

Doing Dirty Work?

Sponsors of Community Service

Margaret Pack

Margaret Pack completed an M.A. (Applied) in Social Work in 1986. Currently working as a social worker at "Hillview", a mental health facility in Lower Hutt.

ABSTRACT

With the introduction of the Criminal Justice Act 1985 and its orientation toward the provision of community based sentencing options, there is a growing awareness of the importance of encouraging a wide range of sponsoring organizations and individuals to become involved in administering community based sentences. This paper presents the results of an exploratory research project carried out in 1986, which asked people sponsoring community service sentence what they liked about the sentence and how they thought it could be improved, drawing on their experiences as sponsors.

Introduction

Increasingly evaluative research on community service programs in New Zealand and overseas has focused on whether the sentence is being used in practice as it was originally intended, at different stages in its implementation (cf Leibrich et al, 1984). Whether community service is being used as an alternative to imprisonment, a stated objective of the program, is currently engaging the interest of a number of researchers in New Zealand and overseas (cf Bradshaw, 1985). In distinguishing between stated policy objectives and the actual operation of the sentence, this approach provides those involved in participating in the program with an opportunity to comment on how realistic and achievable stated policy objectives are.

The focus of the present study was limited to the experiences of those persons who had agreed to become sponsors for community service in the greater Wellington area. I was particularly interested in gathering information on what efforts sponsors made to find a balance between the parts of the job they said they 'enjoyed' and other aspects which they defined as more problematic in terms of ad-

ding to their notions of themselves as being 'good' sponsors.

Clearly sponsors as representatives of 'the community' and defacto workers for the Department of Justice occupy an ambiguous position which requires them to achieve a balance between penal requirements and the individualised needs of those sentenced. This ambiguity is reflected in the fact that there are no consistent principles for determining the point at which sponsors should contact the probation service to initiate 'breach' proceedings to take a person back to court. Thus, consideration can lead to an informal sanctioning of behaviour by sponsors when there is a recognition of the worker's personal or domestic situation. Non-attendance of workers has been cited as a problem by the vast majority of sponsors in New Zealand (Leibrich et al 1984). The need for sponsors to inform the probation service of the non-attendance of workers, I hypothesized, could lend a 'dirty work' quality to their task. This requirement may place considerable strain on reinforcing the favourable self concepts sponsors have of themselves and their role. Hughes has used the concept of 'dirty work' as a feature of many occupations. He suggests that :

"in certain repeated contingencies participants will often be asked to perform a task of which they feel they should be a little ashamed morally". (Hughes, 1962) p.4.

These identity threatening performances, I hypothesized, could be a feature of the work of sponsors on community service.

I found it necessary to ask questions which seemed to precede the hypothesis as I had found it. - What was it about the job of sponsor that individuals found they enjoyed? What was 'difficult'? By keeping my original hypothesis which assumed that some sponsors in some way face a dilemma, I was able to explore the nature of this dilemma by looking at the strategies employed by sponsors to resolve problems they encountered in their day to day work.

Methodology

Using a cut-off date of 28 July 1986, I asked all Wellington probation officers to approach the sponsor of every person sentenced to community service on and after this date, to ask whether the sponsor wished to become involved in the study.

The ten sponsors approached by probation staff, indicated that I could contact them to arrange an interview time in the two months following the presentation of the memorandum. The constraints of time meant that I was only able to draw ten consecutive sponsors to interview who were sponsoring individuals sentenced after 28 July 1986. Ideally the number of sponsors selected to be interviewed would have been guided by the principle of interviewing people until no significant new information appeared to be coming forward (Guba and Lincoln, 1985).

Interviews

All interviews were carried out between May and October 1986. All interviews were held in the workplace of the persons interviewed. I had drawn up a list of questions which I thought could be used as 'discussion starters' between myself and sponsors. These questions aimed to elicit informa-

tion about how long individuals had been sponsors on community service, how many people they had sponsored, and what work the placement offered to those undertaking the sentence. Broadly, sponsors were asked why they had originally decided to become sponsors, whether these expectations had been met, if they thought they were 'good' at being a sponsor, and how they thought they were doing this.

The Sponsors

What They Say They Like About What They Do

Previous research on Community Service Officers in New Zealand found that what was most liked by sponsors about the sentence was its flexibility - it is a sentence that could be used to keep people out of prison or in situations where people could not pay fines (Leibrich, et al, 1984). The Community Service sentence was also seen as being more 'positive' than other sentencing options. One of the main reasons why sponsors thought community service was more positive was that it provided an opportunity for them to 'help' those undertaking the sentence (Ibid).

In the context of the present study, there were several descriptions made by sponsors of their preference for the use of the community service sentence instead of other alternative sentences. These comments were often linked to the sponsor's explanations as to why people offend, and a disillusionment with the effectiveness of other sentencing options:

"We've got enough evidence that prison doesn't rehabilitate people and I don't think that periodic detention does that much for people. What does and how you help people to make change, and, if you take it a step further, I actually feel that people don't like where they are in terms of offending - they don't feel good about it. If they can feel better about themselves - that's going to make some change".

Facilitating 'change' was talked about by each of the eight sponsors interviewed. What sponsors saw as indicators of 'change' was often

described as some change in the worker. Indicators of whether change had taken place in the worker was thought of in the context of before and after descriptions of the offender's attitude, appearance, and/or life circumstances, such as employment, financial situation and housing. However, it was often difficult for sponsors to know whether, or how far, they could claim some responsibility for bringing about these 'changes'. Two comments illustrate this view:

"The idea of following something through - at least Robin got into employment and to my knowledge hasn't offended again. I don't think the community service affected his offending, but may have affected his employment. Maybe that's what helped him into employment".

"I think success for me is seeing that they don't reoffend. We've had one or two that have come back to us who have been sentenced again to community service. But it's good when you're in the mall or walking down the street, or someone rings you up and says "Hi, we haven't done a thing wrong since". You see, I don't just give them work. I give them counselling too. I don't know if I'm even supposed to."

The tendency for people on community service to continue to work at the sponsoring agency after their hours were completed was tied into many comments of what was 'good' about the job.

"You're sharing how you feel about what you're doing and there's been a few people who've come in who are really sort of aloof and people who we probably wouldn't ordinarily meet or get to know, and after a while they warmed up a bit and you think it's good. A number of people have actually come in past their time and done extra because they wanted to be here, and a couple of them have been employed part-time and they've just wanted to help - continuing aside from what they had to do. Knowing that they can help someone or something. We must have a good atmosphere here".

How sponsors offered help, and what kind of assistance they said they made available seemed to vary according to the sponsor's previous life experiences and per-

sonal style. Working alongside those sentenced was often discussed as a way of getting to know the person on community service. The kind of assistance sponsors felt they were able to offer once workers' needs were identified by them, ranged from individual counselling, to access to used furniture and clothing. The following three examples highlight how sponsors attempted to build a relationship with workers:

"With the men, I like working with them and they'll talk while they are working. Once you get alongside them - I try to make them a part of a team in whichever situations".

"I normally tell them a bit about myself, a testimony, and they'll start to open up and I can put into their lives at certain points. It's good when they come back and say: 'hey y'know what you said to me - I really appreciated that - I haven't offended since and I'm really trying.' I take that as a measure of success".

Sometimes, punishment did not seem compatible to some sponsors with their notion of 'helping', and other hopes they held for the sentence and themselves as sponsors. Reparative aims were emphasized in some instances:

"What I like to see is the person trying to see the other side and being able to associate with others as much as paying back to the community as they have robbed it of. I see it as a helping thing - not as a punishment."

The Work

Sometimes though, there were some tangible rewards to the job which were valued by sponsors. When sponsors were asked who would have done the work now being carried out if the person undertaking community service had not been available, a common reply was that a paid worker would have had to be employed. Employing an additional staff member would have been difficult, usually for financial/budgetary reasons. While the extra assistance provided by the person on community service was appreciated by the sponsors, there was a tendency for these sponsors

to feel they need to justify their motives for becoming a sponsor on community service.

'Hassles'

Non attendance of workers has been cited as a problem by the vast majority of sponsors in New Zealand (Leibrich et al, 1984). The amount of background information given to the sponsor about the person sentenced was also found to be an area of concern in the same research study.

In the context of this present study, sponsors who were early in their careers as sponsors, seemed to encounter more dilemmas when workers failed to turn up to the community service placement, while the more experienced sponsors developed 'known ways' of dealing with this particular behaviour. 'Hassles' to do with the person sponsored also were connected with the attitude and behaviour of the person being 'unacceptable' to the sponsor in other ways.

Discovering what sponsors experienced as 'hassles', often made explicit the unspoken expectations sponsors had of workers and of the probation service. The nature and amount of information that sponsors thought needed to be made available about workers by the service at the time when the placement was arranged seemed unclear. So to some sponsors 'hassles' involving the worker's behaviour could have been avoided. For others, it was part of the sponsor's job to deal with whatever 'hassles' came up.

The following comment illustrates the latter view:

"He was almost polite to the point of being obsequious - but not quite - like he'd call me 'sir' and 'Mr Smith', and you wondered whether you were being conned or whether he was that pleased to have the contact. I am still not sure which way it was."

Sometimes, though, sponsors saw 'hassles' arising from the amount of work within the agency to which they had already committed themselves. Being a sponsor on community service, seemed at times, an additional task with few

tangible rewards. As one sponsor commented:

"If you get loaded with too many (workers) it takes up a lot of your time. I can integrate it in my work... but where you've got say solo mothers on D.P.B.'s that have got community service they're not on the phone, you're always going to have to go there or write a letter to get them cracking, and if they've got children it's very difficult for them to get babysitters. Sometimes trying to organize one person on a job takes hours and hours and hours".

Many sponsors interviewed had implicit expectations about how workers perform in the work setting. For example, one sponsor mentioned that working with an agency for the intellectually handicapped required the person on community service to have the capacity to treat co-workers as 'normals'. Another sponsor gave the example of a number of workers at one agency finding that they were philosophically opposed to some of the work that was being carried out by the organisation. On a number of occasions workers on community service had seen animals being put down in the course of their duties at this animal protection agency and had asked for a transfer to be made to another placement in those instances.

One 'hassle' that was generally not tolerated by sponsors was 'dishonesty' or 'being conned' by workers. Knowing how to deal with this kind of behaviour seemed a 'hassle' for some sponsors. However, sponsors were more likely to sort out the problem themselves rather than see the probation service as needing to be involved in the first instance.

Conclusion

This study suggests that there is a lack of consensus among sponsors as to who is eligible to undertake community service. There is some evidence that sponsors believe that community service is used for minor or lesser offences where imprisonment would not usually be considered. This view is in contrast to the District Probation Officer's aim that community ser-

vice be used where imprisonment may be the alternative sentence.

Whether, and how much detail regarding the biography of the person sentenced should be provided by the probation service seemed unclear to the sponsors interviewed. I noted a reluctance in sponsors to request information on the worker before agreeing to offer a community service placement, yet in some situations it was of assistance to sponsors to have some background of workers, before the placement began.

While it is acknowledged that some flexibility needs to be retained by probation staff regarding how much personal data of workers is given to sponsoring groups before service begins, some guidelines could be helpful for probation staff clients and sponsors, as to what detail needs to be given to sponsors before the placement begins.

Recommendations

This exploratory study suggests that sponsors who are new to the job find it less easy in the first few months of service to find a balance between aspects of the job they find positive and other aspects which add less to their notions of themselves as 'good' sponsors.

1.1. Sponsor contact with the probation staff at the beginning of the placement should be encouraged so that any difficulties that are encountered early in the placement are recognised and talked openly about as soon as they arise.

1.2. Contact among sponsors should be initiated by the local community service supervisor, to promote support for new sponsors and to encourage more experienced sponsors to share their own 'known ways' of working.

1.3. Visits to community service placements by the person sentenced and his/her probation officer should be routinely arranged so that probation staff can facilitate discussion between sponsor and prospective worker about the work offered, and expectations of sponsor and worker to one another, before service begins.

1.4. Education about the aims set for community service program-

mes and the orientation of Criminal Justice Act 1985 needs to be initiated. If individuals agree to become involved as sponsors, it is important that they are aware of the philosophy behind current moves to provide deinstitutionalized care for those sentenced.

1.5. To ensure that the community service programme retains its position in the tariff system, and its credibility as an alternative to imprisonment, some system of monitoring placements needs to be established. Not only would regular monitoring of placements by the probation service ensure that hours

of service were being completed satisfactorily and recorded, but this would also ensure that any difficulties arising early in the placement could be explored. Secondly, monitoring would be useful to avoid overburdening the resources of any one sponsoring agency.

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