

Report

Thirteenth CEP Seminar Potsdam, Germany, 29 September-3 October 1999 Volunteers in the Criminal Justice System

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Practice and Significance of Volunteers Working in the Field of Criminal Justice

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The 13th CEP seminar took place in Potsdam, near Berlin, and was attended by 44 people from 14 countries: Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom (England, Scotland and N. Ireland) and the United States. It was run by the DBH - the German Federal Association for Social Work, Criminal Law and Crime Policy - in co-operation with the German Ministry of Justice and supported by the GROTIUS Programme of the European Commission. People attending included probation officers, volunteers, policy makers, senior managers and representatives from voluntary organisations. They brought a wealth of experience and very diverse perspectives on the role and use of volunteers.

Presentations

Two contributions set the scene:

Dr. Anselm Meyer-Antz from the University of Cologne presented a socio- economic analysis of the conditions currently supporting voluntary work. Growing unemployment and the apparent cost-effectiveness of using volunteers meant that voluntary work could become more significant. He saw the increase in an approach which valued community benefit as a third force alongside the power of the state and the power of the market place. There were implications for the role of volunteers: were they a cheap alternative (and therefore a threat) to professionals or should they be seen as adding value, providing a mechanism for the community in the rehabilitation of offenders.

Jürgen Mutz, Director of the Amtsgericht of Ravensburg and Secretary General of the CEP, gave an overview of the use of volunteers within Europe based on the returns to a questionnaire from seminar participants. These showed a wide range of structures and roles that volunteers undertake in working with offenders in prison and in the community. However common features could be seen: the need to assess volunteers' suitability for the task and the need to provide adequate training and support of volunteers. Jürgen stressed the motivation of volunteers to contribute to society, but also the personal gains they could make. Issues included the integration of this work with the professional task through a clear mandate and adequate funding.

Reports on projects showed different ways in which volunteers were currently being used.

Gabriella Zlauwinen, described a project in the canton of Zurich, Switzerland, which has been running since 1980 in which volunteers befriend prisoners, and accompany them to residential drug treatment facilities and on periods of leave from prison. Volunteers are trained and accredited centrally and then allocated to teams within the canton.

Renate Wevering, project leader of the LOTSE project in Nordrhein-Westfalen, in which volunteers work in custodial institutions for young people aged 14 - 21 years, where a high proportion of the prisoners have problems with substance misuse or are of foreign descent. Volunteers are involved in befriending and mentoring young people.

Klaus Schwarz and Hilde Höll reported from Baden-Württemberg on schemes in Ravensburg and Stuttgart. In these, volunteers enhance the work of probation officers in the community through

befriending and support. Tasks included debt counselling, mediation, helping with the search for work and accommodation and supporting offenders through drug treatment and court appearances.

In contrast two larger scale enterprises were shown:

David Barlow, Director of the Society of Voluntary Associates (SOVA) described the activities of this organisation. SOVA is a large voluntary (not for profit) organisation which aims to increase the involvement of communities in assisting offenders by using mentors recruited from all sections of the community. SOVA employs paid staff who manage the projects and who recruit, train and supervise the volunteer mentors. SOVA's role is to enhance the work of statutory organisations and does not see itself as a competitor. It is involved in a range of projects including partnerships with UK probation services, young offender projects and prisoner resettlement projects. A large project in London is currently being set up between SOVA, Inner London Probation Service and 30 other organisations to focus on substance misuse and mental illness.

Jerry Dash, Director of Volunteers in Prevention, Probation and Prisons Inc (VIP) based in Detroit, described how this large voluntary organisation developed out of a court project in Michigan in which a judge involved "significant others" in assisting and supporting young people, acting as a role model. Now there are 4000 – 6000 such projects throughout the United States. The role of VIP is to provide consultancy and training to community justice projects. Their view was that contact with a volunteer should be a statutory requirement of young offenders' probation to ensure its success.

Jerry was able to reflect on projects which failed and those which were successful. Successful projects needed to meet 8 criteria:

- a clear plan based on a goal
- consistent effective recruitment
- clear criteria for screening and assessing potential volunteers' suitability
- a training programme which both provides information and prepares for the task in hand
- a clear mechanism for monitoring activity to ensure accountability
- a long term strategy for funding
- effective risk management and liability procedures
- evaluation of outcomes to examine effectiveness

Finally there were contributions which presented a larger political German and European picture.

Hedi Wegener, Member of Parliament and member of the committee on legal affairs in the Bundestag outlined the legislative intentions of the Social Democratic party in Germany. She stated that voluntary work was essential. However the SPD was aware that the number of volunteers was decreasing. It was therefore proposing to support voluntary activity with recognised organisations through tax concessions.

Erich Wennerström from the European Commission said that there were three pillars for the European Union which had become reality since the Treaty of Maastricht: (i) agricultural and industrial policy, (ii) foreign and security policy and (iii) justice and interior affairs. Although the decision making was lengthy (5 levels) there was now evidence of much greater collaboration. The recognition, for example, that organised crime threatened the fabric of European society had led to an action plan signed by all the heads of state.

Mr. Wennerström explained that the GROTIUS programme aims to help European co-operation through supporting projects, training and exchanges. Initiatives currently support included a project combating racism in Liverpool, England; an international CEP workshop on electronic monitoring in Egmond aan Zee, Netherlands; an international conference on victim-offender mediation in Louvain, Belgium; a film made by the DBH - the German Federal Association for Social Work, Criminal Law and Crime Policy.

Themes

The themes which emerged as important from the presentations and discussions included:

- Are volunteers a "necessary evil" to help deal with the excessive workloads of probation officers? Volunteers have an important role to play in adding value to the work of probation officers. They should not to be seen or used as a cheap substitute for probation officers. The perspective they bring is that of the community.
- The community has a role to play in rehabilitating offenders and this can be shown through the unpaid work of volunteers.
- How can you tell whether it is effective to use volunteers - how can this be measured separately from the work of the probation officer?
- It was agreed that good practice was to induct, train volunteers well and provide ongoing support. All of the presentations had well thought out training programmes, some of which led to qualifications.
- Suitability
- how can volunteers be assessed and accredited? Who should be excluded?
- What are the boundaries in relation to confidentiality? Can a European standard be drawn up?
- How close should volunteers get to offenders? Should they give their home addresses?
- Many countries reported that they found it easier to recruit volunteers for prison based projects than for community based projects. How can more volunteers be recruited for community-based projects?
- Could the CEP act as a vehicle for sharing information between European countries to aid mutual understanding and development?

The seminar was well organised and very enjoyable with opportunities to network and share experiences. A full report of the conference will be available from CEP in due course