*I'm happy with it. I need volunteers constantly and this provides me with volunteers and the individual with options.*

*I would like to see the program grow. I think it's a great idea. Volunteering is a rapidly changing field and we can no longer rely on traditional (i.e., women not in the work force) volunteers to fulfill*

*our needs, we must look to new alternatives.*

*A valuable resource of male volunteers.*

Those respondents (20%) giving a qualified, positive response gave the following comments to back up their answers:

*We sure have two good people, but there sure is no supervision or follow-up.*

*We appreciate the volunteer service, however, would like more communication.*

*Generally favorable, more supervision as to daily commitment is necessary.*

Those respondents (23%) who were not pleased with the program commented:

*I see no communication from Dane County to agency.*

*It has little effect on our program. This is probably due to the loose nature of our operation.*

*Our program depends greatly upon consistency and reliability. It seems community service volunteers do not have these qualities.*

*Our experience with it has not been good generally.*

*I get too many requests and have to turn a lot of people away. Drunk drivers don't seem to be monitored or assisted very well with their placement.*

*We tried it and didn't like it. Don't really know about other programs.*

While overall response to the situation or existence of community service in Dane County is generally positive, several respondents raised the issues of the lack of supervision and monitoring of community service volunteers.

### Question 3

There are a variety of sources of community service referral and different systems of monitoring and supervision of offenders by these programs. In spite of this, 71% of the respondents think adult offenders performing community service contribute to meeting their program goals:

*Referrals are a great recruitment source of volunteers.*

*The market value of the labor provided, hundreds of volunteer person-power hours is great.*

*Provides an opportunity for paid staff to do more direct service because of the volunteer involvement.*

*Volunteers can meet the needs of clients that paid staff often cannot.*

*It provides an opportunity for the offender to give of themselves, some have volunteered beyond initial commitment.*

Of those respondents (18%) who did not think community service volunteers contributed to meeting their program goals, several indicated limitations that any person attempting to provide volunteer services may potentially face. For example:

*They do not have the skills and/or transportation.*

*Limits on areas where we can place such volunteers, especially if we have little information about them.*

*They are usually short term, more concerned about their time requirements than the client needs.*

*They are a very small part of our program.*

### Question 4

The survey-questionnaire concluded by asking respondents about community service alternative's effect on the adult offender. The ma-

ajority of respondents believed that community service has a positive effect on the offender. The reasons or evidence they gave to support this claim centered around the issues of increased self-esteem and meeting the offenders' needs; educational and learning aspects of skill and personal development through the community service experience; the fostering of positive social contacts; the offender being responsible for his or her own actions; and, community service allowing them a chance to contribute to others.

### **BENEFITS OF COMMUNITY SERVICE**

Most of the respondents in this study reported that community service volunteers made significant contributions to their programs. One main contribution was the volunteer recruitment potential that community service can provide local programs. Community service has:

*...become an important volunteer recruitment tool for local programs who rely on diverse methods of attracting volunteers. In this sense, community service referral is a valid and legitimate method of volunteer recruitment...This is especially true for those programs which have had difficulty recruiting male volunteers, as the majority of...offenders...are men. (Hanson & Henderson, 1983-84:17)*

A second major contribution cited was the number of volunteer person hours provided a program. The Wisconsin State Historical Society reported that in 1983, community service volunteers working with the Society contributed labor equivalent to a market value of \$14,790 based on the limited \$3.34 minimum wage figure and seven percent for social security and worker's compensation. This figure is increased when consideration is given for those who continue to volunteer beyond their community service obligation. Community service volunteers provide many additional hours to the volunteer programs that

may not have been available or provided to them otherwise.

A third contribution is that community service volunteers enable paid staff to provide more services to their clientele. Paid staff are freed up to develop and explore new or additional areas of direct client service. Similarly, the community service volunteer provided service in meeting client needs that a paid staff person cannot. Often a volunteer will gain the trust and cooperation of a client more readily than a paid staff person who is not in quite the same position or relationship with the client. They may be more open with a volunteer and more willing to cooperate with staff directions.

It should be noted that these benefits were not universal to all programs. The reasons given why community service volunteers may not significantly contribute to meeting program needs were few in number but important. The lack of skills, problems with transportation, and the fact that the volunteer program receives too little information on the offender to make an adequate volunteer placement were given as reasons why community service volunteers do not contribute to meeting program goals. All of these reasons could be resolved through the implementation of a more systematic and formalized referral process where a pre-screening and orientation to community service is conducted with the offender prior to actual referral to an agency.

The fourth contribution is the effect of community service work on the offender. The majority of volunteer program respondents felt that the community service alternative has a positive effect on the offender as the result of his or her volunteer involvement. This is encouraging. It appears that volunteer program staff have seen educational and, in some cases, therapeutic potential of community service experience with offenders.

Respondents mentioned increased self-esteem, constructive involvement, payback to the community, learning and personal growth, skill development and increased awareness of other people's problems and needs. One respondent stated: "Maybe they realize, after seeing so many incapacitated people, the potential that they themselves have and put it to good use." Another person responded with: "Volunteers have commented that their volunteer work has benefitted them. Volunteers' self-esteem tends to increase, as they learn to meet others' needs and gain appreciation."

Community service has the potential to facilitate personal growth and development of the offender. This seems to be particularly true when the community service experience is handled from a volunteer development perspective. In other words, the same principles of volunteer program management apply to a community service program in terms of interviewing, screening and matching of offenders to volunteer jobs in the community.

The principal exception is volunteer recruitment. Certainly no one is actively recruiting people to become offenders in the criminal justice system. However, as was noted earlier, once the offender is in the community service process, referrals can be considered a very important volunteer recruitment tool for public and private non-profit agencies in the community. The objective of the referral process should be

*...to facilitate the highest possible chance of successful completion of community service hours. A good program-volunteer match produces mutual benefits for the defendant-volunteer, the placement agency, its clientele...and ultimately the community at large. (Hanson & Henderson, 1983:18)*

## PROBLEM AREAS

This study found several areas of concern in Dane County's community service programming efforts. Most volunteer programs in the sample received formal referral information about the community service volunteer. However, because of a lack of adequate supervision and monitoring, volunteer program staff had to contact attorneys or probation officers to verify information that the offender gave them. This suggests volunteer coordinators had to spend valuable time making phone calls after the fact, rather than having the information available to them prior to interview and placement in the community service volunteer position. Even if community service referral information is received and a contact person exists, it does not guarantee that someone will be monitoring the offender while performing community service work.

The majority of volunteer programs do not have volunteer positions available to accommodate a small number of hours or that can be worked eight hours in a given day. There are a few exceptions, but most volunteer positions are from two to six hours a week and ask for a commitment over time. For example, a Big Brothers/Big Sisters program asks for a year commitment on the part of the volunteer and the volunteer should be prepared to meet with the child three or four hours each week. One respondent summarized the concern about a more uniform system of community service hour assignment by agents of the criminal justice system:

*I strongly support this program but feel it needs better structure to be effective. Also, some of our potential placements require extensive pre-service training and we are reluctant to invest that much time in training a volunteer who is not dependable or who has a limited time of service required if that is very brief. We have other placements which do not re-*

*quire such training, but these are in areas such as grounds-keeping or food preparation and not of as much interest to the volunteer, and absenteeism is a problem.*

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Most recommendations given by the volunteer agency staff centered around the referral, screening, and monitoring of community service volunteers. The responses indicated volunteer coordinators wanted:

*(1) better and more referral information prior to the placement agency interview, and that there be a more uniform referral process in place;*

*(2) better and more frequent communication from the criminal justice referral programs;*

*(3) the presence of a contact person who is knowledgeable about each volunteer and who could be contacted when questions or concerns arise in the placement;*

*(4) screening of offenders to take place prior to referral to the volunteer program.*

Two volunteer program respondents gave their comments in ways that express the main concerns and recommendations of many of the survey respondents. Both sets of recommendations and comments are presented.

*By far the most successful referrals are those that are monitored by the referral agency. The First Offender's Program has been a model in this area...The staff of that office provides excellent referral, monitoring, problem-solving and follow-up on their people -- which we know to be an essential component of a successful program. VSB (because it is not their role) does not provide this follow-up and support, and thus is a far less effective option for the mandated volunteer.*



*We really feel the need to stress the importance of this component, and add that we as an agency would be far less likely to be willing to participate in a court-ordered program that is not structured with a resource staff for participants. We had the opportunity to receive many, many referrals from a wide variety of agencies and have learned that a good coordination and follow-up is necessary.*

for volunteer agency staff working with such volunteers. Specifically:

The second respondent expressed it this way:

*A volunteer community service coordinator could alleviate the present problems, serve the volunteer better and coordinate the entire program to be more effective. A central office and staff is needed to screen community service volunteers prior to placement interview. A VCS coordinator is needed to report failure of volunteers' commitment to complete service. At present, if a volunteer does not show up, the time agency staff spend in trying to locate the individual to determine the reason for absence can be extensive.*

*A coordinator is needed to develop with the court system criteria for the number of hours equitable to each offense. A centralized office could keep in file a copy of the contract written between the agency and the volunteer. The office of the coordinator could have a file from each agency, their criteria for accepting community service volunteers and a listing of the criminal types of offenses they could not accept for volunteer placement. This in turn would save the volunteer time and alleviate the feeling of rejection in an agency interview.*

(1) Administration of a community service program utilizing a formalized system of screening, referral and monitoring should be implemented for all community service programs.

(2) A community service coordinator should provide offenders with an orientation to community service and conduct a pre-placement interview where offenders are screened and referred to the appropriate volunteer agency.

(3) A community service coordinator should monitor the offender on a monthly basis during the community service placement to assist the volunteer program staff with supervision responsibilities.

(4) A coordinator should be responsible for obtaining documentation from the volunteer placement agency as to completion or non-completion of community service hours.

The information provided by the volunteer programs working with community service volunteers in this study and the suggestions given provide criminal justice administrators and practitioners, judges, prosecutors, county officials, and state legislators with valuable insight into the current problems of community service programming.

This study also found that community service is accepted by the volunteer community as a positive alternative to traditional means of dealing with offenders in the criminal justice system; and that community service experience can be rewarding and beneficial to the offender, as well as the program clientele served, and the community in general.

It is hoped that these findings and recommendations provided will stimulate and encourage improvements in

## CONCLUSIONS

Survey results show that the administration of community service with offenders is an important issue

community service processing and, in doing so, provide maximum restitution benefits to the offender-volunteer, the victim as represented by the non-profit agency in the general community, and the criminal justice system.

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