

Research

Views and Experiences of New Zealand Community Service Sentence Sponsors

By Julie Leibrich, Burt Galaway and Yvonne Underhill

The practice of sentencing convicted law breakers to perform unpaid community service for governmental or nonprofit organizations has been firmly established in the last 15 years. England introduced community service sentencing in five pilot areas in 1972 and made the sentence available throughout the country in 1975. The practice of sentencing offenders to perform unpaid community service is found in all 50 American states and ten Canadian provinces either as a condition of probation or as a statutory permitted sentence. The practice has gained support through the English-speaking world as well as several continental nations.

Community service sentencing provides both opportunity and challenge for human service agencies. Opportunities exist for a steady flow of "volunteers" to perform needed work and services for the agency and for the agency to assist in the community's response to offenders. But challenges exist in relating to criminal

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justice staff and offenders and integrating offenders into the volunteer programs of the agency. An extensive literature has

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developed regarding the community service sentence (Galaway, Novack, Hudson, 1984). Most of the literature exam-

ines the sentence from the perspective of offender and criminal justice officials. There is little known in regard to the experience and views of community service sponsors—the organizations that receive offenders and provide work opportunities for them.

This study describes the views and experiences of community service sponsors in New Zealand. It was part of a larger survey of how the community service scheme is administered. Sponsors in seven probation districts were interviewed to gather information about their day-to-day experiences with the scheme and to discover their opinions about community service sentence aims, benefits and possible improvements.

The community service sentence was introduced in February 1981 and is administered by the Probation Division of the Department of Justice in each of 35 probation districts. Community service of between eight and 200 hours may be imposed on any person convicted of an offense punishable by imprisonment, provided that the sentence is appropriate given the offender's character and personal history, that the offender understands the purpose and effect of the sentence and consents to the sentence, and that suitable service is available. In 1981, 1,722 community service sentences were imposed; 1,991 in 1982, and 2,483 in 1983.

Methodology

Eight of the 35 probation districts were selected to provide a group that shared a sufficient frequency and range of characteristics to provide a general picture of community service throughout New Zealand. The final study group consisted of seven districts—Auckland, Dunedin, Gisborne, Invercargill, Levin, Lower Hutt and Nelson. Unfortunately, Rotorua, a district with a large Maori population, had to be dropped from the survey because of travel difficulties.

The sponsor population was all those organizations who had acted as a community service sponsor during the year prior to the study for any offender sentenced in a court served by one of the district probation offices. A list of all sponsors used in the past year was requested from each district office. A one in four random sample of sponsors was drawn from these lists, which yielded a sample of 80 sponsors.

An introductory letter requesting an interview was sent through the local proba-

tion officer, who followed this up two or three days later to set a time for an interview. Structured interviews were held with 65 (81%) of the 80 sponsors in the sample. Each interview took approximately an hour, was usually held during the daytime, and at the sponsor's home or workplace. Sponsors were mostly interviewed by one person but logistical difficulties occasionally involved use of a second interviewer. Both interviewers were members of the research team, not local probation officers.

The structured interview consisted of a pool of questions assembled from existing questionnaires in the same research area, suggestions from colleagues and the results of earlier open-ended interviews with sponsors. A final version was produced after revisions and a pre-test. Questions were designed to secure information about the sponsors, reasons for participating in the community service scheme, experiences with the scheme, perceptions of the purpose of the scheme, and views of benefits, strengths and suggested improvement in the scheme.

Findings

Types of Sponsors. The organizations who acted as community service sponsors varied in their activities and size. Thirty-two percent (21 of the 65 interviewed) were day and residential centers for people needing special care—hospitals, rehabilitation hostels, centers for the disabled, emergency accommodation homes. In many cases, the community work of these groups extended to private homes. Nineteen percent (12) were special interest groups, including conservationist organizations, political concern groups and Maori cultural organizations. Seventeen percent (11) were sporting and recreation groups, fifteen percent (10) were schools and pre-school centers, nine percent (6) were service groups and eight percent (5) were churches.

Fifty-four percent (35) of the sponsors used both paid and voluntary staff, 21 percent (14) used only paid staff, and 25 percent (16) depended entirely on volunteers.

Seventy-eight percent (51) were aware of the scheme before they were directly recruited; 46 percent (30) had read about the scheme in newspapers or leaflets or had seen something about it on posters or television; 19 percent (12) knew about it through links with the Justice Department, and 14 percent (9) had heard about the scheme through other community

groups.

Two-thirds (43) of the sponsors had been recruited by the local probation officer and 23 percent (15) by an offender seeking a placement. Only 11 percent (7) of the sponsors initiated a request to take part in the scheme.

Reasons for Involvement. Sponsors offered a variety of reasons for becoming involved with the scheme; no reason predominated. Twenty-five percent (16) said

The community service sponsors varied in size and activity:

- *Day and residential centers for people needing special care—hospitals, rehabilitation hostels, centers for the disabled, emergency accommodation homes (32%)*
- *Special interest groups—conservation, political concerns, cultural (19%)*
- *Sporting and recreation groups (17%)*
- *Schools and pre-school centers (15%)*
- *Service groups (9%)*
- *Churches (5%)*

they had jobs that needed to be done, 22 percent (14) thought they could help offenders by being sponsors, 11 percent (7) saw mutual benefit as their reason, 28 percent (18) became sponsors because of the strength of their relationships with the probation service, and 15 percent (10) cited a general commitment to being involved in the community.

Acceptable Offenders. Seventy-one percent (46) of the sponsors had some reservations or requirements about acceptable offenders; the rest said they would "try anyone at all" on the scheme. The reservations included not wanting violent or sex offenders (13 sponsors); dishonesty being undesirable (8); not accepting a person with psychological or addiction problems (45); and tattoos being unacceptable (1).

Over half the comments related to positive requirements; 13 persons mentioned positive personality characteristics (e.g., nice, responsible, motivated, friendly),

11 sponsors wanted offenders who were particularly appropriate or interested in their organization (e.g., single parents, Maori, accepting of handicapped people), and eight sponsors wanted offenders with specific job skills.

Only 15 percent (10) of the sponsors reported that they had rejected an offender referred for community service. Seven offenders were rejected because of a lack of appropriate work or supervision and three because the offender was unacceptable to the sponsor.

Sponsors were asked what they thought they needed to know about the person to be placed with them. There was considerable variation about what and how much information they needed; 18 percent (12) said they did not want to know anything at all—"I take them on face value," "I accept them as I find them."

The majority, however, did want some information; 20 percent (13) needed only information particularly relevant to their organization, such as the assurance that they would be alerted to any special difficulties such as "if I can't trust them near drugs" or "if there is a medical problem." Twenty-three percent (15) wanted to know one specific piece of information such as offense or work skills or home circumstances; 39 percent (25) wanted a more complete picture, including the offense, personal circumstances and background—"Anything is helpful," when people would serve their hours. Sixty-eight percent (44) of the sponsors reported that set times were arranged. Nineteen reported the hours were set by the sponsor, eight by the offender, and 17 by negotiation between offender and sponsor often with the involvement of the probation service.

Where set times were arranged, 27 were day-time hours on weekdays, 13 were weekend or evening hours, and four offenders fulfilled their hours over a short, intensive residential period. Thirty-two percent (21) of the sponsors did not set regular hours for offenders, although in some instances an agreement had been made to do a certain minimum number of hours per month. Several sponsors trusted the offender with keys if he or she needed to come to a building at off hours, and in two cases offenders did the work in their own homes.

Type of Assignment. Twenty-three of the most recent offenders placed were women and 42 were men. Although offenders were assigned to a range of tasks,

cleaning and maintenance work were the most common. In several cases, however, an offender's specific skills such as sports, mechanics, knitting or carving were used to the benefit of the sponsor.

Most offenders spent a good deal of their time with other people while doing community service. Seventy-seven percent (49) of the 64 most recent placements who had begun the job at the time of the survey spent at least half of their time with other people—34 of these were with others all the time. Twenty-three percent (15) spent less than half of their time with other people, and nine of these offenders worked completely alone except for receiving instructions from their sponsor supervisor.

Thirty-nine percent (25) of the 64 offenders met only members of the group for which they worked. Most, however, also came into contact with people outside the organization, since in many cases services of the sponsor organizations were extended to the general public. Four offenders worked in private homes.

Twenty-three percent (46) of the 202 placements experienced by the sponsors had ended without all the hours being completed. For 34 of the 46 cases, sponsors knew that the placement had ended and knew the reason. For the other 12 cases, sponsors believed the offender would not return but did not know what had happened; several complained about a lack of feedback from the probation agency.

Problems. Eighty percent (52) of all sponsors reported at least one problem relating to an offender. This included both problems caused directly by the offender and problems caused by other people's way of relating to the presence of an offender. Fifty-one percent (33) of all sponsors reported at least one problem relating to the probation service. Fifteen percent (10) of the sponsors said they had experienced no problems at all.

- Poor attendance was by far the most common problem relating to the offender with 63 percent (41) of sponsors having had some difficulty in this area.

- Many sponsors felt frustrated by poor attendance—"It put strains on the relationship," "What can I do?" "I need to know that a job will be done," "They let me down," and "It's wearing thin." A related problem of poor punctuality was identified by 20 percent (13) of the sponsors and problems related to finding a mutually convenient time for the work

was mentioned by 23 percent (15).

- People not trusting the offender was identified as a problem for 22 percent (14) of the sponsors. Most trust problems were a general apprehensiveness and unease—"just an underlying feeling."

- Difficulty adjusting to having an offender around was identified by 20 percent (13) of the sponsors. Examples of this were one sponsor's arduous fight with its committee to accept a drug ad-

Sponsors offered a variety of reasons for becoming involved:

- ***They had jobs that needed to be done (25%).***

- ***They thought they could help offenders (22%).***

- ***Mutual benefit (11%)***

- ***Strength of their relationship with the probation service (28%)***

- ***General commitment to community involvement (15%)***

dict on the community service scheme and members of an organization unwilling to give an offender a ride to the job place. Occasionally staff members were openly resentful—"Why do we have to have them here?" In most cases, these problems were gradually resolved as people became more acquainted with the offender.

- Poor quality of work or the need for too much supervision was identified as a problem with at least one offender by 20 percent (13) of sponsors and unacceptable appearance by 14 percent (9). Problems arising from people treating the offender badly, the offender's unwillingness to accept supervision, the condition in which they turned up for work, or the offender thought of as taking work away from other people were each identified as problems by less than ten percent of the sponsors.

- Twenty-two percent (14) of sponsors mentioned problems not listed. These included inconvenience caused by the offender's needs for transport, feeling uncomfortable about the relationship between offender and sponsor (too dependent, seen as authoritarian, not trusted by the offender, etc.) or material

being wasted. The most unusual problem mentioned was that an acquaintance of one offender asked the sponsor if he could pay off the person's hours.

- Not having enough information about the scheme was the commonest problem relating to the probation service and was identified by 31 percent (20) of sponsors. Most wanted details about how the community service sentence usually worked, background of the sentence, and what other sponsors did. Many complained about a lack of feedback—what happened when a placement broke down, what happened to an offender after he or she had completed the required number of hours, and how did the probation officer think they were doing as sponsors?

Aims of the Sentence. Sponsors were asked to describe the aims of a community service sentence and were encouraged to identify as many as possible. The aims mentioned were later classified into five categories, three of which were more specifically subdivided. Six sponsors were asked to describe one aim of the sentence.

- The largest category (39 percent of all aims) was benefit to the offender. Aims that specified or implied beneficial changes to the offender were placed in this group. General notions of offenders' personal growth were most frequently mentioned and included ideas of rehabilitation, increased self-esteem and learning one's value. Some sponsors focused more specifically on behavioral benefits to the offender—learning work routines and discipline, new skills and interests, meeting new people. Others felt minimizing disruption in the offender's life was an aim of this sentence.

- Benefit to the community constituted 23 percent (31) of all mentioned aims; most of these statements specifically incorporated a notion of paying something back. A few saw the benefit simply in terms of work done. Ideas of community and offender integration such as two-way involvement, acceptance and help were expressed as 17 percent (22) of all aims. Punishment and provisions of an alternative sentence were ideas each expressed in 10 percent (13) of all aims. Nine of the 13 sponsors who mentioned alternative sentence related the alternative sentence aim specifically to prison.

Comments by sponsors about the helpfulness of the offenders on community service were enthusiastic and positive—"The tasks she did have really helped the school," "He did a job that wouldn't have got done otherwise," "It's a poor area—

now the local people can let their kids on the beach safely," "It's meant the people can have a community center," "We've had an extra pair of hands and technical skills at no cost," and "Everyday tasks are getting done around here."

Several sponsors (13) mentioned not only the jobs done but also some extra positive outcome for the organization—"I've really enjoyed the contact with him," "They've created a good example for the trainees," "We gained a keen volunteer who did extra hours and eventually became a valuable employee," "He went beyond his hours—made and maintained a contact as friend with the kids," and "We've learned that given the chance certain people can come up with the goods."

A few (7) felt the organization had increased its awareness of other people's difficulties and there had been personal growth from the involvement—"Made me aware they are like us," "It created a good feeling at the home, and people can see someone improving themselves and helping themselves; I've enjoyed it," and "It's given us insight, more community involvement, more understanding of people and their problems."

All sponsors thought at least some of the people they had had on community service had benefited from contact with the organization. The most tangible examples of benefits to the offender came from the sponsors who reported continued connections between the offender and organization after the hours had been completed.

Sponsors were asked to indicate what they liked best about the sentence. A flexible sentence, one that could be used to keep people out of prison or save them from getting into further trouble if unable to pay fines, was seen as the best feature for 36 percent (22 of the 61 sponsors who said they liked the sentence).

They also saw it as a more positive sentence than other alternatives—"It doesn't divorce a person from society," "It doesn't label someone so much" or "It's more constructive than a fine." The feeling that they were helping an offender was the best feature for 25 percent (16) of sponsors. It gave "the opportunity to help someone who wants to be helped," and gave "the ordinary person a chance to be available and know that there's not just a left-out-in-the-cold feeling."

A needed service given to the community was identified as the best feature by 17 percent (11) of the sponsors. The op-

portunity for personal growth and occasionally for "something special" to happen was most liked by 19 percent (12) of the sponsors, and several gave illustrations of the growth of relationships and mutual benefit for offender and sponsor.

Seventy-four percent (48) of the sponsors said that they would take more offenders on community service. A further 19 percent (12) would take offenders given certain conditions; for example, if there were jobs to be done or if the person

The community service sentence sponsors learned of the program from different sources:

- ***51% were aware of the program before they were recruited.***
- ***46% had read about it in newspapers, leaflets or posters, or had heard something about it on television.***
- ***19% knew about it through links with the Justice Department.***
- ***14% had heard about it through other community groups.***
- ***66% had been recruited by the local probation officer.***
- ***23% were recruited by an offender seeking a placement.***
- ***11% initiated a request to take part in the program.***

was suitable. Only eight percent (5) of sponsors said they would not take on more people because there was no work to be done, they had become worried about putting their good name on the line, or the procedure had been too much trouble.

Summary

The majority of sponsors reported their organization had benefited from participating in the community service sentence scheme. Several mentioned enjoying being a sponsor and an increase in social awareness as well as describing the jobs that had been done. All the sponsors

thought at least some of the people they had had on community service had benefited from the placement, and 22 percent described continued involvement of an offender with the organization after the hours had been completed.

Although sponsors generally enjoyed their involvement with the community service scheme and were enthusiastic both about its present operation and potential growth, they also acknowledged difficulties in several areas. The most common problem was poor attendance by the offender. Other problems mentioned included inadequate information about the scheme, lack of feedback about the progress of the placement, difficulties organizing time and staff, and volunteers not trusting the offender.

A variety of improvements to the scheme was suggested including greater involvement from the probation officer with routine calls, hours more fixed for the offender, reimbursement for sponsor expenses, better discipline to finish the hours, publicity aimed at getting more varied placements for offenders, clearer instructions for the sponsor, and an initial meeting between the sponsor, offender and probation officer.

The study identified, from the perspective of the sponsor, three main issues that needed to be addressed in developing a community service program.

1. Many sponsors felt unclear about what was expected of them. In particular, they were curious about the division of responsibilities between themselves and the probation officer. The roles and responsibilities of the sponsor, offender and probation officer need to be clearly defined.

2. Almost a third of the sponsors reported that they had not been given enough information about the scheme, and several complained about the lack of feedback when a placement broke down. Routine communication between all three people would make it easier to deal with problems early on. Ongoing feedback might also enable sponsors to have a stronger sense of being supported and to feel confident about things going well.

3. Although community service placements may be expected to suffer from any problem normally found in the workplace, poor attendance is clearly a major difficulty for the sponsor. Offenders' not turning up was the main problem reported by sponsors, with nearly two-thirds of them having experienced some difficulty in this area.