

COURT VOLUNTEERS' KNOWLEDGE OF COURTS PRIOR TO TRAINING: A SURVEY

by

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In the development of a training program for volunteers in courts, it is essential that the trainer have cognizance of the familiarity of the court volunteer with the court and the correctional process in order that training objectives can be developed and individualized for each volunteer.

A class of volunteers is not unlike a class in any other setting, in that there are among the individual trainees diverse levels of knowledge and preparation. Some volunteers present themselves for training very much misinformed; some have good intentions but little information, while others possess a great deal of information. The only real justification for training is to provide minimum knowledge about certain subject matter and to provide the opportunity for attitude change. A training program then, if it is to have relevance for a class of diverse individuals, must have within it something for each trainee.

One means of assessing the knowledge of volunteers is through the administration of a simple paper-and-pencil test given before volunteer training has begun. Preliminary Report # 6 of the National Court Volunteer Training Project provides one model of such a test. It is recognized that in utilizing such a test there are obvious limitations, particularly when dealing with questions where the answer is not necessarily right or wrong but rather reveals an attitude on the part of the volunteer. Research points to the conclusion that attitudes toward a subject, as expressed verbally, are not necessarily correlated with similar behavior toward that subject. As a result, it is necessary to suggest here that paper-and-pencil tests be used as only one means of assessment, and that observation of behavior in experimental training also be used in order to supplement our knowledge of the volunteer's training needs.

Hoping to learn more about volunteer training needs by establishing a baseline of volunteer knowledge prior to training, and keeping in mind the above-recognized limitations, Dr. Ivan Scheier, Director of the National Information Center on Volunteers in Courts, devised a preliminary paper-and-pencil test. This test was administered to two novice volunteer training groups which had been recruited and screened, but had not yet begun formal pre-assignment training. The groups were comprised of (1) 31 PARTNERS, a group of mostly college-age young

people undergoing training to serve as volunteers to delinquent children coming before the Denver Juvenile Court, and (2) 31 community volunteers with a wider age spread preparing to serve the Denver County Court as Probation Counselors for adult misdemeanants. The responses of the 62 people were categorized by a rater. Thus the responses to follow are not necessarily verbatim statements from the volunteers.

The procedure followed in administration of the test was as follows. When the class was assembled and settled in their seats, the trainer began.

"We would like you to answer a few questions before the training class begins. We fully realize that you can't possibly know all or even most of the answers until training is completed. We also realize some of your answers might be different after training. Write the number of the question down on your paper as I read it, and then the answer. We do not need your name on the paper. We're just interested in group averages. Answer each question fully. No more than a sentence or two perhaps. If you don't know the answer, simply write 'don't know'."

THE TEST QUESTIONS

1. Have you ever been a volunteer in a court before? Yes - No
2. Have you ever been through a training session for court volunteers? Yes - No
3. Have you read any volunteer orientation materials yet?
 - (a) Just scanned it.
 - (b) Really studied it.
 - (c) Not looked at it.
4. Briefly what do you think "probation" means?
5. How does probation differ from parole?
6. In your opinion what is the purpose of probation?
7. What would you guess are the four most frequent crimes or offenses of people brought before this court?
8. What is the average age of people brought before this court?
9. What is the youngest age at which a person can be brought before this court?
10. What is the difference between a misdemeanor and a felony?
11. How many hours a month do you think the court expects you to put in on your volunteer job? Choose one of the following options:
 - (a) No fixed minimum.
 - (b) Two hours minimum.
 - (c) Five hours minimum.
 - (d) Ten hours minimum.
 - (e) Fifteen hours maximum allowed.
12. Can you give the full names of the following people?
 - (a) Judge closely associated with this volunteer program.
 - (b) The person who heads this probation department.
 - (c) The person most directly responsible for this program.

13. As for the volunteer program in this court:
- (a) How long has it been in existence?
 - (b) How many volunteers have worked in it?

THE RESPONSES

Responses to question # 1 clearly show that the vast majority of the volunteers tested had never before been volunteers in courts prior to the training sessions. Out of 62 examinees, only four of the PARTNERS and one of the Denver County Court volunteers had in fact been volunteers in other court programs. Consistent with this finding was the response to question # 2. Here only two volunteers answered "yes" to the question, "Have you ever been through a training session for court volunteers?"

The fact that volunteer programs in courts are relatively new would probably be the main reason for the small number of volunteers with previous court volunteer experience. It is quite clear that a group with nominal exposure to volunteer experience and/or training does require a program of orientation and training. A key point also established here is that these are in fact naive pre-training volunteers, so the test is getting at what court volunteers know or don't know prior to any training.

The authors do not feel that a justification for court volunteer training is any longer a point of contention. If we are indeed intent on using lay citizens as change agents for offenders, they must be equipped with knowledge of the goals of the court, how the court is organized to achieve its goals, the role of the court in the larger community, as well as knowledge of the people who are under the court's jurisdiction. Specific training about purposeful use of self in relation to the offender is now a common part of volunteer training for courts.

With the exception of one person, the volunteers either had only scanned the written orientation materials given them or had not looked at it at all prior to being surveyed. This was not terribly surprising, due to the time factor involved, but it does lend credence to the fact that the trainees' information about the court and corrections was not particularly enhanced by exposure to written study materials presented to the class prior to training.

Thirty-eight of the trainees responded to the query, "Briefly what do you think 'probation' means?" by making reference to the "trial period" connotation of probation. Twelve other respondents were inclined to see probation as surveillance, while eight individuals emphasized the counseling motif of probation. Only three trainees admitted that they didn't know what probation was.

The general understanding of probation, while reflecting a differential in emphasis, was considered to be positive and generally accurate. Training would thus need to be directed toward more specific under-

standing for this group but it does not appear that the naive trainees were victims of basic misinformation about the concept of probation.

In order to get at a clearer picture of volunteers' ability to distinguish probation from parole, the question asked was, "How does probation differ from parole?" These two terms which are commonly confused and misunderstood by many laymen were also confusing to our sample of court volunteers prior to training. Fully twenty-six of the 62 trainees frankly admitted they did not know the answer to this question or their responses were so vague as to convince the raters that they could not differentiate the two. Twenty-nine of the sample group responded in such language as to reveal a clear differentiation of the two processes, while the remaining seven of the trainees reflected partial understanding in that they saw the difference largely in terms of the goals set for the offender or a difference in the severity of the penalty.

The sixth question, "In your opinion what is the purpose of probation?" demonstrated that the trainees generally had rehabilitation-oriented opinions about the purpose of probation to the extent that only four respondents answered "don't know". Nineteen felt probation was a chance for the offender to prove himself; twenty saw probation as counseling of some sort; and nineteen indicated it was a process of adjustment. It is interesting to note that none of the volunteers saw probation as a sentence, a penalty, or punishment.

Question seven was designed to indicate the pre-training sensitivity of the volunteer to the types of offenses being committed by offenders coming before the courts to which they were offering their services. It was recognized that the news media may have the effect of distorting the accuracy with which a volunteer may perceive the incidence of certain types of crimes. Further, it was felt that neophyte volunteers may be apprehensive about and preparing for a more aggravated type of offender than is actually placed on probation.

According to 1968 statistics, the four most common offenses in the Denver Juvenile Court were burglary, joyriding, shoplifting, and assault and battery. The PARTNERS Volunteers, according to their responses, underestimated the occurrence of joyriding, shoplifting, and assault and battery. They correctly surmised that burglary was prevalent among juveniles, and they overestimated the extent of narcotics as a reason for coming before the court.

Denver County Court Volunteers were inclined to overestimate the degree to which narcotics is a County Court problem, and they were also overly prepared to deal with offenders convicted of various kinds of theft. They correctly defined drunkenness as a major problem of the court.

For the most part, the trainees were correct in their assumptions regarding the average age of the offender coming before the court. The aver-

age age of children appearing in Denver Juvenile Court is 14.7 years. Only five of the PARTNERS responded to this question with an expectation of dealing with a younger age group. The Denver County Court Volunteers also in large measure correctly anticipated working with a youthful age group of 18-21.

There was, however, an evident lack of clarity regarding the youngest age at which an offender can be brought to the court. This probably reflects the differing policies in various states with which the volunteers are familiar and the obvious confusion about which courts have jurisdiction over various age groups. The youngest age at which a child can be brought to Juvenile Court in Denver is ten, yet only ten of 31 PARTNERS knew this. Similarly, seventeen of 31 of the Denver County Court Volunteers were incorrectly operating under the assumption that an adult misdemeanor court had jurisdiction over juveniles. Only twelve of 31 correctly understood age 18 to be the minimum age for this court.

A slight majority of the 31 Denver County Court Volunteers saw the distinction between a felony and a misdemeanor as being the seriousness of the offense. Eighteen trainees responded in this vein, while 24 of the 31 PARTNERS elicited a similar distinction. It is recognized that the complexity of this distinction from jurisdiction to jurisdiction negates more precise responses. However, the fact that the majority of the volunteers understood the basic concept in this distinction is indication of a level of sophistication not anticipated by many, from the average layman.

Question eleven was designed to determine to what extent the trainees and the court were in agreement as to what was expected of the volunteer in terms of time commitment. PARTNERS expects considerably more time from their volunteers than the Denver County Court, asking for a minimum of twelve hours per month. The Denver County Court asks for a minimum of one hour per week or four hours per month.

Fifteen of the 31 Denver County Court Volunteers were expecting to give the exact number of hours expected, while the remainder were expecting to give more in varying amounts. PARTNERS volunteers were extremely close to their agency's time expectations. Two expected no fixed minimum time; 22 out of 31 expected to give a ten-hour monthly minimum time commitment, while three expected to give at least fifteen hours. One respondent admitted he didn't know.

The conclusion that might be drawn from this finding is indeed encouraging in that the volunteers clearly expected to give as much or more time to the offender than is in fact being asked of them.

The twelfth question was geared to inquire into the pre-trained volunteer's knowledge of key court personnel involved with the volunteer program. Correct answers here would perhaps reflect internal know-

ledge of the court. Thus trainees were asked if they could list the names of the judge associated with the program, the person heading the probation program, and the person responsible for the volunteer program. Half of the PARTNERS could identify Judge Philip Gilliam as one of two judges in the Juvenile Court, but not a single one of them could name the Director of Probation, while only eighteen of 31 correctly identified the Director of the PARTNERS by name.

Denver County Court, having thirteen judges, provided the volunteer with a more formidable task. Only seven of 31 correctly identified the judge most closely associated with their volunteer program, while 21 said they did not know. Since a new Director of Probation had just assumed office at the time of this survey, the fact that only eight people could identify him by name is understandable.

The last question regarding the length of time the volunteer programs have operated and the number of volunteers having participated, revealed that the volunteers seemed to be generally aware of the size of the organizations they were joining as well as the length of their operation. Thus, a clear majority of the volunteers knew that the Denver volunteer program had operated for four years and had utilized over 1500 volunteers. PARTNERS trainees also had a clear understanding of the fact that this organization was two years old and included nearly 200 volunteers.

IMPLICATIONS

Rather than attempt to form firm conclusions, the authors would suggest some inferences that may be drawn from the above material. They are:

- (1) The volunteers had not, at the time of training, performed volunteer services in another court nor had they received training to do so. Thus, courts are not yet at the point where they can expect to recruit many experienced volunteers who are graduates of other related programs elsewhere. If courts want trained volunteers, each court must do it for themselves.
- (2) Untrained court volunteers have a generalized idea of probation that is accurate and in keeping with the goals of probation. On the other hand, they lack specific understanding of more technical areas.
- (3) Court volunteers, prior to training, like the rest of the population, are probably more sensitive to the more publicized offenses and expect to be working with offenders who commit these offenses.
- (4) Neophyte court volunteers, in substantial numbers, seem confused about the jurisdiction of the various courts, as reflected in their uncertainty regarding such items as minimum age and types of offenses handled in the two courts in the present study.

- (5) Untrained court volunteers are prepared to spend time working with offenders consistent with or in excess of the expectations of the court. Again, within the limitations of the present verbal testing procedure, the inference is that they are prepared to be serious about their volunteer work, if you are.
- (6) The volunteer prior to training does not seem to be familiar with the names of key court personnel, although he has accurate general knowledge about the volunteer program he is joining.

This test as it stands can be utilized to provide the trainer with a general picture of each class, and in that sense can make him more sensitive to the training needs of that class. However, the present test does not seek to identify volunteer attitudes toward the judicial system, although the reader is urged to refer to Preliminary Report # 6 as a beginning step in this direction. Obviously there is a need for more sophisticated test instruments in relation to both knowledge and attitudes, which in turn could provide court volunteer trainers with a better-guided and researched training design.