

REPORT OF THE SECOND ASIA VOLUNTEER PROBATION OFFICERS MEETING

The Second Asia Volunteer Probation Officers Meeting, hosted by the organizers of the Third World Congress on Probation, was held from 15:00 to 17:30 on September 12, 2017 at the Shinagawa Prince Hotel in Tokyo, Japan. Mr. Shoji Imafuku, Director of the General Affairs Division Rehabilitation Bureau of the Ministry of Justice of Japan presided over the meeting as Chair. The meeting was attended by volunteer probation officers (VPOs) and officials responsible for community corrections from the following countries: Korea, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Japan. Observers from China and Kenya also attended the meeting. In total, around 200 participants attended the meeting.

1. Opening Addresses

Mr. Daizo Nozawa, President of the National Federation of Volunteer Probation Officers of Japan, extended his heartfelt welcome to the overseas participants and volunteer probation officers who participated in the meeting. At the first meeting three years ago, participants exchanged information about their respective volunteer probation officer systems, shared common challenges among the participating countries, and adopted the Tokyo Declaration, the first international declaration addressing the role of VPOs in offender rehabilitation. The purpose of the Second Asia VPO meeting is to assess the progress of the implementation of the Tokyo Declaration and to share best practices for enhancing public awareness and recognition of the role of VPOs.

Mr. Keisuke Senta, Director of the United Nations Asia and Far East Institute for the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders (UNAFEI), welcomed the participants and introduced UNAFEI's activities to enhance the role of VPOs and community corrections. These activities focus on the exchange of information and experiences between Japanese VPOs and criminal justice practitioners from other countries.

2. Country Presentations

The Chair recalled that the purpose of the Tokyo Declaration, adopted at the First Asia VPOs Meeting, is to share information on VPO and similar systems in the participating countries and to enhance public recognition of VPO systems.

JAPAN: Mr. Shojin KOBAYASHI, Vice President of the National Federation of Volunteer Probation Officers, summarized the characteristics of the VPO system in Japan and reported the challenges facing the current system, including the declining number of VPOs and increased pressure on current VPOs. In response, Japan has established Offenders Rehabilitation Support Centers to provide VPOs with a location where VPOs can meet and interview probationers, exchange ideas with other VPOs, consult experienced VPOs stationed at the centers, and so on. An internship program was also established to identify promising VPO candidates, and Japan has prioritized the engagement of younger generations in crime prevention activities with VPOs.

PHILIPPINES: Volunteer Probation Assistants (VPAs) in the Philippines amply the services provided to clients in the community and promote greater citizen awareness and involvement in the criminal justice system. Regular evaluation and recognition of VPAs are key measures for motivating VPAs. Challenges faced include community doubt of the effectiveness of community corrections and insufficient funds to train and sustain the VPA program. To further improve the VPA system, measures include providing continuous training for VPAs, enhancing public private partnerships in community corrections, and expanding the evaluation and recognition system for VPAs.

SINGAPORE: The delegation from Singapore introduced the recruitment process for VPOs, which allows ex-offenders to volunteer under certain conditions, and the training process, which includes both an e-learning module and seminar-style meetings. To encourage VPOs and enhance bonding among them, VPO committees organize events for VPOs, and VPOs are given awards and other forms of public recognition. The challenges faced by the VPO scheme include dealing with the evolving needs of probationers and balancing the organization's needs and volunteers' aspirations.

THAILAND: The delegation from Thailand introduced its VPO system based on the new legal framework resulting from the recent passage of the Probation Act. These changes include the lowering of the minimum age qualified to serve as a VPO from 25 to 20 because, like Japan, the average age of VPOs has been increasing, and some older VPOs have challenges relating to younger probationers. To enhance services and public recognition, Thailand also engages in evaluation and public recognition of VPOs. Among other roles, Thai VPOs are tasked with engaging in pre- and post-sentence investigations, supporting the work of the Probation Department, and so on.

KENYA: The delegation explained that the VPO program provides auxiliary support to relieve the problem of prison overcrowding, particularly for the many offenders who are imprisoned for minor crimes. VPOs enable the probation department to extend its reach into Kenya's villages, many of which are geographically isolated. Progress was reported in the fields of recruitment, organization and development, and public recognition. The programme had also developed system of working with Non –governmental organizations. In order to strengthen the VPO system in Kenya, recommendations include entrenching the VPO system in Kenya's laws and policies; enhancing recognition, capacity building, and government funding; and expanding coverage of the VPO system to all parts of Kenya.

CHINA: Community corrections has developed over the past two decades in response to the increasing prison population. As of 2016, China has 672,100 volunteers, such as retirees, college students and professionals, who provide a variety of services to rehabilitate offenders in the community. A number of models for treatment and support were provided, all of which draw on the support of community volunteers, criminal justice agencies and social support agencies. To identify and retain these volunteers, the volunteer system engages in recruitment, provides training, and offers commendations to outstanding volunteers. Challenges include the lack of funding, poor organization, including high turnover of volunteers, and insufficient training.

3. Plenary Discussion

The Chair stated that the theme of the plenary discussion would focus on enhancing public recognition of VPOs and that, to do so, it is important to engage a broader set of society. Before opening the floor to a broader discussion, the Chair asked the eminent experts in attendance to share their thoughts on the country presentations and on how to promote public recognition of VPOs.

Prof. Tatsuya Ota of Keio University (Japan) commented that recruitment is an important issue in Japan and pointed out that the VPO population in Japan is aging. Accordingly, Japan should reconsider how it recruits VPOs. He also stated that persons with professional experiences and knowledge, such as nurses, mental health practitioners, lawyers, etc., should be recruited as VPOs in order to provide special guidance and support to probationers. Furthermore, VPOs should operate in teams of two or three along with other professionals, and they should cooperate directly with social welfare agencies and other resources. In Japan, the statistics suggest that a majority of Japanese are aware of the role of VPOs, but there is a lack of understanding of community supervision in general.

Prof. Hiroshi SHOJIMA of Fukushima University (Japan) suggested that it is necessary to reconfirm the role of VPOs, particularly by focusing on their role in their communities. Certain offenders, such as sexual offenders, require specialized treatment, but most offenders require the support of the community to reintegrate. Building such understanding does not require expertise; it requires someone who has standing in the community and knowledge of local resources. Although confidentiality is important, the "visibility" of VPOs' non-confidential activities in the community is indispensable. Recently, open dialogue in our communities is important to enhance public recognition of VPOs and community-based treatment, while community-based monitoring is not an important factor.

Dr. Frank PORPORINO, Senior Partner, T³ Associates Training and Consulting Inc. (Canada), stated that although the VPO approach is not known well on the international level, the Asian region should be proud of what VPOs have been able to achieve. Although each country applies its own variation of the VPO scheme, the essence of the VPO scheme is that it is there to support, not to enforce. The VPO scheme should not be viewed as a measure to save money, but rather it should be viewed as a culturally appropriate and evidence-based approach for working with offenders. While the term volunteer

sometimes implies “amateur”, VPOs are professionals in their own way. Organizing the VPO system too much could result in losing its vitality and energy. It is very important to create an evidence base in the Asian region based on the practices related to VPOs: who is able to relate with offenders best, why and how. Also, Dr. Porporino suggested that ex-offenders might be excellent candidates for VPOs, because those who have traveled the path to rehabilitation know it best.

Director Senta of UNAFEI stated that the United Nations Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice will be held in Kyoto in 2020. Participants include ministers of justice, attorneys general, chief justices of Supreme Courts, as well as criminal justice practitioners and academics from around the world. The Congress will promote the building of peaceful and inclusive societies. During the Congress, some agenda items are closely related to VPOs’ activities. UNAFEI will be in charge of the workshop on reducing reoffending, and the workshop’s panelists will include experts or practitioners of community corrections. In addition, there will be more than 100 side events during the Congress. These events are excellent opportunities to promote the public recognition of VPOs nationally and internationally. Moreover, the Kyoto Declaration will be adopted during the 2020 Congress, and through diplomatic negotiation, the importance of community corrections and VPOs might be included.

Following the experts’ remarks, the general discussion touched upon four key issues: (1) public understanding of the VPO concept and measures that should be taken at (2) the community and operational level, (3) the national level and (4) the international level. All participants agreed that these issues must be addressed in order to enhance public recognition of VPOs.

(1) Public Understanding of the VPO Concept

In countries with active VPO systems, the general public may have a basic understanding of the VPO concept, or at least the existence of VPOs. However, it was suggested that in most countries there is a lack of public understanding of the goals of community corrections. Consequently, it is important that actions are taken on all levels and by all countries to enhance public understanding of community corrections and, where applicable, the VPO concept. At the community level, this does not necessarily require expertise; rather, it requires someone who has standing in the community and knowledge of local resources. It was proposed that efforts to enhance public understanding should focus on open dialogue with members of the public, explaining that the role of VPOs is to provide offenders with support for their reintegration rather than monitoring them or enforcing compliance with conditions of probation.

(2) Community and Operational Level

A number of countries reported issues with the aging of the VPO population, stating that they faced challenges in the recruitment of VPOs at the community level. It was proposed that the engagement of youth as VPOs should be prioritized, citing the possible benefits of expanding the recruitment pool and that younger VPOs may relate better to younger offenders. However, it was also pointed out that older VPOs can still play an important role in mentoring younger offenders despite differences in communication style and technological ability. One innovative idea for recruitment is to allow community participation in the nomination and selection of VPOs, which would also enhance public understanding and acceptance of VPOs’ roles. The discussion also addressed the question of whether former offenders should be allowed to serve as VPOs. Although differing perspectives were shared, some believe quite strongly that former offenders can be extremely effective at relating to offenders and showing them the path to rehabilitation and desistance based on their actual experience. From an operational perspective, a number of ideas were presented, including enhancing the professionalism of VPOs by recruiting nurses, mental health practitioners, lawyers, etc., encouraging VPOs to operate in teams of two or three, encouraging VPOs to work directly with social welfare agencies, partnering with NGOs, and expanding the use of offender rehabilitation support centers, which allow VPOs to conduct their work and meet with offenders in a safe, collegial environment.

(3) National Level

Some of the participants stressed the importance of enhancing national recognition of the efforts of VPOs. Measures discussed during the session included publication of annual reports on VPOs activities, strengthening press relations and communicating with the public through the media, establishing a national recognition day for VPOs, conducting law-related education for citizens, offering tax incentives to VPOs to encourage more working professionals to volunteer, and offering preference to students who

serve as VPOs when seeking government jobs.

(4) International Level

There was general agreement that the VPO concept is not so well known at the international level and that measures need to be taken to enhance awareness globally. One idea that garnered unanimous support was to promote the establishment of an International Volunteer Probation Officers' Day. It was also noted that countries with active or developing VPO systems should promote the concept at international conferences, including the United Nations Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice, which will be held in Kyoto, Japan in 2020. It was also suggested that the 2020 Congress presents the unique opportunity to hold the Third Asia Volunteer Probation Officers Meeting as a side event, which would draw international attention to VPO systems.

4. Closing Address

Ms. Naomi UNEMOTO, Director General of the Rehabilitation Bureau of the Ministry of Justice of Japan, delivered the closing address, noting that the country presentations identified tremendous work among the VPO and community corrections systems represented at the Meeting, as well as a number of common challenges facing these systems, and that many important initiatives for enhancing public recognition for VPOs were proposed and discussed during the plenary session in terms of enhancing public recognition for VPOs. The Rehabilitation Bureau, in cooperation with UNAFEI, will use their best efforts to promote the public recognition of VPOs at the international level.

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