

Sustainable Community Involvement: A Solution to NIMBY in Community Corrections?

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“We can make this city safer, and it will be done through community and criminal justice partnerships.” Paul A. Quander, Jr., Director, CSOSA

On a recent April evening, thirty residents and neighborhood leaders filled the community room at a police station in northeast Washington, DC to talk with representatives of the Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency (CSOSA) about domestic violence, violent crime, and what the agency does to address it. CSOSA, established in 1997, is responsible for supervising offenders on probation, parole, or supervised release in the District of Columbia.

Shortly into the meeting, the conversation moved to CSOSA’s new violence prevention program, which attempts to reorient offenders’ decision-making through cognitive behavioral therapy, mentoring, common supervision techniques, and drug testing.

A woman sitting in the third row raises her hand. Visibly upset, she protests, “Why wasn’t the community told about this? This program brings dangerous people into my community. It’s disrespectful to the community.”

Lawrence Jordan is a Community Relations Specialist for CSOSA who lives in this part of town and has been a District of Columbia resident for 54 years. He hears these kinds of questions frequently in his role as liaison between the CSOSA and the community. Calmly and rationally, Jordan explained that the offenders already live in the community and that CSOSA provides services designed to reduce the risk that the young men in the program would continue to solve problems through violence.

The exchange is valuable for more than one reason, according to Jordan. “Every objection is another opportunity to repeat the message about the agency’s value to public safety,” he says. “Second, by being out here, we build credibility and pockets of support for everything we do.”

Performance-Based Structure for Community Involvement

To make community involvement sustainable, CSOSA has made it an integral component of the agency’s organizational structure. The partnerships nurtured through community involvement expand the capacity of the agency to provide close supervision, treatment, and support services for offenders.

The meeting that Jordan hosted in April is part of the agency's emphasis on Partnerships; one of the four critical success factors that CSOSA has identified as key to improving public safety by giving offenders the tools and support necessary to change their behavior. The three other critical success factors are Risk and Needs Assessment, Close Supervision, and Treatment and Support Services.

- **Risk and Needs Assessment** determines the likelihood that the offender will re-offend and establishes a supervision and service plan to mitigate that risk.
- **Close Supervision** is achieved through frequent contact between the Community Supervision Officer (CSO) and the offender, in both the office and in the community, and regular periodic drug testing.
- **Treatment and Support Services** address offenders' substance abuse, education, employment, physical and mental health needs.
- **Partnerships** allow for creative collaborations with other organizations and the community to diversify the ways the agency supervises offenders and provides support services.

Six Community Relations Specialists maintain crucial relationships with community representatives in each police district. Known formally as Community Justice Advisory Networks (CJAN's), the networks are comprised of key stakeholders including residents, faith institutions, schools, civic organizations, businesses, nonprofit organizations, government agencies and local law enforcement entities. CJAN's are designed to resolve key public safety issues and concerns resulting in an improved quality of life.

The Community Relations Specialists are also responsible for maintaining CSOSA's involvement in any grassroots venue that relates to public safety. In a typical month, it's not unusual for Community Relations Specialists to attend events organized by the police department, public housing resident councils, homeowners' associations, and area neighborhood commissioners (non-paid elected representatives who serve as community liaisons to the local government).

"We strive to be out there," Jordan says, "so that we can be a resource that people can rely upon when public safety issues arise."

Community Relations staff develop resources that contribute to the agency's focus on close supervision and support services. They routinely work with civic groups to organize neighborhood clean up or beautification activities, which provide opportunities for offenders to fulfill court-ordered community service requirements.

Community Relations Specialists also convene groups of offenders for community supervision orientation sessions hosted jointly by CSOSA and the local police district. The orientations are just one part of CSOSA's effort to collaborate with other law enforcement agencies to expand CSOSA's supervision capacity by sharing information

on offenders and promoting a coordinated law enforcement response to public safety issues. “Accountability Tours,” one of CSOSA’s most effective partnership activities, pair Community Supervision Officers travel with uniformed police officers to conduct community contacts with offenders.

CSOSA also maintains partnerships with more than forty Washington, DC faith institutions to link offenders returning from prison with trained mentors and other services that many houses of worship have to offer, such as job training, parenting classes, and transitional housing assistance.

The Value of Sustained Community Involvement

In addition to strengthening the agency’s capacity to provide close supervision and treatment and support services, community involvement also builds the goodwill necessary to the agency’s efforts to locate community supervision field offices in the communities where the offenders live.

“One very real test of a community corrections agency’s value,” says Jasper Ormond, CSOSA’s Associate Director for Community Justice Programs, “is whether or not you can place your operations directly in the neighborhoods where your population lives.”

A recent *Washington Post* story, “Parole Building Plan Stirs an Outcry,” demonstrates how important sustained community involvement is in the process of placing community corrections facilities in neighborhoods.

The *Post* focused on resistance to CSOSA’s plans for a new field office in far northeast, Washington, DC. It’s the only area of the city with substantial numbers of offenders and no CSOSA field office to which individuals on probation or parole would report to meet with their Community Supervision Officers, take drug tests, and participate in educational and vocational programs. While the report quotes one homeowner and refers to “many residents” who do not want CSOSA to place an office in their neighborhood, the story also acknowledges that CSOSA “has some community support.”

“CSOSA does have some backing from residents,” the *Post* reported. Three of seven members of Advisory Neighborhood Commission 7D wrote a letter of support to the zoning board in support of CSOSA’s new field office. In a letter to Director Quander, The Neighbors of Burns Street Organization indicated that the field unit “will be good for the offenders and defendants who reside in Ward 7.”

“We’ve been through the experience of placing new field sites in Washington, DC,” offers CSOSA Associate Director for Community Supervision Services, Tom Williams. “We know from that experience that some people may embrace you. We know that others will mount opposition. We know that if the media covers it, they’re likely to focus on resistance.”

CSOSA Director Paul A. Quander, Jr. is a homeowner in Ward 7 where the proposed facility will be located. Also a lifelong District resident, he notes that 3,900 offenders

and defendants under CSOSA supervision live within three miles of the proposed site. “To be effective we need to be in close proximity to the men and women who we are responsible for supervising,” says Quander.

CSOSA has a positive track record of placing facilities and services in the community. Since 1997, the agency has opened four new field sites that house Community Supervision Officers. CSOSA also placed two learning labs and one residential substance abuse treatment facility in Washington, DC neighborhoods. A fifth new field site is scheduled to open in November, 2005.

“Our past success in extending our operations into neighborhoods with high numbers of offenders,” Quander notes, “reflects the fact that we have made partnerships and sustainable community involvement a significant focus of our strategic plan.”

“Part of the value of sustained community involvement,” Ormond says, “is that the meetings and other partnership activities bring stakeholders and the agency together to create a shared understanding about the impact we can have on public safety.”

Cedric Hendricks, Associate Director for Legislative, Intergovernmental and Public Affairs states, “Community and intergovernmental cooperation either makes or breaks us as an organization. There’s no doubt that our success in placing field offices and learning labs in the community would not have been possible without the continuous community presence that our emphasis on partnerships affords us.”

The placement of the CSOSA field site at 25 K Street, Northeast, serves as a case in point. This field office opened after the agency worked with the community stakeholders who had opposed two previous locations within a half-mile of 25 K Street.

“When initial support to the first proposed site in near northeast was stronger than expected,” Hendricks remembers, “we asked some of our key opponents to help us find an acceptable location. Within a relatively short amount of time, we were committed to the K Street location, just five blocks from the first site that the community opposed.”

Each effort to locate a new program is a challenge. CSOSA is currently developing a 100-bed residential Reentry and Sanctions Center, which is scheduled to open in late 2005. The facility is an expansion of an existing 21-bed residential facility started in 1996 to prepare offenders with serious criminal histories and chronic patterns of substance abuse for long-term substance abuse treatment. An independent study of the program by researchers at the University of Maryland found that the pre- and post-program arrest rates of participants dropped significantly.

The challenge of this opportunity was that the program needed to temporarily relocate during the construction of the expanded Reentry and Sanctions Center. The best available site to temporarily house the program was located in the heart of one of Washington, DC’s rapidly gentrifying neighborhoods.

A year earlier, well-connected residents in the same neighborhood had successfully blocked the Federal Bureau of Prisons from renewing a contract for a community-based corrections center for returning prisoners. The facility had been in the neighborhood for more than thirty years.

“When the opposition started to organize,” Ormond recalls, “we were able to work with residents with whom we had built a relationship through our advisory networks and other partnerships. When opponents charged our facility would increase crime, the police came out said they welcomed us. Residents from other parts of the city where we’ve opened new field units in the last few years came out to say that they wished we’d been in their neighborhoods sooner.”

CSOSA successfully opened the temporary facility. The agency’s commitment to community dialogue and decision-making paid significant dividends in this case.

Efforts to win sufficient public support for the placement a field office in far northeast DC continues. “We understand from experience that increasing our presence in a particular neighborhood is a process that includes communication, possible misunderstandings, cooperation and collaboration,” notes Quander. “It’s also an opportunity to increase awareness about our mission and increase our base of support.”

Sustaining the Process

Criminologists and criminal justice leaders have said for years that true crime control comes from the will of the community. Decades of community-based crime control programs point to community decision-making and consensus as key to safer societies.

“We decided early in the agency’s history that investing in a staff of Community Relations Specialists and making partnerships a critical success factor were central to our operations,” notes Ormond. “We’ve learned from experience that true community engagement is a process much like being in a relationship. It takes time to cultivate. It takes real commitment, respect, flexibility, and the development of trust to sustain a relationship over time.”

CSOSA’s community involvement strategy focuses on process. Resistance is not necessarily bad. Everything has a life cycle; everything has its moment. Everyone wants things that are healthy for their neighborhood. CSOSA begins initiatives with the knowledge that there are introductions, explanations, definitions, “not in my backyard” resistance, “you didn’t ask me” objections, and “all the bad programs come here” observations.

“At the core of NIMBY and every why-didn’t-you-ask-me question,” Quander notes, “is a common desire for a safer city. If we talk through the initial resistance and come to that common ground, we can make this a safer city.”