

Operation Spotlight: The Community Probation-Community Police Team Process

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Introduction

CONSIDER THE following scenario played out daily in a community in a town or city like yours:

Who's Talking to Whom in Dismal Swamp?

In a poor section of your city there is a small but well-populated community known as Dismal Swamp. Three thousand citizens live and work in Dismal Swamp. One hundred and twenty offenders who are currently on probation or parole supervision reside and do crime in the Dismal Swamp area. Open drug sales, litter, vacant lots, and vacant row houses (often used for crack or stash houses) are commonplace. The parks are empty. Most residents do not move about freely. Drug dealers control many street corners. At night the churches and schools are closed and quiet.

Thirty-seven youthful offenders are on juvenile probation or on release from state institutions with five different juvenile probation officers covering Dismal Swamp.

Dismal Swamp has 62 adult offenders on probation or parole who are supervised by six different state probation officers.

Twenty-one persons in Dismal Swamp are on federal probation, parole, or supervised release, assigned to four different federal probation officers.

Two city community police officers are assigned to the Dismal Swamp community. The two city community police officers share information with each other occasionally.

Now consider this:

The five juvenile probation officers do not routinely discuss their cases with each other or with the state probation officers, with the federal probation officers, or even with the two city community police officers, and certainly not with the local citizens.

The six state probation officers do not routinely discuss their cases with each other, with the juvenile probation officers, or with the federal probation officers, or with the two city community police officers, and certainly not with the local citizens.

The four federal probation officers do not routinely discuss their cases with each other, with the juvenile probation officers, with the state probation officers, with the two city community police officers, and certainly not with the local citizens.

The two city community police officers do not routinely discuss crime matters or information about at-risk offenders in Dismal Swamp with each other, with the juvenile probation officers, with the state probation officers, with the federal probation officers, and certainly not with the local citizens.

And the 3,000 citizens know very little about the at-risk offenders in Dismal Swamp and certainly are not included in discussions with any of the probation officers or the community police officers.

But many of the 120 offenders in Dismal Swamp are interacting and sharing information every day!

There is something very wrong with this picture. It is against this backdrop that the authors created the Community Probation-Community Police Team (CP-CPT) process.

The Factors That Keep Agencies Apart

Combinations of factors, by practice, separate the work of law enforcement and correctional agencies and do not serve the safety of the community well. Some of the practices are:

- Probation and police agencies do not regularly share information about at-risk juvenile and adult offenders in the community because historically an "information wall" was erected to "protect" offenders from (potential) police harassment. This information wall must come down for the safety and protection of citizens.
- Probation and parole systems have emphasized punishment programs in spite of the research that reveals that programs that emphasize punishment have no positive effect on reducing recidivism. Yet, the literature is clear that rehabilitation programs that address the criminogenic needs of offenders can have a significant impact on reducing new criminal conduct.
- Probation officers often adopt a style of interaction with offenders, learned on the job, that closes down the possibility of meaningful dialogue. Generally

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speaking, this is a nagging or disapproving style that does not work well with offenders who are prone to antisocial attitudes. A good deal has been written lately about new communication styles for probation and police officers alike when addressing citizens (and at-risk offenders) that increase the opportunity to develop a mutually respectful (and thereby useful) relationship.

- Unlike businesses, probation and police agencies often put more emphasis on growing than on being more efficient. This could be considered a “more is better” organizational upsizing strategy. It is perhaps wiser and certainly more cost efficient for both agencies to adopt a utilitarian approach to community safety; that is, to focus on the at-risk offender with a history of criminal conduct rather than trying to gain more staff to expand ineffective approaches.
- Too few tangible organizational techniques exist to positively reinforce probation officers with regard to case outcome. The probation officer with the greatest skills at helping offenders live lawfully is not *encouraged* any more than the probation officer with a tail ‘em, nail ‘em, jail ‘em approach (and the most revocations in the agency) is *discouraged* from such practices. Probation agencies need more tools to reinforce officers who help offenders succeed on supervision.
- The vast majority of offenders returned to prison are for technical violations of the conditions of their release—not for serious new criminal conduct. According to the California Blue Ribbon Commission on Inmate Population Management, in January 1990 the State of California discovered that 47 percent of its new entries into prison (34,000+) were *technical violations of the conditions of community supervision, i.e., without new criminal conduct*. Practitioners are aware that the primary reason for these technical violations is substance abuse, aggravated by a lack of treatment resources. Probation and police agencies must find creative ways to break the revolving-door syndrome.

A More Difficult Offender on Supervision?

Many practitioners today believe that young adult offenders are returning from relatively long prison sentences with increasingly serious problems. A small but hardcore portion returns with such exaggerated antisocial attitudes (and joins the company of like-minded antisocial associates) that no intervention short of removal from the community appears viable. Even well-intended at-risk offenders can be expected to face serious adjustment problems. By their nature and experience, they tend to resolve their feelings of anger, rejection, and interpersonal conflicts poorly. Unresolved problems, coupled with impulsivity, quickly can lead to

a downward spiral that is exacerbated by alcohol or drug abuse. To have a chance with the at-risk offender, community supervision must be vigilant and in “real time.” At no fault of the officers, because of high case-loads and inadequate resources, supervision interventions often are neither vigilant nor in close proximity to the behavior of the offender. As a result, officers often feel like “retrospective monitors of failure.”

Community supervision policies and practices for at-risk offenders must be retooled. In short, probation systems must do what they say they can do—deliver safe, effective supervision of offenders in the community. But the task of changing self-defeating behavior of offenders is and always has been too large and complex for probation and police systems to manage successfully alone. The retooling of community correctional systems requires new partnerships between probation and police officers, private investors, universities, senior citizens, social services, mental health treatment services, schools, community organizations, and religious organizations.

Where will the resources come from? Refreshingly, the authors do not advocate the more-is-better approach to a retooling effort. While *more* resources must be targeted for at-risk offenders, *fewer* resources should be allocated to offenders with moderate and low risk of recidivism. Lower risk offenders should be removed from supervision quickly so that they do not absorb large portions of finite resources. Yet, probation officers’ unnecessary administrative attention to lower risk offenders is in part a consequence of the courts’ excessive use of multiple special punishment conditions. Punishing low risk offenders with multiple conditions spreads probation supervision too thinly. A 1987 Federal Judicial Center study, *Community Supervision of Federal Offenders*, conducted on the supervision of 650 federal offenders, revealed that administrative time given to low risk offenders in the sample matched the attention given to the most dangerous offenders on supervision. This is sometimes referred to as the “leveling phenomenon” or the “Big Mac” approach, i.e., everyone gets the same meal (or attention). The results of this topsyturvy distribution of officers’ time and attention can be quite dangerous when viewed from the impact on the community. In a survey conducted by the National Center on Institutions and Alternatives in September 1997 for the kick-off the “HotSpots” community initiative in Maryland, over 100 probation officers reported that they saw at-risk offenders face to face less than five times *per year*. They were not proud of this lack of meaningful contact. How, then, can probation and police agencies retool their practices to focus on the behavior of at-risk offenders already in the community?

The Community Probation-Community Police Team Process

In 1995, the authors developed the Community Probation-Community Police Team (CP-CPT) process, *Operation Spotlight*. The National Center on Institutions and Alternatives (NCIA) had become increasingly concerned that throughout the country, community corrections systems had lost the confidence of the public with regard to the ability of probation systems to supervise effectively the offenders already in the community. NCIA believed that until community corrections agencies can prevent large-scale new criminal behavior by at-risk offenders, prisons will remain the punishment of choice, even for relatively minor offenses. The authors started with the belief that trendy new programs-du-jour will not substitute for redesigning the process by which probation, police, and citizens work together toward a common vision to help offenders who are motivated to live a law-abiding lifestyle. Conversely, the authors believe that the current level of new criminal conduct by at-risk offenders is a very serious problem that demands a more effective approach.

Goals of the Process

The CP-CPT process, or *Operation Spotlight*, focuses investigative and supervision services of police and probation systems on the at-risk offenders already in the community. Through extensive formal training, technical assistance, and an information system, NCIA established the following goals for *Operation Spotlight*:

- To create a process that facilitates the exchange of information between probation and police officers regarding the behavior of at-risk offenders in the community;
- To provide a mechanism that engages local citizens and the resources in the community in the problem-solving process;
- To provide probation and police officers with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to help offenders develop prosocial attitudes and associates; and
- To increase the safety of officers and citizens.

How the Process Works

Probation and police officers voluntarily commit to work on a team for at least 1 year. The officers attend two 1-week training sessions. Week one focuses primarily on the development of a high-performance team. After the officers have several months' experience working together, week two is directed toward working effectively with at-risk offenders and their families and developing partnerships with local citizens.

Since studies have shown that 50 percent of crime is committed from 3 percent of residences, the teams are

located in the communities where the offenders live and where crime is committed. Most importantly, *Operation Spotlight* probation officers have caseloads that are limited in size and comprised exclusively of at-risk offenders. The offender participants receive intensive supervision from probation officers on the team, which is complemented by field observations from police teammates. Probation officers supply the police team members significant "static" background information about the offenders "in the pool," including the following: name, address, phone number, photograph, offense, conditions of release, prior record (including firearms, substance abuse, acts of violence), past co-defendants, known hangouts, and automobile tag numbers. This static information improves the quality of field observations and provides a background for the police to get to know the offenders. Additionally, police officer safety is significantly improved: no longer will a police officer blindly respond to a domestic disturbance at the residence of an at-risk offender who has a history of firearms possession or assault on police officers.

Certain types of "dynamic" information are not shared, such as treatment providers or results of urinalysis. Obviously, community-based police officers' field observations help the probation officers' supervision efforts by "grounding" case decision-making in the light of an exponentially greater degree of information. Instead of being limited to how offenders appear and what they may say at a report-day ritual, the probation officer receives information about the actual behavior of the offender in the community from the perspective of the police and through neighborhood complaints.

Citizens are called upon and reinforced to report to the team activities that may be illegal. The team's job is to investigate the complaints swiftly. For example, if a citizen alleges that drugs are being sold on a certain corner and, upon investigation, drug distribution is confirmed and it turns out that none of the persons involved are on supervision by team probation officers, the matter remains a police concern. However, if some of the participants are on supervision, the matter becomes a team concern as well and swift interventions are initiated. Most importantly, the results of the team's action are reported back to the citizen, who then is encouraged to provide future reports of "alleged" criminal activities. The goal is to have citizens know the team members and trust that the team will take action.

Operation Spotlight teams spend a great deal of time finding a wide range of treatment opportunities, tailored support systems or mentors, and an array of community resources for offenders who are motivated to live a prosocial lifestyle. This is consistent with the team's "tone" toward offenders and citizens: firm, factual, and friendly. Notwithstanding this tone, teams are taught to verify everything. Community probation officers are taught to aggressively answer the question

“How do you know?” For example, how do you know an offender works where he says he works, lives where she says she lives, or stays away from known drug distribution corners? Much of this verification must come from aggressive field investigation work.

Because of the sophistication of the intensive supervision practices of *Operation Spotlight* teams, the teams discover offender conduct that could technically violate the conditions of release. *Operation Spotlight* teams learn to recommend incarceration as a remedy for technical violations only for new, serious offenses or if an untenable threat exists to the public safety. Absent these two events, *Operation Spotlight* teams address technical violations of conditions (such as drug use) with increasingly restrictive local sanctions.

Training for Officers

The authors cannot overstate that *Operation Spotlight* is not a program—it is a refined process. Formal training in this new paradigm is an essential ingredient to success. *Operation Spotlight* is revolutionary by the degree and frequency of officers’ actions and by the range of sources of help. The immediate benefits—law enforcement agencies’ sharing of information about at-risk offenders in the community, increased officer safety through increased knowledge about offenders, and increased involvement of citizens and resources in the local communities—are all appealing by common sense. Still, the underlying tenets of *Operation Spotlight* go well beyond common sense. The knowledge, skills, and attitudes on which participating officers are trained are drawn from contemporary correctional literature, organizational development and change theory, high-performance team-building theory and practices, structured family therapy, transactional analysis, cognitive treatment behavior, contemporary field safety practices, and streamlined due process and administrative procedures.

Experience has shown that it is imperative that key decision-makers, supervisors, and managers receive a modified version of the training *before their participating officers receive training* so that managers are well informed as to the skills and techniques required. This approach facilitates the support of managers. Formal training is supported by select readings, videotapes, and electronically shared “best practices.”

Weekly Team Meetings

Operation Spotlight officers meet weekly at a regular time and place in the designated community for approximately 3 hours and follow a structured meeting format developed by NCIA. The purpose of the standing *Operation Spotlight* meeting is to accomplish the following:

- To conduct a case staffing on each offender in the “pool” and review strategies for effective interventions;

- To gain new skills and methods to intervene effectively with at-risk offenders;
- To gain knowledge of existing community resources; and
- To develop techniques for gaining support from citizens.

Officers decide when joint home inspections, visits with family members, or curfew checks enhance the quality of supervision. The value of this approach has been displayed well in Boston’s “Nightlight” project.

As part of the weekly team meeting, local citizens, leaders, or key staff from community resources give presentations to the teams. The purpose of these presentations is for *Operation Spotlight* teams to gain a thorough understanding of the services each agency or organizations offers, the intake process, logistical information, relevant procedures, rules, requirements, necessary paperwork, and contact persons. On-site visits and inspections by *Operation Spotlight* team members follow the organization’s presentation. NCIA maintains that individuals within organizations will work hard for each other (and therefore offenders) if the individuals involved know of each other’s work and share mutual respect.

Team members also prepare and give formal and information presentations on the goals and practices of *Operation Spotlight* to elicit the support of and provide information to community groups and organizations such as homeowners associations, insurance groups, civic associations, religious groups, schools, legislators, and the media. In short, they become a part of the fabric of the community by their visibility and participation in community functions. Volunteers are sought to help support *Operation Spotlight* and to assist offenders under conditions supervised by team members.

Operation Spotlight Information System (OSIS)

NCIA has developed a software package to serve the needs of the *Operation Spotlight* team members and their agencies. Each *Operation Spotlight* team is provided a personal computer equipped with a modem and printer and a high capacity diskette drive for data backup. The objectives of OSIS are: sharing information; tracking and recalling contacts with the offender; distributing training materials, resource lists, case studies, and other materials; gathering and consolidating statistics; and exchanging information with other criminal justice information systems.

Benefits to Participants

The following are some of the ways *Operation Spotlight* benefits various players in the criminal justice process:

- *Benefits to Police Agencies.* By receiving information on at-risk offenders—such as criminal records, his-

tory of violence, domestic abuse, child abuse, firearms use or possession, residence, phone numbers, employment, and conditions of release—police agencies improve intelligence about local crime and enhance officer safety. Additionally, citizens begin to see police officers as responsive and personally invested in their safety.

- *Benefits to Citizens.* Perhaps more than anything, citizens want immediate response and feedback from community probation officers and community police officers regarding their complaints about antisocial behavior of offenders on supervision. From our experience, citizens appear to trust community probation officers and community police officers to the degree they are visible, are fair and equitable, and are concerned about creating a safe community.
- *Benefits to Probation Agencies.* Probation agencies gain valuable information from field observations and investigations by community police officers on offenders who currently are engaged in criminal conduct. Knowing which offenders are engaged in antisocial activities and which ones are not is the essence of risk control with at-risk offenders. By becoming community oriented, agencies earn the respect and support of citizens. That support, in turn, brings a wealth of heretofore unknown resources to help resolve the many problems at-risk offenders present.
- *Benefits to Offenders.* Offenders who have had difficulty living within the laws of society are given clear expectations and legitimate opportunities in the form of treatment, vocational services, guidance, and support—all targeted to help them become productive members of the community. *Operation Spotlight* teams actually want offenders to “make it.”

Implementation of the Process in Maryland

Under the direction of Governor Parris N. Glendening and Lieutenant Governor Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, chair of the Cabinet Council on Criminal and Juvenile Justice, on March 18, 1997, the State of Maryland kicked off a 3-year, \$10.5 million crime reduction effort known as the Maryland “HotSpots” communities initiative. The HotSpots effort identifies high crime areas and seeks to systematically help neighborhoods reduce crime with new partnerships between federal, state, local, and county agencies working together to “reclaim their streets from crime, violence, drugs, and fear.”

The HotSpots initiative was patterned after an earlier 3-year demonstration project in Baltimore, Maryland, known as the Comprehensive Communities Program (CCP). The CCP, a concept advanced by Lieutenant Governor Townsend when she served at the Department of Justice, demonstrated the benefits of

communities joining together to overcome the forces of street crime. Significant reductions of crime rates in the targeted areas were demonstrated. Noticeably absent from this effort was the participation of probation agencies. In fact, one well-known community police officer who had worked in a CCP area for several years stated that he had never met or seen a probation officer in the community.

Utilizing \$3.5 million annually from an array of state and federal grant sources, the HotSpots initiative focuses on the following components: Community Probation-Community Police Teams (*Operation Spotlight*), Community Mobilization, Community Maintenance, Youth Prevention, Community Prosecution, Youth Delinquency Prevention, Crime Prevention Through Design, Victim Outreach and Assistance, Community Support for Addiction Recovery, and Housing and Business Revitalization.

NCIA was given the responsibility to plan the implementation of its Community Probation-Community Police Team process, *Operation Spotlight*, between diverse organizations—Maryland State Police, Baltimore City Police, county police from 22 counties, numerous sheriff’s departments, juvenile justice, adult parole and probation, and federal probation. Today, 36 teams are in place in 22 counties and Baltimore City. Governor Glendening recently announced his intention to expand the sites from 36 to over 100 in the near future.

The CP-CPT process has been widely heralded in the print and electronic media and has received glowing reviews by participating officers. Many officers have commented that for the first time in their careers, the process has allowed them to actualize the goals that brought them to their professions—to *make a difference in the lives of others*.

Summary

The authors have collectively over 50 years’ experience designing creative offender supervision programs and developing community alternatives to incarceration. They assert that by changing the process by which probation and police agencies address the problems presented by at-risk offenders, communities can show marked improvement in reducing crime.

The CP-CPT process is founded upon what the research literature reveals to be the essential ingredients for what works well: extensive and comprehensive training; the use of “real-time” interventions; comprehensive treatment services for substance abuse and mental health problems; the active pursuit and use of prosocial forces such as family, friends, churches, mentors, and community organizations; a reliance on interventions that follow the principles of structured family therapy, transactional analysis, and cognitive treatment behavior; structured weekly team meetings; teamwork that relies on interactions with offenders

that are firm, factual, and friendly; and the use of graduated sanctions, where possible.

Already in the first year of operation in Maryland's HotSpots communities it is clear that enthusiastic officers are active in the community, exchanging unprecedented information about at-risk offenders and offering assistance to offenders that has no comparison with previous community corrections supervision practices. While formal longitudinal outcome studies are forthcoming from the University of Maryland and others, an anecdotal comment by a participating probation officer is now telling: "This process (CP-CPT) is really a mind-set. . . . I simply see my offenders differently now!" As this process unfolds and evolves, participants have yet to report a downside.

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