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Changing the Student's View of Union County Probation: A Service Learning Project

Introduction

During the fall semester of 2017, students of the Criminology course offered at Bucknell University engaged in a service learning project, where students worked with local organizations that are involved with the criminal justice system. By working closely with these organizations, students were given the ability to apply topics learned in the course to real life situations, in addition to expanding their existing knowledge of the criminal justice system. Moreover, the goal of this service learning project was to develop a product that would benefit the organization by educating the public in order share their missions and goals.

We worked with the Union County Probation Department, specifically Chief Probation Officer Scott Lizardi, Deputy Chief Probation Officer Scott Kerstetter, and Treatment Court Coordinator/Officer Steve Diehl. We focused on learning about the basic structure of the Probation Department, their everyday tasks, and the county's Drug and Alcohol Treatment Court. Through working with the Probation Department, we were given the opportunity to gain valuable insight into the community of Lewisburg and the system as a whole. Our goal was to dispel the inaccurate information held by the neighboring college students surrounding the Probation Department.

Mission of Union County Probation

The mission of the Adult and Juvenile Probation Department in Union County, Pennsylvania is "to enforce the mandate of the Court of Common Pleas of Union County by ensuring the legal accountability of those individuals under its supervision" (*17th Judicial District*). In order to accomplish this mission, the organization focuses on individualized direction, client centered goal coordination, effective use of community-based resources, and the timely and consistent administration of prescribed sanctions. The values of Union County

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Probation are community protection, accountability, facilitation of rehabilitation, and mutual respect. Upholding these values is crucial for providing success to clients, exercising authority with discretion and equality, and evaluating and re-designing program services to ensure that the office maintains these pillars in fulfilling its mission (*17th Judicial District*).

The mission of the Union County Criminal Justice Advisory Board (CJAB) meeting at the Probation Resource Center meeting was “to examine and address community criminal justice issues from a systemic and policy prospective, and to recommend ways in which public safety agencies, the courts, and private organizations can efficiently, effectively, and collaboratively deliver criminal justice programs throughout the communities encompassed by Union County” (*Union County CJAB Meeting Agenda, 2017*). The Union County Court Resource Center (UCRC) is a branch of probation that has many programs for recently released offenders to help them adjust to life outside of prison. Some of these programs include anger management courses, educational classes, and skill workshops on working in community gardens and kitchens, in addition to a mobile site that provides assistance for jobs. This center also helps individuals develop employment skills through building resumes, increasing their financial literacy, assisting them with parenting information, and introducing them to computers to help prepare them for real life. While these programs are developed to help offenders reintegrate into society, there are also programs that help with case management, such as vocational rehabilitation services, which help people with disabilities start and maintain a career, and cognitive behavioral therapy, which helps cultivate the relationships of people with their beliefs, emotions, and behavior patterns.

For those who suffer from drug or alcohol addictions, the UCRC has drug and alcohol counseling as well as Gaudenzia, which is an outpatient substance abuse program that uses state-approved placement tools to determine the best level of care. Individuals who participate in this program have one individual session a week and one or two group sessions a week in order to provide support as they combat their addiction.

Union County Probation Experiences- PSIs

Prior to beginning our work with Union County Probation, we did not know much about the specifics of probation or even what the officers did on a typical day, as did other college students. After working with Scott Lizardi and Scott Kerstetter, we had a much clearer understanding of Union County Probation officers’ responsibilities. Ranging from participating in house calls to appearing in court hearings, probation officers interview offenders, conduct and write-up presentence investigation reports, do random check-ins with offenders, drug test offenders, recommend to the judge who should and should not be released, and much more.

While we were not able to spend a lot of time at the Union County Resource Center and observe the aforementioned programs in action, we learned a lot about them from an open house we attended. The Union County Resource Center is a great resource to assist those new to probation who recently completed their sentence and those who want to get their life back on track. This open house enabled us to learn about the positive, often misunderstood side of probation.

As we continued our project with the Probation Department, we learned that probation officers are involved in decision making from the time a crime is brought to the attention of the police. Probation officers conduct a personal investigation to determine whether a defendant should be released on his own recognizance or on bail. Probation reports serve as the primary source of information that the courts use to determine which cases should be deferred from formal prosecution. Probation officers must supervise offenders who have been deferred from prosecution, and their recommendations are then used when deciding whether the offenders successfully complied with the diversionary sentence and therefore should not face formal prosecution. For offenders who violate court-ordered conditions, probation officers are responsible for deciding which violations to bring to the court's attention and for recommending subsequent sanctions (Petersilia, 1997).

From the point of the arrest, information about the offender's crime and criminal behavior is collected, and if the case proceeds to prosecution and sentencing, the information is presented to the judge. This formal document is known as the presentence investigation report (PSI) or presentence report (PSR). The PSI includes information on the seriousness of the crime, the defendant's risk, the defendant's circumstances, a summary of the legally permissible sentencing options, and a recommendation for or against prison (Petersilia, 1997). If prison is recommended, the PSI details recommended sentence length; and if probation is recommended, the PSI outlines sentence length and conditions to be imposed.

We were given the opportunity to sit in on the actual interview used to obtain the information for the PSI, and following the interviews, provide our insights, offer different perspectives, and read through and edit pre-sentencing reports. This enabled us to fully grasp what it is like to be a probation officer and experience the demands of their daily tasks. We participated in PSI interviews for offenders from various backgrounds, including sex offenders, individuals struggling with mental illness, offenders who were engaged with theft, robbery, DUIs, etc. One impactful PSI interview that we participated in involved a defendant who was irritated by the probation officer's questions and sounded defensive, as if they had been cheated by the system. It was difficult to listen to the details in the first few PSI interviews while remaining impartial. For example, when we sat in on a sex offender's PSI interview who had signed a no-contest plea,

it was difficult to treat them with dignity that you would treat any other individual. However, it was a learning experience that required us to be patient, unbiased, and listen to the sex offender's side without reacting. Having the opportunity to participate in pre-sentencing interviews provided us insight for understanding the different steps in the process of sentencing, cultivate new perspectives, and emphasized the importance of remaining impartial.

Union County Probation Experiences- Treatment Court

A significant component of our service learning project involved observing the Union County Treatment Court Program. Since the War on Drugs began in the 1980s, federal and state correctional facilities have seen an increase in prisoners incarcerated for drug offenses. Approximately 1.3 million more individuals have been incarcerated for drugs offenses since the policy was implemented, and recidivism rates have risen to 77%, resulting in drug offenders representing the greatest threat of failure while on probation (Liang & Long, 2013; Banks & Gottfredson, 2003). Due to the increase in incarceration and recidivism, treatment court programs have been created to prevent individuals from being incarcerated and reducing their rates of recidivism. The Union County 17th Judicial District Treatment Court was established in 2008 to reduce recidivism by facilitating treatment and rehabilitation through increased supervision (*17th Judicial District*). Their goal is to return clean and sober individuals to the community with an improved life and the ability to maintain their sobriety. Other benefits of this program include more employment opportunities, better relationships with family and friends, a better understanding of oneself, and a positive outlook on life (*17th Judicial District*). Participants of this program who have graduated have said that this program has given them a "second chance at life", helped them regain respect from family members and find themselves again.

The Union County Treatment Court is composed of both a drug treatment court, for non-violent offenders who are addicted to drugs, and a DUI treatment court, for non-violent 2nd and 3rd time offenders of driving under the influence (*17th Judicial District*). Participants are both males and females, ranging in age, races, ethnic backgrounds, and SES classes. The Union County Treatment Court is a highly structured program, consisting of three phases, each lasting a minimum of four months. Participants are required to complete certain objects and goals in order to move on to the next phase (*17th Judicial District*). An example of a difference between phases is mandated court appearances, which can be either weekly, biweekly, or monthly, depending on the phase. At this time, participants meet with the judge to discuss their progress from the week, any improvements or setbacks, and answer what we call his "question of the day", where participants acknowledged how their addiction has affected them, what their long-

term goals are, etc. This meeting is also when sanctions, if applicable, are determined, which are usually discussed in a briefing held an hour before the meeting. In this briefing, the judge meets with all of the probation officers who have met with the participants, and the officers inform the judge on the participants' progress that week. The Union County Treatment Court boasts a recidivism rate of 3%, compared to the average offender recidivism rate of 75% (Zoukis, 2017).

Upon completion of the program, participants attend a graduation ceremony during which they give a brief speech about what they have learned from the program and how it will help them live happier, healthier lives. In order to graduate, a participant must have been entirely treatment compliant, have secured stable housing, resolved all legal matters, paid any and all fines, and be employed. Ideally, they have been able to use the resources provided by the program to resolve these issues before graduation.

At the actual graduation, which we had the privilege of attending, each individual gave their speech and presented their aftercare plan to the officers, family, friends, and other treatment court participants in attendance. Interestingly, the speeches were recorded to be used to a tool to combat relapse in the future. Attending treatment court graduation was by far one of the most memorable experiences of this project because it allowed us to see the end result of many months of hard work and dedication. One of the graduates said that they felt the program was truly "making a positive impact on society" and that they had learned that they "can't undo the past but could fix the future". Participants recognized their relationship with the judge and the probation officers as personal and empathetic, not like their previous relationships with law enforcement, and they are extremely thankful to have been given this opportunity to improve their life and heal.

It was both inspiring and impactful to hear the actual participants speak about what the program had done for them and how it had changed their outlook on life for the better. Witnessing this first hand lent a unique perspective to our understanding of the Treatment Court program and proved that the work done by the dedicated, empathetic, and supportive officers is nothing short of admirable. Observing the Union County Treatment Court and conversing with the probation officers enabled us to realize that the criminal justice system and probation officers are here to help, not hurt and make matters worse. The judge and probation officers sincerely care about being fair to offenders and giving them equal opportunities in order to improve their lives. The judge forms close bonds with the participants and only wants to see them succeed in life. The power of an adequate support system has been proven to improve rehabilitation and reduce recidivism; punishment and incarceration of criminals is not always the answer, which we learned by observing Treatment Court.

Contribution to the Union County Probation Department

Our service learning project with the Probation Department provided us with the opportunity to contribute to the organization, both by assisting with the creation of a pre-sentencing investigation report and by informing the public, especially undergraduate college students, about the actual goal of the probation department, to protect the community by holding individuals accountable and providing rehabilitation, not the inaccurate but highly publicized one, to get individuals in trouble. Through observing the pre-sentencing interview from beginning to end, we were able to contribute our own suggestions and engage in discussion with the officers about the relevancy of our work specifically on the report. The PSIs served as a component of our contribution to the organization but it is also important to note that our collective efforts throughout this service learning opportunity will also be beneficial in many ways. Our active observation also added multiple perspectives to the different aspects of the treatment court program and case interviews. Since we reside in a college town, undergraduate students often experience trouble with the law and therefore have a negative connotation of law enforcement and the Probation Department. By sharing what we learned about the Probation Department, the numerous programs they offer to rehabilitate offenders, and how sincere officers are in helping others, we hoped to clear up any confusion or misinformation, and change the students' views of the Probation Department.

Conclusion

Throughout our work with the Union County Probation Office and Treatment Court program, we solidified our understanding of sociological themes through experiential learning and observation. Everyone we worked with was extremely cooperative, thorough, and helpful in enhancing our understanding of the organization, its goals, and the demographic of the population that it serves. In each case we observed, we were able to develop our own perspectives while expanding our own self-awareness. We enjoyed learning about the Probation Department and sharing what we learned to help reshape the public's view of the Probation Department. We are grateful for our experiences and ability to make contributions to this truly impactful organization.

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