

Mass Orientations: Orienting Criminal Offenders in Washington, DC

by Leonard A. Sipes, Jr.*

The church basement in southwest Washington, DC, overflows with criminal offenders. Approximately 200 people relatively new to a sentence of probation from the courts or released from the Federal Bureau of Prisons fill the room. Others are here as a sanction for violating the rules of their release. It is a cold and dreary night in one of the highest crime and drug areas in the nation's capital.

Staff members from the Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency (CSOSA), the federal, executive branch entity responsible for providing parole and probation services in the District of Columbia preside over this assembly. Also present are a prosecutor from the U.S. Attorney's office and contingents from the Metropolitan Police Department and DC Housing Authority Police. All of these agencies deliver a unified message to the offenders: There are consequences for failure. There are also programs and services to increase the chances for success.

Much of the audience, however, does not seem pleased with the prospect of spending the next hour and a half with us. Some are curious, some look as though their attention is focused many miles away, and some seem downright hostile. This should be an interesting evening.

A Continuous and Ongoing Chain of Events

Mass orientations of criminal offenders new to supervision are not isolated events; they are not programs unto themselves. They are part of the continuous and ongoing chain of events that define the essence of CSOSA's partnership with the rest of the criminal justice system in Washington, DC

Mass orientations began in 1999 when CSOSA was emerging as a new federal agency, created out of existing parole and court-related probation agencies in the District of Columbia. CSOSA started as an effort to relieve DC government of the fiscal burdens of services ordinarily provided by state agencies. Pretrial, parole and probation, the public defender, the courts, and incarceration of long-term prisoners were

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all "federalized" or provided with federal funding. CSOSA became an independent federal agency in August of 2000.

The opportunity to create a new agency devoted to state-of-the-art parole and probation services was exciting. Liaisons with law enforcement were thought to be crucial. Assistant Chief Winston Robinson of the Metropolitan Police Department was a district commander at the time. Robinson worked with Jay Carver, the leader of CSOSA under the initial three-year trusteeship, and Jasper Ormond, now CSOSA's associate director for Community Justice Programs, to create a community supervision system founded on three essential principals:

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- Frequent information and intelligence sharing;
- Thousands of joint patrols (accountability tours) to offenders' homes; and
- Mass orientations.

These core activities are the individual plays in CSOSA's overall strategy to win the high-stakes game of community supervision. They are part of an integrated package deemed necessary for success. Each effort supports the others: Without the cooperation and involvement of police and prosecutors, CSOSA's activities would resemble a defense with no offense. Both are necessary.

Research from the National Institute of Justice on boot camps and intensive supervision programs suggests that both supervision and social services are necessary for success. CSOSA offers an array of employment, education, substance abuse, mental health, domestic violence, anger management, and other services. CSOSA partners with DC city government (which provides the bulk of services), private non-profit organizations, and places of worship throughout the city.

The combined energies and capabilities of law enforcement and social service organizations are brought to bear on the issue

of criminal offenders and their obligations to themselves, their children, and their families. Mass orientations are simply part of the overall strategy. They are but one product in an array of services and partnerships designed to reduce recidivism and crime.

Back to the Meeting

Greg Thomas is a community relations specialist with CSOSA's Office of Community Justice Programs. His job is to attend police and community meetings dealing with crime in his district. He also organizes crime-related meetings with leaders within the communities he serves. He is a former member of the Metropolitan Police Depart-

ment, and his office brims with the awards of a lifetime in law enforcement. Tonight, however, he stands among 200 criminal offenders mandated to attend the mass orientation. He and five other community relations specialists organize these events on a quarterly basis throughout the city.

"Welcome ladies and gentlemen to tonight's orientation." Greg cheerfully begins. "We are here to make sure you know the rules of supervision and understand the many programs that exist to help you become productive and law abiding citizens of the District of Columbia."

The faces of the offenders in the crowd seem to predict who will succeed and who will struggle. The ones paying attention are the safer bets for success. The ones lost to the world will struggle. Greg reaches out to the ones on the fence. You can tell that he has years of experience talking to offenders:

Supervision is not just about drug tests and us showing up at your door with the police [he says]. A lot of you in this room are sick and tired of being sick and tired. You know you want a better life. You know your kids are depending on you. You know that

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drugs will eventually kill you. You know that dealers live terrible lives. You know you want something different. You know that!

More faces look up. Heads nod in agreement. To some in this room, drugs and hustling and beefing are all they know. Escape seems distant or impossible. Yet they know they want something better. They are not quite sure, however, what "better" means.

The Rules of Supervision. The evening starts off with the rules of supervision. Community supervision officers (CSOs) clearly state what is expected. CSOSA has some of the most stringent contact standards in the nation:

- Twice-a-week drug testing is mandatory for the first eight weeks;
- Twice-a-month testing follows for the next 12 weeks; and
- Monthly drug tests occur throughout supervision.

Fail one and you go back to the beginning of the cycle.

Close to half of the offender population is either under high levels of supervision (four to eight office and community contacts each month) or is part of a special supervision

attend. Everybody understands that both approaches are necessary.

The U.S. Attorney's Office. The assistant U.S. attorney makes the next appearance. She has the demeanor of a docent at one of Washington's many historical monuments: Just the facts, delivered politely. She is direct, polite, and matter-of-fact. Her voice is not raised. She simply tells those assembled that those holding a gun or ammunition will go away to a federal prison in another state for a minimum of five years. If they engage in acts of violence or criminal conspiracies, they will be aggressively prosecuted. During her presentation, no offenders stare at the floor or nod off to sleep. For the moment, everybody's listening.

CSOSA's Services

CSOSA's partnership philosophy also applies to services. For example, the agency works with faith institutions to provide mentors to offenders returning from prison and to link offenders with faith-based support services. CSOSA has put significant effort into cataloging the programs offered by Washington's churches and mosques. Some provide clothing. Others offer job placement and training. Housing, childcare, drug treatment, food, and fellowship are additional services.

opportunities," they state. The unit will do a comprehensive vocational and educational assessment of any offender and will provide direct services.

The VOTEE staff continue with an overview of additional services offered directly by CSOSA or other agencies: drug and alcohol treatment, anger management, mental health counseling, and others.

Offer of Services Is Always There

It is important to note that there is no "expiration date" on CSOSA's offer to match offenders with helpful services. There is a formal intake process, during which the CSO does a complete assessment of the new offender's risk and social needs, and a contract is signed. Beginning in 2006, CSOSA implemented an enhanced, expanded, and fully automated assessment instrument, the Auto Screener.

CSOSA's Transitional Interventions for Parole Supervision (TIPS) unit has staff placed in every Bureau of Prisons halfway house in the city. These officers provide the same assessment for the 50% of prison returnees who come back to the District through halfway house placement.

At every contact with their CSOs, offenders can say that they are ready to accept the help that is offered. CSOs will then initiate referrals to the various service units. They do not have to rely on the courts or Parole Commission to get someone into drug treatment, mental health programming, or job training.

An End or a Beginning

Ninety minutes can seem like a lifetime. After the program, many audience members rush out into the cold night air. Many others, however, stay and learn more about programs they know they need:

It's a system philosophy [states Paul Quander, director of CSOSA]. We apply pressure, especially to high-risk offenders. We show them a unified system, but we also show them that we care about their well-being, their future, and their child's future.

Bryan Young, a CSOSA senior management analyst and organization historian offers:

We learn stuff through mass orientations and other partnership activities that we will not learn through day-to-day office and community contacts. We find key data to protect society and help offenders and their families. That's what makes our partnership work. That's what makes the District of Columbia safer. ■

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caseload (i.e., sex offenders, satellite tracking, mental health, domestic violence, day reporting, etc.).

It is important to note that there are others in the room beyond rank and file CSOs. Management at various levels within CSOSA attend these events and meet with the audience. All of this reinforces one message: You will be held accountable for your behaviors. Although all of us are aware that there are no guarantees regarding community supervision, there is some optimism that we are bringing accountability to the table.

The Police. The police are next. Various officers go to the front of the packed room and tell those assembled that they will be looking for them as they patrol. If they are on the corner causing the community grief, their CSOs will be informed, and action will be taken.

The stories of police officers recognizing offenders as troublemakers during mass orientations and instantly holding decision meetings with CSOs are many. But treatment needs are also discussed, and the officers often encourage offenders to

But identifying services can be an academic exercise. Getting offenders to use them and embrace their benefits is another issue. Offenders, for a wide variety of reasons, have difficulty dealing with the vast and impersonal bureaucracies that often administer social services. If the services are constructed with offenders in mind, then participation rates increase.

Back at the mass orientation, Greg Thomas introduces members of CSOSA's Vocational Opportunities, Training, Education and Employment (VOTEE) unit, who stand up to address the crowd:

We have services designed just for you [they state]. We can provide you with a job or provide job training through the city.

They point out that many former offenders have trained as commercial truck drivers who go on to make very good money. In fact, they say, some former offenders have hired people released from prison who completed the training. "There are many other