


**14TH UNITED NATIONS CONGRESS  
ON CRIME PREVENTION AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE**  
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**Frank J. Porporino Ph.D.**

**Keynote Presentation**

**World Congress for Community Volunteers  
Supporting Offender Reintegration**

**Kyoto, 7 March 2021**



A Future for  
Volunteers in  
Probation Practice

## Why Recognize Volunteers?

- **Historically, volunteers originated the notion of community-based support and supervision for offenders**
  - In the US, 1841 ... John Augustus; Father of probation
  - In the UK, 1887 ... Police Court Missionaries
- **A driving force for reform of our institutionally developed approaches for dealing with offending**
- **Have stood steady in keeping the original spirit of understanding and support for offenders alive and well**
- **But their contribution has not been recognized typically as either essential or as evidence-based**

**Belief that the wayward could be assisted**

**“through understanding, kindness, and sustained moral suasion”**

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## Probation Practice ... Limits and Constraints

## In the Western World

- **Efforts to Transform Probations Staff into 'Agents of Change' ... have struggled to show clear impact**
  - STICS; EPICS; STARR; Citizenship; PGI ...etc.
- **What Happens ... when we try to structure Probation Practice?**
  - Some staff are able to learn new skills, others not so much;
  - Level of commitment varies considerably;
  - Some change in key 'relational' skills ... but doesn't last
  - Not much improvement in 'therapeutic alliance'
  - When facing resistance ... easily revert to surveillance/control
- **Most recent evaluation studies have shown little impact on re-offending ... especially when 'going to scale'**
  - E.G., Krimstics, Sweden

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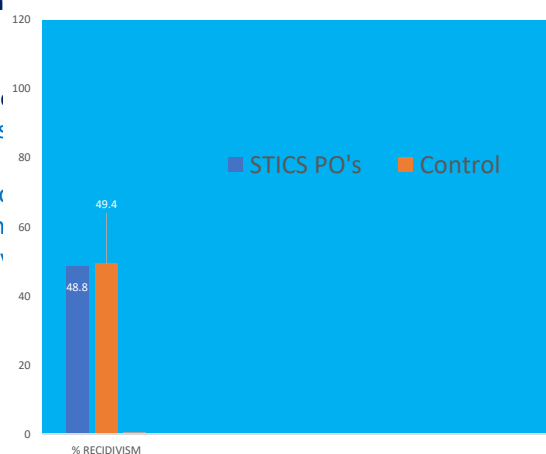


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KRIMSTICS Evaluation 24 Month Follow-Up



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## Probation Practice ... in the Real World

- 'Mass Probation' ... unmanageable caseloads
- The new 'managerialism' ... focus on documenting vs. relating
- Can we expect mastery of an array of 'core correctional skills' that have to be applied judiciously and consistently?
- We may be demanding too much of PO's in the real world context
- And besides ... steering offenders towards desistance requires more than a focus on 'personal change'

## Probation Practice ... in the Real World

A core message of the desistance paradigm is that there is more than one type of 'rehabilitation' ... not just the personal but the:

- **Social** ... about acceptance, belonging and new opportunities
- **Legal** ... eliminating the stigmatizing and exclusionary effects of conviction
- **Moral** ... reparation and earning redemption as a citizen of good character

Volunteers can serve as impartial 'role models' ... catalysts and reinforcers for this identity change to emerge and strengthen

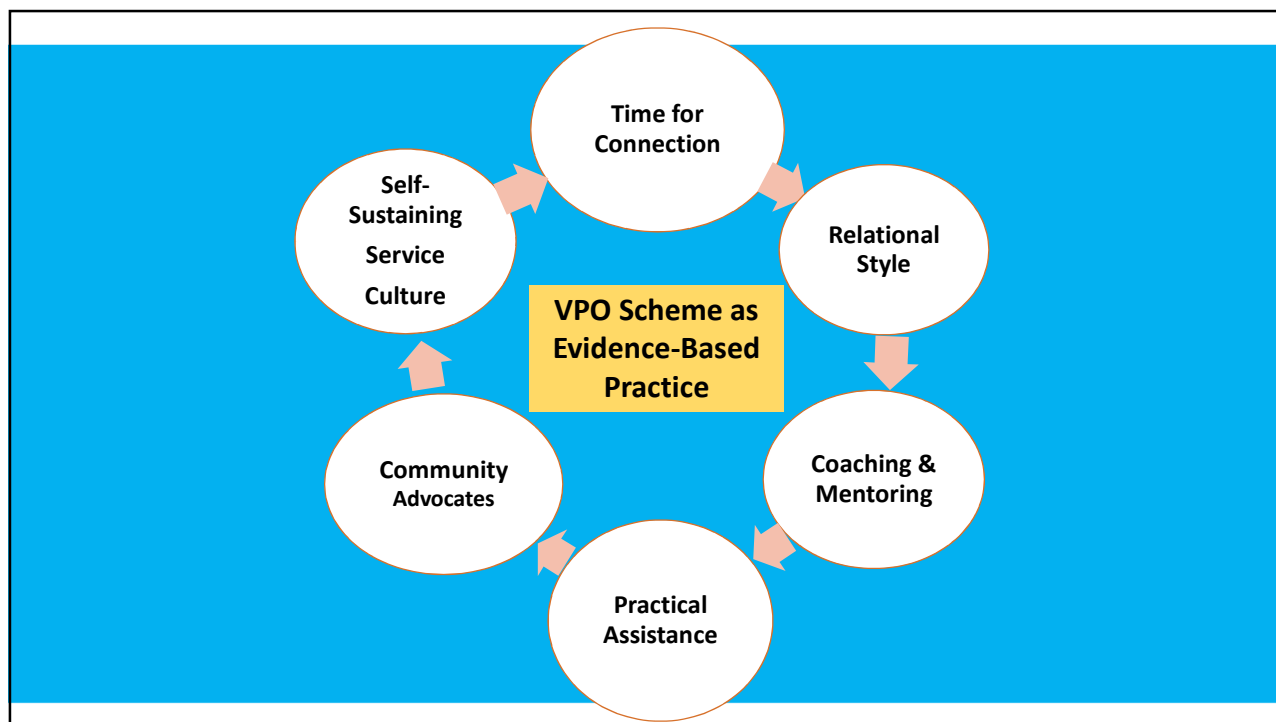
**Change In Identity**

**A slow and evolving process we can't rush or force!**

## A Core Role for Volunteers in Probation Practice

## Can Volunteers Do What Probation Practice Strives To Do?

- Poorly coordinated, add-on Volunteer Schemes that are too short-term & under-resourced tend to make little difference
- But the VPO Model in Japan ... serves as the 'backbone' for community support
- Capitalizes on the energy, dedication and creativity of a mini-army of volunteers
- Human spirit of wanting to 'give back'
- My exposure to VPOs in Japan led me to reflect on what may be the key elements for success?



## Time for Connection

**Benefit of only a few clients to deal with at a time**

**VPOs are at a satisfied and relatively relaxed stage of their life ...**

**Time to listen to offenders ... get to know them before beginning to give advice or counsel**

**Motivational engagement attended to flexibly**

**At a 'time' and 'place' convenient to the individual offender ...**

## Time for Connection

**Not forced engagement but a naturally evoked relationship between two people, with different sets of experiences and backgrounds, where each can learn from the other**

**Time allows trust to develop and trust becomes the fuel that powers pro-social influence**

**Offenders may experience a genuine and caring other, perhaps for the first time in their lives**

**VPOs in turn receive an uplifting sense of having had a positive influence on another ... an uplift that may also infect the offenders they work with!**

## Relational Style

Blending of a particular relational style emerges as key in most ethnographic studies of probation practice

Five dimensions (Lewis, 2016) ... Acceptance, Respect, Support, Empathy and Belief

Offenders need to be heard with respectful and genuine interest

The VPOs I met in Japan, perhaps in part because of their maturity and range of life experience, seemed to me to exude a calm and responsive relational style, effortlessly and naturally

Genuinely credible 'message givers'

Able to create safety and encourage self-disclosure of meaningful and sensitive information

## Coaching and Mentoring

**Coach** = task or performance focused and present-oriented; helps you cope with the challenges you are facing in the present

**Mentor** = person focused and future oriented ; cares about you, your future and your long-term development

**Mentor** is able to 'listen and understood me'; 'build my confidence' while providing advice, sharing knowledge and experiences, and gently teaching to encourage self-discovery

**Coach** can be more directive in pointing someone to some desired end result

## Coaching and Mentoring

Offenders need coaching to deal with issues in the short-term that can create 'clear and present danger' ...

But they also require mentoring over the longer haul since desistance is reinforced by the positive qualities of sustaining hope, maintaining a strong sense of self-efficacy, and re-defining one's identity

The offender has to achieve at least some of their personal aspirations, both for new meaning and for gaining pro-social legitimacy

VPOs I met were clearly attuned to this dual role of Coach and Mentor ... able to easily oscillate from one role to the other

## Providing Practical Assistance

Good probation practice requires attention to timely, concrete and meaningful practical assistance

VPO's are well positioned to offer this ...

Desistance is fueled by a sense of 'agency' ... personally surmounting ones obstacles or concerns ... which then fuels further resolve

Probation Practice tends to 'lead' with standard solutions ... rather than offering contextualised and individualized options

VPO's are able to use their contacts, connections, and influence in the community to give the right support, at the right time in the right way

VPO's as 'practical helpers' perhaps one of their most important roles

## Community Engagers & Advocates

Community involvement is essential for full reintegration ... yet communities often reject and stigmatize offenders ... wishing to keep them apart rather than to become a part of the community

More correctional services advocate ... more communities tend to push back

As respected community citizens & leaders ... with status and connectedness in their communities ... VPO's can counter these sentiments and promote 'joint responsibility'

VPO's have entrenched themselves as local ambassadors, reaching out to the community in a myriad of ways ...

Momentum as ambassadors for a community-responsive reintegration philosophy ... locally and nationally

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## Self-Sustaining Service Culture

Probation services often struggle in establishing and then sustaining a culture of committed service to clients; staff recruitment is an ongoing challenge

Significant informal function of VPO's in Japan is to recruit other VPOs ...

VPO system effectively becomes self-sustaining ...

VPO's remain recognized, both locally and nationally, as members of a dynamic National Association of VPO's

With the full support of the much fewer Professional Probation staff, the continued networking of VPOs themselves becomes the glue keeping the VPO scheme sustainable into the future

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## CONCLUSION

Can Volunteers Do What  
Probation Practice Strives To Do?

- In the last few years, the offender-focused approach that developed so naturally with the tradition of the VPO scheme has been challenged as perhaps 'too soft'
- Difficulties in recruitment of new VPOs owing to the urbanization of Japanese society, the fracturing of community relations, and growing financial hardship among the elderly
- Japanese society is changing and the VPO scheme will have to adapt and adjust to those changes

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## CONCLUSION

But the VPO model in Japan has been embedded as an innovative and evidence-based component of community corrections that should be **applauded and emulated as much as possible ... EVERYWHERE!**



**Criminal justice practice should not be seen as either soft or hard ...**

**It is either smart, evidence-informed and community responsive ... or NOT.**

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**THANK  
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## **A Future for Volunteers in Probation Practice**

### **Introduction**

In this short article I want to develop a core argument ... that we should recognize not just the **value** but the **evidence-base** for a well-organized Volunteer Scheme that is fully integrated with **Professional Probation Practice** and not just loosely appended as a 'nice-to-do-if-we-can' approach. Of course, I will use the template of the Volunteer Probation Officer (VPO) scheme in Japan as an example which I believe shows us the way.

So here is my argument ... which is based at least in part on my personal exposure to the Japanese VPO scheme over the last number of years.

Community-based support for individuals who have fallen into criminal conduct was essentially originated by volunteers. In America, for example, John Augustus, a Massachusetts boot-maker by trade, is credited with being the '*Father of Probation*'. Augustus believed that abusers of alcohol, and other unfortunates, could be rehabilitated 'through understanding, kindness, and sustained moral suasion'. In 1841, Augustus attended a police court hearing to bail out a 'common drunkard'. The offender became the first probationer. He was ordered to appear in court three weeks later for sentencing. He returned to court a sober man, accompanied by Augustus, and to the astonishment of the judge and all in attendance.

In the UK, the notion of Police Court Missionaries was created under the Probation of First Offenders Act of 1887 enabling magistrates to refer offenders to a volunteer who would try ‘by personal influence, with material help, if necessary, to persuade those who had found their way into the dock to lead a sober and steady life in the future’.<sup>1</sup>

Volunteers have made a long-standing and significant contribution in reforming our institutionally developed approaches for dealing with offending, whether prisons or community supervision practices. Importantly, volunteers have also stood steady in keeping the original spirit of understanding and support for offenders alive and well. In many respects, volunteers have always implored corrections to do more, and to do better in treating offenders with decency and humanity. Perhaps surprisingly, however, the contribution of volunteers has not been recognized typically as either essential or as evidence-based. It has been seen, and continues to be seen, more as a ‘nice to do’ adjunct to professional correctional practice rather than as a central requirement for having true impact. I want to challenge that view in this presentation and argue that what *Professional Probation Practice struggles to do, Volunteers may be able to do – and indeed able to do well!*

### **Probation Practice Can Make a Difference ... But There Are Limits and Constraints**

Probation practice has struggled to show any clear or consistent impact on re-offending. One explanation arising out of the predominant RNR paradigm has been to argue that probation staff don’t always work effectively as ‘agents of change’. Numerous efforts have been made over the last several decades to structure and focus probation practice more deliberately towards targeting what are commonly referred to as ‘criminogenic needs’ ... for example, challenging anti-social attitudes or relying on various CBT techniques to improve offender problem-solving, self-management skills ... etc. Notable among these RNR-based training initiatives are the Strategic Training Initiative in Community Supervision (STICS) developed in Canada (Bonta et al., 2010; 2011; Bourgon et al., 2010), the Effective Practices in Community Supervision (EPICS) developed by the University of Cincinnati (Smith et al., 2012), the Strategies Aimed at Reducing Re-arrest (STARR) developed by the U.S. Federal Probation and Pretrial Services (Robinson et al., 2011), the Citizenship program developed in the United Kingdom (Pearson et al., 2011,) and the Practice Guide for Intervention (PGI) developed by Corrective Services New South Wales (Howard et al., 2019). All of these initiatives have aimed to strengthen probation officers’ skills to more effectively interact with clients in adherence to RNR principles. Major effort has been made to properly design, implement and evaluate these quite intensive approaches to re-direct probation practice. And so, in the end, what have we learned from these efforts?

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<sup>1</sup> British Social Work in the Nineteenth Century. By A. F. Young and E. T. Ashton. New York: The Humanities Press, Inc., 1956.

As might be expected, there is considerable variation in how well probation staff can learn new skills or become committed to applying them. It's clear that some change in how staff relate with offenders begins to be observed, but unfortunately it doesn't always last (there is drift back to preferred ways). Though supervision sessions become more structured, there continues to be only limited attention paid to establishing any kind of initial or lasting therapeutic alliance with clients. Despite training that points probation staff clearly to intervene more particularly with higher-risk clients, when encountering resistance, intervention with these offenders is often abandoned in favor of a surveillance/control mode of supervision. Perhaps most strikingly, however, is the fact that despite numerous evaluation studies, evidence for any serious impact in reducing re-offending has been sparse, especially when attempts are made in 'going to scale' in an entire jurisdiction.

In a recent attempt to replicate their initial efficacy evaluation, Bonta et al. (2019) failed to find differences in recidivism rates as a result of STICS training. And a major replication of STICS in Sweden, referred to as Krimstics, pilot tested and subsequently implemented nation-wide with more than 700 probation officers over a 4-year period (2014–2017), was shown in a recent pilot evaluation (Starfelt-Sutton et al., 2020) as having no measurable impact on reoffending (with reoffending of 48.8% for the experimental group and 49.4% for clients supervised by probation staff in the control group).

Probation staff are typically resistant to imposed change in practice (Viglione, 2019; Viglione & Blasko, 2018)). Implementation is difficult and usually strains organizational capacity to monitor, support and correct. Of course, a host of other real-world factors limit and constrain to what extent probation staff can become primary 'agents of change' in community corrections. The run-away train towards 'mass probation' has created unmanageable caseloads in most jurisdictions around the world (McNeill & Beyens, 2013; Porporino, 2018), where supervision often becomes a matter of simply requiring a periodic 'check-in', increasingly not even in person but through a mobile app or at a kiosk. The growing managerial emphasis on efficiency and accountability has steadily forced probation staff, quite grudgingly, to emphasize process and paperwork, spending their time more on recording and documenting rather than relating and intervening (Norman & Ricciardelli, 2021). Welcoming probation staff to participate in co-designing incremental change in practice may be more successful (O'Connor et al., 2018), but a fundamental question that remains is whether there are limits to how much probation practice, on its own, can contribute to reducing re-offending. The demands we make on our professional probation services to steer offenders towards desistance are considerable. These staff have to possess and/or master an array of personal qualities and skills, and then learn to apply them judiciously and effortlessly.

- They have to be able to clarify and get offenders to accept the duality of their role (to both support and enforce compliance to supervision);
- Serve as strong pro-social models and learn to consistently reinforce the emergence of pro-social thinking and behaving;

- Learn to apply a variety of CBT techniques to teach problem-solving, decision-making and ways of challenging maladaptive thinking and beliefs;
- And they have to do all of this within a respectful and empathic ‘relational’ style that shows sensitivity and understanding but while negotiating *active* participation, offering encouragement that is perceived as genuine, and steadily promoting self-determination and change in the offender’s self-identity.

We may need to accept that while some probation staff can rise to this mastery, others may remain competent in what they do but not able do it masterfully. Added to this reality is the fact that true rehabilitation and reintegration requires more than just a focus on the ‘personal’ change in offenders that may or may not be realized.

The core message of the desistance paradigm, expressed most ably by Professor Fergus McNeil, highlights four distinct types of ‘rehabilitation’ – not just the personal – but the social, legal and moral dimensions that have to work in the same direction (McNeill, 2006; 2012). The social dimension is about acceptance, belonging and access to opportunities in one’s community. Without enhancing the community’s ability to assimilate (and support) offenders towards reintegration – perhaps no real rehabilitation is possible – no matter what we can do with probation supervision. The legal dimension requires that we aim to eliminate the stigmatizing and exclusionary effects of conviction. And the moral dimension speaks to the need for reparation in earning some form of redemption as a citizen of good character. In many respects, I believe volunteers are better placed to help offenders realize these other forms of ‘rehabilitation’.

Offenders ultimately can’t remain rehabilitated through sheer force of will – they need to see movement towards successful social integration, citizenship and participation. The ‘desistance’ framework acknowledges that this fundamental **change in identity** is a slow and evolving process that we can’t rush or force. Attitude change follows identity change, not the other way around. But professional practice often is characterized by an urgency to request attitude change, to monitor and overly emphasize (and even penalize) lapses, rather than accept and help re-align effort. Probation officers, moreover, are not attributed automatic pro-social legitimacy. They are inevitably seen as working for the ‘system’, and having to enforce the rules of the system. Volunteers, on the other hand, can serve as impartial role models, as the catalysts and the reinforcers for this crucial identity change to emerge and strengthen.

Can probation practice somehow incorporate the ‘force and influence’ of volunteers more deliberately in order to legitimize their role in helping offenders move towards desistance? I want to elaborate on why I believe a Volunteer Probation Officer scheme such as the one that Japan has sustained for more than 60 years may offer a truly transformative, alternative model for supporting probation practice.

## **Can Volunteers Do What Probation Practice Strives to Do?**

Japan has one of the lowest incarceration rates in the world (45 per 1000,000) and it has entrenched an approach to community supervision that is nothing short of bold and all-encompassing. Now being emulated increasingly both in the Asean region and beyond, the well-established Volunteer Probation Officer (VPO) scheme is not just considered an adjunct or minor component of community corrections; it serves as its very backbone. The VPO model is unique in capitalizing on the efforts and the energy of a mini-army of VPOs (more than 40,000) and it has been referred to by some probation scholars as a 'third sector template' for probation practice and delivery of community corrections services (Ellis, Lewis & Sato, 2011). Similar VPO schemes have now been adopted in a number of countries (e.g., Thailand, Philippines, Kenya, Korea, Singapore and China), but the Japanese VPO scheme remains the most impressive in both scale and breadth of involvement of VPOs.

I first became aware of the Japanese VPO scheme a number of years ago when I had the privilege of lecturing for UNAFEI at the one of their International Training Courses in Fuchu, Tokyo. Fortuitously, I had the double privilege of meeting a group of Japan's VPOs ('hogoshi') and was able to visit a number of Japan's Offender Rehabilitation Support Centers that are manned by VPOs. A few years later, I was also invited to attend the Second Annual VPOs Meeting that was held in conjunction with the Third World Congress on Probation where hundreds of VPOs were in attendance from both Japan and internationally.

As I interacted with these VPOs and listened to their stories about why they had become involved in this work, I was touched by the repeated theme of wanting to give back to their communities and assisting others who had been less advantaged in their lives. In their recounting of a number of case histories of clients they had worked with, I was left awestruck by the warmth and compassion that was expressed, the level of commitment to help re-direct individuals who were stuck in living often lonely and chaotic lives, the intuitive understanding of what might have led these individuals into pathways of crime, and the patience and optimism to stick with it despite the usual setbacks. What could account for this kind of very human spirit and dedicated enthusiasm in spite of the fact that they were working with difficult individuals who faced very difficult circumstances with multiple issues and needs and a history of failure that could be expected to have crippled their resilience to bounce back and try to improve their lives? Why were VPOs in Japan able to engage so well with offenders, and why in turn did they seem to get so engaged by this work, receive satisfaction and remain so personally committed over time. My reflections led me to ask whether this kind of reliance on volunteers could have implications for the transformation of probation practice more broadly.

We know what doesn't work with volunteer schemes in criminal justice. Schemes that are too short-term, under-resourced, not well coordinated or supervised, where volunteers are inadequately trained, and where there is inconsistent and/or lack of any intensive contact with

offenders tend to make little difference. But reverse all of these conditions and impact begins to appear in clear and measurable ways (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2007).<sup>2</sup>

I'm going to argue that the VPO model in Japan give us some insight into at least six essential elements of successful volunteer support initiatives ... and argue further that these elements are fully consistent with the evidence-base we have about 'what works' in community supervision.

### **DEVOTING TIME FOR CONNECTION**

*You can't help if you don't connect ...*

In contrast to professional community justice workers who have to deal with ever growing caseloads where they are bombarded every day with some client crisis or problem and where they have to squeeze in time on their schedules to have some personal contact with their offenders, in between the paperwork they have to negotiate, and the meetings they have to attend, VPOs have the luxury of only a few clients they deal with at a time. The majority of VPOs in Japan are in their elder years (averaging about 65 years old). They are recruited with the understanding that they will have the time and energy to devote to their VPO duties. Most of these VPOs are retired, are both financially and emotionally stable, in good health, undistracted by the usual stresses of earlier stages in life, having left behind productive careers, not needing to worry about earning further income, and looking for some meaningful way to still 'make a difference'. With relative peace and clarity of mind, they have the time to listen to offenders, get to know them, and get to connect with them before beginning to give advice or counsel.

The initial motivational engagement phase of working with offenders, considered so crucial in all of the literature on effective practice in corrections, does not have to be rushed. It can be attended to flexibly, and it can begin to occur both at a 'time' and 'place' convenient to the individual offender – not just in the probation office at a given time on a given day, but in a coffee shop, a park, or even in the VPOs own home over a cup of tea. This is not forced engagement following some structured motivational technique but rather naturally evoked engagement between two people with different sets of experiences and backgrounds where each can learn from the other.

Though the notion of 'respect for the elderly' in Japan may enter the dynamic, more likely is the fact that the absence of any power imbalance, as in the classic probation officer dilemma of being both enforcer and supporter, allows for a more human connection to take place. Time allows trust to develop and trust becomes the fuel that powers pro-social influence. From the offender's perspective, as trust unfolds, there is no ambiguity or suspicion about the VPOs

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<sup>2</sup> Another good example of a well-coordinated volunteer effort that originated in Canada and is now spreading internationally is the *Circles of Support and Accountability* (C.O.S.A.) framework where a group of well trained and carefully screened volunteers (up to 5 or 7) become a 'circle' of 24/7 support for a given offender, and where the offender meets with the circle as a group and then again individually with each circle member as often as once a week (Wilson et al., 2009).



motives. The VPO becomes seen as a steadfast and non-judgmental ‘helper’ pure and simple, in an uncomplicated relationship-building process, where the offender may genuinely experience a caring other, perhaps for the first time in their lives. VPOs in turn receive an uplifting sense of having had a positive influence on someone else’s life. The literature on aging is clear on the importance of social networks as a protective factor for the elderly. The relationships VPOs nurture with their offenders, and with their fellow VPOs, undoubtedly contribute to a zest for living a continued and worthwhile life ... a zest that may also infect the offenders they work with.

### **A SUPPORTIVE AND RESPECTFUL ‘RELATIONAL’ STYLE**

*How you relate determines how others will respond ...*

In a number of early ethnographic studies of probation practice (Bailey & Ward, 1992; Ditton & Ford, 1994; Rex, 1999), a particular blending of style and skills emerged as *core* in importance in working effectively with offenders. More recent research looking at variation in the ‘relational’ skills of probation staff shows clearly that more ‘relationally’ skilled supervision is more effective (Chadwick et al., 2015). Contemporary notions of ‘motivational’ practice point to the same qualities (Miller & Rollnick, 2002; McMurrin, 2002; Porporino & Fabiano, 2007; Prochaska & Levesque, 2002; Stinson & Clark, 2017). A recent qualitative study of probation practice (Lewis, 2014; 2016), that is fully consistent with other studies looking at probation officer qualities influencing desistance (Robinson et al., 2014), has narrowed in on 5 key dimensions --- *acceptance, respect, support, empathy and belief*. It is this adroitness in enabling a positive relational climate with the offender that in turn can effect a significant change in beliefs and behavior. The conclusions from all this research are strikingly consistent ... a ‘relational revolution’ is needed in criminal justice where offenders are given opportunities to project their voice and be heard with respectful and genuine interest so as ‘to alleviate feelings of social exclusion and reconsider their identity’ (Lewis, 2016, p. 163). This is fully in accord with the principles of the ‘desistance’ paradigm that calls for far more attention on the factors that can help offenders find their way ‘out of crime’ rather than the just the risk factors that have propelled their lives ‘into crime’ (Porporino, 2010; Maruna & Immarigeon, 2004; McNeil, Raynor & Trotter, 2010). The VPOs I met in Japan, perhaps in part because of their maturity and range of life experience, seemed to me to adopt a calm and responsive relational style, effortlessly and naturally, that could help offenders navigate through their struggles. To breakthrough credibly with offenders, the message giver may have to display certain characteristics, and be able to deliver the message in a trusting interpersonal relationship, where it may be seen as safe to self-disclose meaningful and sensitive information. The VPOs I met impressed me as these kinds of genuinely credible ‘message givers.’

### **COACHING TO SUPPORT AND MENTORING TO INSPIRE**

*Coach me to deal with the NOW; Mentor me to imagine my FUTURE ...*

In the business management literature, a distinction is made between the focus of ‘coaching’ and

'mentoring' (McCarthy, 2014). The terms are often confused in criminal justice. In summary, the mentor in the leadership development literature is seen generally as person-focused and future-oriented; the coach, on the other hand, is seen as task or performance-focused and mostly present-oriented. The mentor is someone who is personally involved and displays an obvious personal interest – in a sense a respected 'friend' who cares about you, your future and your long-term development. On the other hand, the coach concentrates on helping you develop specific skills for the task, and coping with the challenges and performance expectations that you are facing in the present.

The most distinguishing features of the mentor is how they are able to 'listen and understood me' and how they can 'build my confidence and trust in myself, and empower me to see what I can do.' The mentor serves as a sounding board, creating a two-way mutually beneficial learning experience where the mentor provides advice, shares knowledge and experiences, and gently teaches in a Socratic questioning style to encourage self-discovery. A coach can be more directive in pointing someone to some end result. Though the other may choose how to get there, the coach should be strategically assessing and monitoring progress and giving advice for effectiveness and efficiency.

One has to stretch very little to appreciate the fact that one of the essential skills that VPOs should master is the ability to oscillate between being both 'coach' and 'mentor' to the offenders under their care. Again, in my interactions with the VPOs I met, I saw evidence that they remained attuned to both of these aspects of their work. Offenders need coaching to deal with the many facets of their lives, in the short-term, that can create 'clear and present danger' – a return to substance abuse, managing their emotions and especially their anger and depression, dealing with conflict with loved ones, boredom, the discouragement of continued unemployment ...etc. Coaching offenders with realistic options and strategies they can use to cope with (and hopefully resolve) their issues can be clearly invaluable. The coaching is unlikely to take hold as a one-shot intervention. But repeating and reinforcing, clarifying and adjusting, and helping the offender remain positive even in the face of inevitable setbacks, is the kind of supportive 'stick-to-itiveness' that I noticed in the case histories that VPOs presented on that afternoon in Tokyo.

Beyond the coaching effort, where the need to do it becomes almost immediately apparent in beginning to work with offenders, mentoring begins to take center stage as the relationship unfolds and offenders begin to find some semblance of stability in their lives. Once again owing to a combination of their age, their life accomplishments, their experience and their intimate knowledge of the community context and the opportunities it can present, VPOs in my view illustrated the potential to serve as powerful and empowering role-models. They could nudge and influence offenders in realizing they can achieve not just basic adjustment – but their full potential. A consistent finding in positive psychology is that 'implementation planning' (the how, when, and where of goal pursuits) works only when there is strong autonomous motivation to strive for the goal, and when consistent approach-oriented strategies are applied. In working with offenders, it means that we should be helping them with their planning skills for the future, practically and concretely, and that we should remain by-their-side as their approach-goals emerge, and not just be there to admonish and call out what they should avoid.

One of the essential tenants of the ‘desistance’ paradigm is that over the longer haul what will support desistance are the *positive* qualities of sustaining hope, maintaining a strong sense of self-efficacy, and re-defining one’s sense of self and identity. This necessitates that the individual achieves at least some of their personal aspirations, both for new meaning and for gaining pro-social legitimacy (Porporino, 2010). The VPOs I met seemed to be acutely aware of this basic tenet of the Good Lives Model (Ward, 2002).

#### **PROVIDING MEANINGFUL PRACTICAL ASSISTANCE**

*Give me food and shelter before you give me INSIGHT ...*

In the case histories that the VPOs presented that afternoon in Tokyo, there was repeated emphasis on efforts made to give offenders some level of ‘practical assistance’ (e.g., a suggestion or referral for possible employment, a place to sleep for the evening, a warm meal, transportation, help in acquiring some official document, support in entering a substance abuse program ... etc.). We know that desistance seems to be accompanied by active, offender-led, *agentic* resolution of social obstacles (Farrall, 2002; 2004). It is this sense of ‘agency’ experienced by the offender -- where they feel they have been able to personally surmount some significant concern or obstacle in their lives -- that in turn seems to strengthen motivation and resolve even further (Burnett & Maruna, 2004). Curiously, much of our standard community supervision often fails to recognize (or is unable to respond to) the often indirect or vague requests for practical assistance received from offenders. Instead, supervision tends to lead with standard options rather than compliment emerging offender ‘agency’ motives with timely and contextualized practical support (McNeill, 2006). To paraphrase a dictum regarding what works generally in intervention, for support to make a difference, it has to be the right support, offered at the right time, and in the right way. In the end, the individual should believe that though the support was helpful, it was their own efforts that made the greatest difference.

As I listened to my group of VPOs, I began to appreciate how they fully accepted their role as ‘practical helpers’ – who should use their contacts, their connections, and their influence in the community to help offenders surmount some of their key obstacles and deal with some of their most immediate concerns. These VPOs moreover seemed to understand the importance of ‘agency’ and how it can ‘lift the individual up’ -- perhaps because ‘agency’ had been so important in their own lives. Even in their elder years, these were individuals who took control of their lives and agreed to take on a significant new challenge as VPOs. A good deal of ethnographic research on probation practice points to the fact that ‘good’ practice should remain attuned to giving timely, concrete and meaningful ‘practical support’ that can begin to improve the quality of life for offenders, even if only in small ways (Farrall, 2004; Mair, 2004; Robinson et al., 2014). VPOs seemed to me to be ready, willing and able to play this role.

#### **VPOs AS COMMUNITY ENGAGERS AND COMMUNITY ADVOCATES**

*You can’t engage your community if you don’t know your community ...*

There is clear and unambiguous evidence to support the buttressing of active community involvement for successful offender reintegration. For example, over a period of more than a decade, the well-respected Urban Institute in America conducted perhaps one of the most comprehensive evaluations ever of prisoner reintegration initiatives across the nation. They explored the pathways for successful reintegration and concluded that when key elements are addressed – in the areas of employment, housing, substance use, physical and mental health, family, and community supports – success is consistently improved.<sup>3</sup>

Most communities in most parts of the world are still restrained by the attitude that offenders' well-being and adjustment is a correctional services responsibility and not a community responsibility. Because of their status and their interconnectedness in their local communities, VPOs in Japan are ideally positioned to counter this sentiment and to promote instead the proposition that the responsibility is *joint*. When the community gets involved and the offender succeeds, it is both the community and the offender that benefit. VPOs in Japan have entrenched themselves as local ambassadors, reaching out to the community in a myriad of ways – in all of the various community events they participate in, social gatherings they attend, discussions they have with their neighbors, presentations they make to other association meetings, contacts they have with employers and business people, the exposure they may get in the local media ... etc. There is an unleashing of energy and creativity needed to engage communities and help them see that offenders, with the right support, can indeed become an asset instead of a liability. Government institutions have a difficult time to orchestrate this kind of momentum. Though it may perhaps be difficult to measure how and how much, I am convinced that VPOs in Japan are creating this momentum, as ambassadors for a community-responsive, reintegration philosophy for corrections, both at the local and national level.

#### **A SELF-SUSTAINING CULTURE OF SERVICE: VPOs AS RECRUITERS OF OTHER VPO'S**

*We reap what we sow ...*

The last stage in implementing effective practice is often the most difficult. Once good practice has been entrenched, it has to be sustained. Too often in corrections we fail to sustain effective practice and it ends up becoming fragmented, spotty in quality and generally truer 'on paper' than in reality (e.g., outlined only in policy). Establishing and preserving continuity for an overarching culture of committed service to clients is especially difficult.

One of the most significant informal functions of VPO's in Japan is to look for, identify and recruit other VPOs. In most correctional jurisdictions, recruitment of volunteers (not to mention the right kinds of staff) is an up-hill struggle. Recruiting the kinds of volunteers is even more difficult. The public has a stereotyped view of offenders, often assuming them to be dangerous, unpredictable and uncooperative. Some volunteers may be attracted more because they are

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<sup>3</sup> For a summary listing of research reports, see: <http://www.urban.org/center/jpc/returning-home/publications.cfm>

curious or intrigued – and not because of any particular dedication to support and assist others who are troubled and disadvantaged. Because they have done the work, VPOs are more likely to have a deep appreciation of the characteristics and qualities that are needed. They can remain alert in looking for, identifying, educating, informing, and encouraging others to take on the role of VPO. From personal experience and real examples, they can point to what makes the work both rewarding and meaningful. The VPO system becomes self-sustaining, with one generation of VPO's recruiting and then guiding and advising the next generation in order to preserve a culture of service.

Noteworthy is the fact that being appointed as a VPO in Japan also carries some level of prestige. For example, individuals who apply to become VPO's are screened and then officially appointed by the Ministry of Justice. They became part of a 'community of VPO's' both locally and nationally as members of a recognized, structured and rather dynamic National Association of VPO's. The system, in essence, is effectively and easily sustainable because it feeds and nourishes itself. Of course, Professional Probation staff also play an active role in continuing to engage VPOs through various training seminars, encouraging the sharing of practice-based experience in treatment meetings held at Rehabilitation Support Centers, and in recognizing the work of outstanding VPOs with recommendations for particular commendations. But it is the continued networking of VPOs themselves that seems to be the glue keeping the VPO scheme dynamic in the present and sustainable for the future.

## **CONCLUSION**

A VPO who wanted to share her experiences presented a short case study at the Third World Congress on Probation that perfectly illustrates the potential force and influence of these dimensions of practice that I have just outlined. The case was about a young offender who had a very difficult and rebellious early adolescence and fell into drug use. The VPO worked with the young man for a lengthy period seeing him regularly every week and thinking she had established a good relationship. The young man was working and going to school. However, in time he relapsed back into drugs and one day assaulted a peer. He was sent to training school. The VPO was disappointed but thought there was nothing more she could do. But the young man's mother visited the VPO at her home and asked that she not abandon her son. So, she didn't. She visited the young man every week once again while he was in training school. As the young man's release approached, she advocated with the young man's previous employer to re-hire him. The employer obliged. The young man did exceptionally well this time around, completed his probation period, and he continues to visit the VPO to give her the occasional update concerning his life. The VPO concluded that she learned to not give up and that everyone can change if someone 'stays by their side'.

In the last few years, the relatively informal, supportive, offender-focused approach that developed so naturally with the tradition of the VPO scheme in Japan has been challenged as perhaps 'too soft'. It has also been noted that recruitment of new VPOs is becoming increasingly difficult owing to the steady urbanization of Japanese society, the fracturing of community

relations, and a situation of growing financial hardship among the elderly. Japan is among the most quickly aging countries in the world. Japanese society is changing and the recruitment of VPOs will have to adapt and adjust to those changes. Whether VPOs will be able to counteract public perception and remain dedicated to their original goals and aims will remain to be seen. Whether government, in concert, will be able to work to support these original goals and aims, and see them for the 'evidence-informed' practice that they really are, will also remain to be seen. Criminal justice practice should not be categorized as either soft or hard. It should be seen as either smart, evidence-informed and community responsive – or NOT.

When we cut through to the core of all the research and all the theorizing about 'What Works' with offenders, one conclusion comes to the forefront. Corrections is fundamentally about how to influence change in others through the building and leveraging of relationships. When we get this right, whether in prisons or in community contexts, we can help transform lives. This is what makes corrections a noble profession and this is what makes the VPO model in Japan an innovative, far-reaching and important component of community corrections that should be preserved, applauded and emulated wherever and however possible.

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