

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT FOR IMPROVED PROBATION OUTCOMES

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Probation system in Singapore is a Court-ordered community-based rehabilitation programme for suitable offenders. It offers the Courts with an alternative sentencing option in dealing with offenders who may otherwise be committed to a juvenile rehabilitation centre or prison. It aims to instil in offenders a strong sense of social responsibility and self-discipline so that they could lead a crime free life. The Probation Service comes under the purview of the Ministry of Social and Family Development.

The Probation Service has continually sought to involve our community, both individuals and organisations, in the provision of support and services, and integration of offenders into mainstream society. To augment the efforts in the rehabilitation of juvenile and adult offenders on probation, partnerships with the community have to be targeted and purposeful.

Some of the programmes leverage on the expertise in the community to better target risk and needs of the probationers and their families. Collaborations with social service agencies, organisations and the private sector are strengthened to create growth opportunities for community service placements and in areas such as the arts and sports.

Community partners are educated on the value of rehabilitation work and the important role the community can play in the rehabilitation process. Through regular dialogues, these community partners are kept abreast of issues in the management of probationers. There are platforms to share best practices with the agencies so that they are able to better work with the offenders and their families.

This paper will showcase how Volunteer Probation Officers and Community Service Order agencies have played an integral role in enhancing the rehabilitation experience for the probationers and their families.

II. VOLUNTEER PROBATION OFFICER SCHEME

The Community Probation Service was introduced in 1971 to promote volunteer participation and community awareness in the rehabilitation of offenders placed on probation. It was renamed the Volunteer Probation Officer (VPO) Scheme in December 2012 to strengthen its representation as a volunteering scheme.

The 223 Volunteer Probation Officers complement our work with offenders. VPO activities and engagement are also overseen by a committee comprising a group of VPOs, who work in conjunction with the Probation Service MSF to plan and initiate activities for all VPOs.

The functions and roles of VPOs are spelt out under the Probation of Offenders Act (1985). Upon their appointment, all VPOs are gazetted by having their names published in the Government Gazette and are issued with an identification card to identify them as VPOs. All VPOs are appointed to two-year terms. An annual performance review, and a biennial re-screening exercise, for all VPOs is conducted to determine their suitability to continue as volunteers and before their re-appointment for new terms.

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A. Areas of Engagement

The different areas of engagement are designed to tap on the VPOs' strengths and to complement the role of the Probation Officers (POs) in the rehabilitation of the probationers. A VPO may be involved in more than one area of engagement at any one time, depending on their availability and interest.

The areas of engagement for VPOs are as follows:

a) Befriending

VPOs serve as befrienders and positive role models to the probationers, and mentor them towards being socially responsible individuals. They build a personal relationship with the probationers and provide support to them in their probation journey, through maintaining regular contact with them and engaging them in pro-social activities. Such additional support is particularly useful for the probationers and families with multiple risks and needs issues.

VPOs also provide POs with monthly updates on the probationers' progress and their observations and assessments on the different aspects of the probationers' lives. These inputs provide POs with prompt updates and valuable insights into the probationers' progress, and allow POs to follow up on the issues more effectively.

b) Operation Night Watch (ONW)

VPOs conduct physical curfew checks at the probationers' homes during their curfew hours to ensure they abide by the Court-ordered time restriction as stated in the Probation Order. Having the VPOs assist in this area relieves the POs from having to make these checks at night; and enables the POs to focus their efforts on direct intervention work with probationers and families.

c) Community Service Volunteers (ComServ)

About 80% of offenders on probation are required to perform community service as a condition of probation. VPOs assist to plan and implement meaningful community service projects for probationers.

They work alongside the probationers to guide and support their completion of the community service hours. They also process the community service experience with the probationers and help them to meet their service learning objectives for the projects. There is much value in having the VPOs lead the probationers during such projects as the VPOs are on-site to provide the direct supervision and timely encouragement to the probationers as they fulfil their community service hours.

d) School Liaison Network (SLNP)

With 85% of probationers in schools, it is important to ensure they are monitored and supported while in school. The goal is for them to value education and have a positive schooling experience. VPOs serve as a primary contact person with selected secondary schools to facilitate supervision and management of schooling probationers.

They are assigned to schools and visit the designated schools once in two months to gather updates on the progress of probationers in the schools. This feedback is then shared with the POs to allow timely follow-up on school-related issues faced by the probationers. VPOs play a significant role to foster a closer partnership between Probation Service and the schools.

e) Facilitation of programmes

VPOs co-facilitate group programmes for probationers and parents together with the POs. Some of these VPOs are trainers by profession and they have the skills and expertise to enhance the way the programmes are conducted.

B. Volunteer Engagement Strategies

To ensure a meaningful volunteering experience and the active engagement of VPOs, the Probation Service continually looks at different ways to organise, motivate and empower the VPOs. Below are some of the strategies that have worked well.

a) VPO Committee

Probation Service works together with the VPO Committee to plan activities to reach out to the other volunteers. These VPOs (5 to 6 VPOs) are selected based on their active engagement and leadership abilities. Serving as the bridge between Probation Service and the VPOs, the VPO committee meets up with Probation Service on a quarterly basis to discuss ways to better engage the volunteers. Some of their initiatives include holding regular tea sessions with volunteers and facilitating bonding activities by VPOs for VPOs.

b) Organising VPOs by areas of engagement

VPOs are organized according to their respective areas of engagement. Each area is overseen by a member of the VPO Committee. Such groupings allow the VPOs to network with one another to share experiences, knowledge and good practices. Regular dialogues and specific training sessions are also organised for the VPOs to gather feedback from them and to equip them with skills specifically relevant to their area of engagement.

c) Continual training opportunities

An annual enrichment training is held for all VPOs where external speakers are sourced to speak on topics related to volunteering, youth and offender work, and personal development. Apart from this, regular year round training sessions on specific topics are also organised to equip VPOs with specific skills such as relating to offenders with special needs and organising group projects. VPOs are also invited to staff training platforms, where applicable. In addition, suitable and deserving VPOs can also be sponsored to attend relevant courses by external trainers or be nominated to attend overseas conferences.

d) One-to-one mentoring by the Probation Officers

POs are instrumental in providing the VPOs with a meaningful volunteering experience through one-to-one mentorship. Each VPO who befriends a probationer is attached to a PO, who is the case manager for the probationer. The PO introduces the VPO to the probationer and the family, facilitates the first meeting and guides the VPO in building a positive befriending relationship. This on-the-job training and guidance provided by the PO forms a major part of the training for the VPOs. They learn how to relate with and motivate probationers to make positive changes to their lifestyle during the probation journey.

e) Structured work processes

Work processes are clearly drawn out to ensure that all volunteer applications are processed promptly, and that we train, engage and review the progress of all VPOs actively. There is also regular review of the processes to ensure they are relevant and effective.

f) Appreciation and Recognition

Annually, the Ministry recognises all volunteers including VPOs with outstanding contribution and long-service through an award ceremony. There is also an annual Volunteer Appreciation Event which brings all the volunteers together to celebrate and have their contributions acknowledged and appreciated.

g) Annual review of VPOs

VPOs are reviewed annually to ensure that they are engaged actively and to provide a platform to provide feedback to them. This allows Probation Services to keep track of VPOs' contributions and engage the VPOs in discussions on their areas of engagement. This annual review also serves as the basis for nomination of suitable VPOs for awards and external training opportunities.

C. Challenges in Volunteer Engagement

a) Complex needs of offenders

Probation Service has in recent years seen an increase in the proportion of higher risk offenders placed on probation. This is evident from the increase in the proportion of offenders requiring intensive supervision, restrictive conditions and longer period on probation. The profile of offenders and their offences were noted to be increasingly complex. As a result, this has placed great demands in the su-

pervision of such offenders. VPOs are a valuable resource to Probation Service. However, VPOs need to have the capacity to handle such offenders and families.

b) Culture of the youth and families today

The youth today seek excitement and are more liberal in their views and actions. They are highly connected via social media and are exposed to vast amount of information at great speeds. Increasingly, they are also turning to outdoor activities and the arts to meet their need for social interaction and relatedness. The challenge is for POs and VPOs to be equally savvy in the use of sophisticated technology and be equipped with the knowledge of their interests.

The families in the system often struggle to balance work and family commitments, maintain the household and provide care and supervision to their child, who is in conflict with the law. Due to multiple stressors, parent-child relationships are impacted and parental supervision is weakened. Hence the VPOs are increasingly required to not just serve as befrienders to the youth, but also lend support to the parents.

To establish a good relationship with these probationers and families, VPOs need to understand the worldview of the probationers and families, without imposing personal values and beliefs. Changing mindsets and seeing positive changes in attitudes and behaviours also requires much time and effort. Thus, patience, perseverance and encouragement are necessary attributes for VPOs working with such offenders and families.

c) Changing needs of VPOs

The needs of the VPOs change according to the life stage that they are at. As the ages of VPOs range from the early twenties to early eighties, it is important for Probation Service to continually review the way we engage and motivate these VPOs. It would be essential to have regular conversations with the VPOs as they embark on the different phases of life to review their volunteering journey and find the best area of engagement, which suits them. For VPOs who wish to take some time off to settle their personal commitments, Probation Service also allows them the option to take a period of leave of up to one year.

d) Role of Probation Officers/Community Service Officers in engagement of VPOs

Given the intensity in the work and multiple demands placed on the staff, they may find it an added challenge to co-manage the cases with the VPOs. There is ongoing effort to educate the officers to tap on VPOs to better manage their caseload and involve the VPOs in different aspects of intervention. Some of the specific areas VPOs can offer support include accompanying the probationer and/or parent for psychiatric appointments, employment interview and providing tuition.

III. COMMUNITY SERVICE ORDER AGENCIES

A. Purpose of CSO

The Community Service Order (CSO) was first implemented in Singapore in 1996 as a probation condition for juvenile offenders. Since then, it has been expanded to include adult offenders, both as a condition of probation and as stand-alone sentencing option, and also for persons who default the maintenance orders in the Family Courts.

CSO involves well-prepared and meaningful activities. Assignment to projects/agencies take into consideration the offender's offence, risks and needs issues, strengths, interests, availability of placements at agencies and proximity to agencies, among others.

The community service experience as a whole serves as an interface for interaction between offenders and the community and facilitates principles of reparation. Community service helps to broaden the offenders' life perspectives, provides them with valuable social experiences to become more responsible towards themselves and others, gives them the opportunity to develop their social skills and helps them develop a sense of purpose in life on seeing the benefits of their contributions.

B. CSO Agencies

Starting off with 10 community service agencies in 1996, the Probation Service now has a network of more than 130 partners. Community agencies have opened their doors on a goodwill basis to accept offenders and created opportunities for them to make a difference in the lives of others and the community.

These community agencies share a strong belief in our work and are open to exploring creative placements and tapping on probationers' strengths and interests, e.g., allowing probationers with hair dressing skill to cut the hair of the elderly, allowing probationers with interest in music to perform at agency events. Partnership with various community service agencies allow our probationers to have meaningful experiences on community service and go on to give back to society.

C. Role of CSO Agencies

When a probationer is assigned to a CSO agency, he/she will be briefed by the agency representative on the agency's rules and regulations and nature of work. In addition, the offender will also be given a briefing/training on managing the agency's clients.

Agency staff helps to monitor the attendance, performance and progress of the offenders/defaulters under their charge and update the Community Service Officer regularly. Challenges faced with the offenders/defaulters will surface to the Community Service Officer for follow-up action.

D. Sustaining Partnerships with CSO Agencies

a) Co-creation of CSO projects

As we progress in rehabilitation efforts and seek support from our community agencies, we recognize that it is also critical to seek inputs on the changing needs of the agencies in creating projects to sustain our partnerships. Thus, we place greater emphasis on creating projects with them to add value to the services they provide for their beneficiaries, e.g.: a project where probationers made photo passes for the residents of a Home so that they can be easily identifiable; a project where probationers made customised game sets for the dementia patients of a Centre.

b) Clustering of Agencies

To ensure there is closer contact and better rapport between CSO officers and CSO agencies, the community agencies are divided into 5 clusters with 2 officers in charge of each cluster. Officers conduct regular site visits to the agencies to gather feedback and support agency staff in managing offenders.

c) Cluster Networking Sessions (C-net)

This platform provides opportunities for CSO officers and CSO agencies to interact with one another. It also allows for networking between CSO agencies who could discuss collaboration opportunities for joint CSO initiatives. C-Net also serves as a platform for sharing about the developments of the Probation Service and CSO work; and for agencies to hear from probationers' the impact of their enriching CSO experiences. We believe hearing personal accounts of these probationers would reinforce agencies' belief in our work and be a form of motivation.

IV. CONCLUSION

To stay ahead of changes and achieve better outcomes for higher risk offenders, we recognise the need to build mutually beneficial and creative partnerships with the community. Together with many helping hands from the community, this provides a great opportunity to do more and do better in intervention work with offenders during and after probation.