
PARTICIPANTS' PAPERS

RECRUITMENT, CAPACITY-BUILDING AND PUBLIC RECOGNITION OF VOLUNTEER PROBATION OFFICERS IN THE TOKYO PROBATION OFFICE

*Yasuhiro Muraki**

I. INTRODUCTION

The Japanese volunteer probation officer system was established by the Volunteer Probation Officers Act, which is the basic law addressing the appointment, qualification, disqualification and services of volunteer probation officers (hereinafter, VPOs). This paper will focus on the state of developing VPOs in the Tokyo Probation Office, which includes their recruitment process, training, capacity building and public recognition.

II. THE STATE OF VPOS WITHIN THE JURISDICTION OF THE TOKYO PROBATION OFFICE

Out of 52,500 positions (the fixed number of VPOs permitted nationwide by the Volunteer Probation Officers Act), 4,375 positions are assigned to the Tokyo Probation Office's jurisdiction, which amounts to 8.3% of the available VPO positions. The current actual number of VPOs within the Tokyo Probation Office's jurisdiction is 3,507 as of 1 January 2015. Nationwide, the VPO system is operating at 80.2% of its full capacity of 52,500 officers.

The percentage of female VPOs in Tokyo is about 32%, which is higher than the percentage of female VPOs (about 25%) throughout the whole country. There are 33 probation districts¹ in the Tokyo Probation Office's jurisdiction, and local VPOs' Associations coincide with each probation district. Together, all of the local VPOs' Associations compose the Tokyo-Prefectural Federation of VPOs' Associations.

III. RECRUITMENT PROCESS FOR VPOs

A. Finding VPO Candidates in Probation Districts

Traditionally, VPOs make full use of their community networks when recruiting new VPOs. Individual VPOs find appropriate persons in their community to be their successors, and when their retirement age (76 years of age) arrives, they offer the person to be their successor. If the person accepts the offer, the President of the local VPOs Association officially recommends the person to the Probation Office. When making a recommendation, the President often attaches a letter of recommendation from the Municipal Chief.

Recently, the "VPO Candidates' Information Meeting" has been introduced nationwide. By holding these meetings, local VPOs' associations can gain wider information from the local community and find more appropriate candidates to serve as new VPOs.

Before a local VPOs Association recommends a VPO candidate to a Probation Office, the Association confirms if the candidate meets the necessary qualifications required by the Volunteer Probation Officers Act and other lower rank decrees (for instance, the age limit of first appointment: 66 years of age or younger; age limit of re-appointment: younger than 76 years of age). This process demands detailed confidential information about the candidate; for instance, whether the candidate's family supports his/her activity as a VPO. This means that public advertisements are not considered appropriate in recruiting VPOs.

*Chief Probation Officer, Tokyo Probation Office.

¹ Article 2-1(1), Volunteer Probation Officers Act.

B. Selection of VPOs by Government

After the above-mentioned process, the Probation Office will conduct various examinations with the consent of the candidate. If the Director of the Probation Office confirms that the candidate is qualified, the Director of the Probation Office consults the VPOs' Screening Commissions about the candidate's appointment.

The VPO Screening Commission is an organ established by the Volunteer Probation Officers Act. The Commission is established at each Probation Office, and it gives opinions to the Director of the Probation Office regarding the appointment of VPOs based on the Director's consultation. A Commission should be composed of a maximum of 13 members (a maximum of 15 in the case of the Tokyo Probation Office). According to an Ordinance of the Ministry of Justice, the member of the Commission should be selected from the District Court Chief, the Family Court Chief, the Chief Prosecutor, the Chief of the bar association, a warden of a correctional facility, a representative of VPOs, the Chairperson of the Prefectural Public Safety Commission, the chief of a prefectural school board, the Chairperson of the local social welfare council, the Chairperson of the local labor council and scholars or other experts. In the Tokyo Probation Office, the members are selected according to these criteria. Members of the Commission are appointed by the Minister of Justice.

The VPO candidates will be considered individually by this Commission. After receiving the Commission's report whether or not to appoint the candidate, the Director of the Probation Office will finally recommend the candidate to the Minister of Justice.

C. Appointment of VPOs

When a VPO is appointed by the Minister of Justice through the above-mentioned process, a certificate of appointment by the Minister of Justice will be issued. All the newly appointed VPOs will be assigned to a local VPOs' Association. At the Tokyo Probation Office, this appointment procedure will take place from two to three times a year, and from 60 to 80 persons are appointed on each occasion.

The appointment ceremonies are held at Probation Offices, and there, certificates of appointment, letters assigning the VPO to a local VPOs' association, VPO's identification cards and VPOs' identification badges are issued.

VPOs are appointed as part-time government officials, and they are subject to the requirements of the National Public Service Law. They are also protected by the Public Officers Accident Compensation Act. This means that when they suffer damage in the performance of their duties, they will be compensated by the government. However, because VPOs are private citizens by nature, the prohibition or restriction of political activities, and the Government Officials Ethics Code are not applied to VPOs.

In spite of their status as government officers, the VPO Act provides that no salary shall be paid to VPOs. Therefore, VPOs are recognized as private-citizen volunteers rather than part-time government officers in Japanese society.

A system of restricted term of office is applied to VPOs; each term in office is for two years. However, if a VPO is not subsequently disqualified, and if the VPO him/herself is willing to be re-appointed, and if the probation office finds no problems with his/her re-appointment, he/she will go through the re-appointment process and will be re-appointed. Therefore, once they are appointed, they will typically be re-appointed continuously until their retiring age: 76 years old.

IV. CAPACITY BUILDING OF VPOs (TRAINING AND OTHER LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES)

Japanese rehabilitation of offenders is administered by the collaboration of professional probation officers and VPOs. This means that the VPOs are the implementing bodies of probation/parole supervision and crime prevention activities in the community. Therefore, capacity-building, specifically improving the offender-treatment skills of VPOs, is considered to be crucial in enhancing rehabilitation services.

The VPO Act provides that "VPOs shall be conscious of their mission, make efforts to develop a note-

worthy character and broad vision and acquire the knowledge and skills necessary for performance of their duties". Therefore, various training programmes are provided for VPOs.

A. Training Provided by Probation Offices

Probation Offices provide training for VPOs as follows: a) Initial training course for newly appointed VPOs; b) Basic treatment skills training course for VPOs who have less than 2 years' experience as VPOs; c) Treatment skill enforcement training course for VPOs who have 2 to 4 years' experience as VPOs; d) Special training course for acquiring specific treatment skills; and e) Local probation area periodic training, which is held at local levels, to which all the VPOs assigned to the area must participate). These trainings are conducted by the probation office periodically, or according to stages of each VPO's experience. Professional probation officers usually serve as trainers/lecturers for these training programmes.

B. Seminars Planned by VPOs' Associations (Independent Seminars)

Each local VPOs' association plans and conducts seminars (so-called independent seminars). The contents of the seminar vary according to the needs of the VPOs' association. For instance, they sometimes invite local police officers or local school teachers as lecturers to learn more about the status of the local area to which they belong. They may also conduct case-study workshops on probation cases. They may also hold initial workshops for newly appointed VPOs in the local area. Study trips to related agencies such as correctional facilities are also options. At a local association's request, Probation Offices cooperate in the implementation of these seminars by sending professional probation officers as lecturers or advisors.

C. VPO's Capacity Building by Probation Officers through Daily Practice

Probation officers' duties include giving advice in managing VPOs' Associations or serving as trainers of VPOs as well as supervising individual probationers or parolees. Probation officers, while working collaboratively with VPOs, continuously communicate with and actively give advice to VPOs regarding the treatment of individual offenders or the management of VPOs' associations. These active communications between probation officers and VPOs are very meaningful to improve VPOs' treatment skills and to enrich their knowledge.

D. Self-Development of VPOs by Local Treatment Meetings at Rehabilitation Support Centers

Sometimes, VPOs hold treatment meetings in their assigned probation area in order to share information about their assigned probationers/parolees, specifically when their assigned probationers/parolees are accomplices of the offence. The VPOs can also discuss the management of their association at the treatment meetings. These meetings are often held at Rehabilitation Support Centers. At these centers, experienced VPOs are stationed so that the newly appointed VPOs can seek assistance from the experienced VPOs stationed at the center. The experienced VPOs can even sit beside the newly appointed VPOs when interviewing the offenders at the center. This way, VPOs learn from each other and develop their own skills by helping each other at the local level.

V. PUBLIC RECOGNITION OF VPOs (COMMENDATION)

Article 16 of the VPOs Act provides that "The Minister of Justice shall give consideration to commending volunteer probation officers, Volunteer Probation Officers' Associations, and Federations of Volunteer Probation Officers' Associations [that] have rendered distinguished service, . . . giving publicity to such service." Hence, various commendations are established for VPOs. Probation Offices hold commendation ceremonies annually for the VPOs and other volunteers involved in rehabilitation services.

A. Guidelines for Commendation at the Tokyo Probation Office

The guidelines for commendation at the Tokyo Probation Office award commendations to those who have rendered distinguished service. The following list describes the commendations awarded.

- a) Commendation from the President of the Tokyo Prefectural Federation of VPOs' Associations.
- b) Commendation from the Director of the Tokyo Probation Office.
- c) Commendation from the President of the Kanto Regional Federation of VPOs

- d) Commendation from the Chairman of the Kanto Regional Parole Board
- e) Commendation from the President of the National Federation of VPOs
- f) Commendation from the Minister of Justice.

Among those who had been commended by the Minister of Justice, some VPOs will be granted the following decorations and medals of honour.

- g) Blue Ribbon Medal
- h) Regular Decoration.

As shown above, VPOs will firstly be commended at the local level (VPO association and government), and then at the prefectural levels, (VPO association and the government), regional level and then at the national level. In rare cases, Blue Ribbon Medals or decorations are given.

In Japan, receiving medals or decoration of honours is considered to be a status symbol. This means that the government acknowledges the distinguished importance and the difficult nature of the VPO's activities.

B. Commendation Ceremony

The commendation of VPOs is thought to be important because it has the effect of improving VPO motivation. Hence, Probation Offices hold commendation ceremonies annually for the VPOs and other volunteers involved in rehabilitation services that received official commendation within that year.

At these ceremonies, besides VPOs, members of the Women's Association of Rehabilitation Aid, Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBS) members, cooperative employers or VPOs' families who had contributed to rehabilitation activities are presented certificates of appreciation.

At the Tokyo Probation Office, more than 100 persons are recognized each year; therefore, the ceremony is quite large. High-level officials involved in rendering rehabilitation services, including the Director-General of the Rehabilitation Bureau and the Chairman of the Kanto Regional Parole Board; officials from the criminal justice sector, including the Chief Prosecutor of the Tokyo District Prosecutors Office, the Chief of the Tokyo District Court, the President of the Bar Association; and the Governor of Tokyo are routinely invited.

VPOs are also involved in planning and organizing the ceremony. For the Tokyo Probation Office, the venue of the ceremony is held in a different location each year within the jurisdiction the Tokyo Probation Office. The local VPOs' Association that is selected to be the organizer of the ceremony prepares for the ceremony in cooperation with the Probation Office.

VI. CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

A. Challenges and Solutions to VPO Recruitment

1. Difficulty in Securing Information about VPO Candidates

The number of VPOs is gradually decreasing nationally. The capacity rate of VPOs in Tokyo (80%) is lower than that of the national average (over 90%), which shows the serious downward trend in the number of VPOs in the Tokyo Probation Office's jurisdiction.

The recruitment of VPOs is becoming more and more difficult in the Tokyo Area. One of the factors is the development of large-scale collective housing caused by the over-concentration of population in Tokyo, which increased the number of temporary residents in local communities. These societal changes weakened the personal relationships in local communities, which caused difficulties in gaining information about VPOs candidates.

Therefore, traditional measures of VPO recruitment, where the individual VPO recruited his successor

from his neighbourhood, do not function well these days. To improve this situation, the Rehabilitation Bureau institutionalized the "VPO Candidate Information Meeting". This meeting consists of municipal government officials, members of neighborhood associations, commissioned welfare volunteers and commissioned child-welfare workers, who are key persons with information on VPO candidates in the area. This meeting was first introduced in April 2008 and was established in all the probation areas in April 2013.

B. The Aging of the VPO Population

Recently, the average age of VPOs is on the rise; the national average age of VPOs is over 64 years old, and Tokyo is in a similar situation. It is difficult to recruit the younger generation because they usually have full time jobs, which may be incompatible with the duties of VPOs. In addition, specifically in the Tokyo area, most of the residents live in small homes, such as flats or apartment houses, where it is difficult to have sufficient room to comfortably interview probationers/parolees. It has also been pointed out that many family members of VPOs do not prefer to receive offenders at their homes.

One of the measures to overcome these challenges is the establishment of Rehabilitation Support Centers. Probation Offices and VPOs' associations are making efforts to increase the number of Rehabilitation Support Centers so that VPOs can use these Centers as places to interview probationers/parolees. In addition, the centers also serve as places for meetings of local VPOs' associations, or as a secretariat office for VPOs' associations, and so on. By cooperating with local governments, Rehabilitation Support Centers are often established in public buildings, where rent is not required.

The Tokyo Probation Office is making efforts to promote Rehabilitation Support Centers. Currently, among 33 local VPOs' associations within the jurisdiction of the Tokyo Probation Office, 16 local VPOs' associations have set up their own Rehabilitation Support Centers, and more Centers are going to be built in the near future.

C. Issues on VPO's Training

One of the qualifications required of VPOs is that they have sufficient time available to accomplish their necessary duties. However, many VPOs have their own jobs or are involved in other volunteer activities. Therefore, in terms of training, the decrease in the attendance rate at local area periodic training has been an issue.

To increase the attendance rate, proposals to "hold training on the weekends" or "hold training in the evenings" had been made. However, it is very difficult to adjust the time and date so that all the VPOs in the area can participate.

Therefore, the Tokyo Probation Office provides supplementary training sessions at the Probation Office for the VPOs who could not attend the periodical training course at their own local area, so that more VPOs can receive the necessary trainings.

In addition, after the local probation area periodic training courses or special training courses were held, the contents of the training will be included in Tokyo Probation Office's monthly newsletter, so that the VPOs can review what they have learned in the training, and even those who did not attend can gain necessary knowledge by reading the article.

VII. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, I outlined the situation of recruitment, capacity-building and public recognition (commendation) of VPOs, as well as its challenges. Lastly, I would like to conclude by pointing out the following crucial points:

- 1) VPOs are community volunteers by nature, but due to their significant responsibility — to implement community-based treatment of offenders, as a part of the criminal justice system — VPOs are granted official status as part-time government officials. Hence, the recruitment process is very strict with several selection stages, and their enthusiasm to rehabilitate offenders is highly scrutinized. Moreover, the candidates are required to maintain strict confidentiality in the community with respect to their rehabilitation activities.

- 2) Because of the weakening of human relations and changes of housing situations brought about by modernization and urbanization, recruitment of appropriate VPOs from local communities is becoming increasingly difficult. However, the government is making sincere efforts to enhance the VPO system, which constitutes the front line of community-based treatment in Japanese society.
- 3) VPOs are community volunteers; however, their duty — to help offenders rehabilitate — is very demanding. Therefore, the government considers it important to enhance ability and treatment skills, and to enrich their knowledge. Hence, probation offices conduct various trainings and seminars for VPOs.
- 4) The contribution of VPOs to the society — helping offenders rehabilitate in the community without any rewards — is outstanding. To repay to the VPOs for their priceless efforts and dedication, commendation is meaningful. Receiving commendations may motivate the VPOs to continue their duties, enhance their quality of work and lift their morale.

As mentioned above, the Japanese VPO system is facing some challenges due to societal changes. However, I believe that the importance of VPOs in the Japanese criminal justice system in the field of offender rehabilitation and crime prevention has not decreased at all. Therefore, it is crucial to further promote the community-based offender treatment system conducted by the collaborative efforts of the government and community volunteers, which contributes to maintaining public order and safety of our country.