



PROBLEM-SOLVING JUSTICE

# DEVELOPING A COMMUNITY SERVICE PROTOCOL

Many problem-solving criminal justice initiatives require offenders to participate in community restitution projects. Community restitution—also called community service—provides a proportionate response to low-level offending. Through community service, offenders “pay back” the community for their offending and learn that their actions have real consequences. Staff can also use community service to engage offenders and link them with appropriate services. Further, visible community service projects remind the public that the justice system takes all criminal behavior seriously.

This practitioner tool is one in a series to support the development of problem-solving justice initiatives. For other documents in the series, please visit [problemsolvingjustice.org](http://problemsolvingjustice.org).

This information sheet provides tips for staff at problem-solving criminal justice initiatives who are interested in incorporating community service into programming. While the exact goals may vary from project to project, in general a community service program should do the following:

- Provide a useful service to the community, in a highly visible way whenever possible
- Seek suggestions for project ideas from community advisory boards, block associations, police officers, and other sources of community input
- Send crew supervisors, project staff, or volunteers out on a regular basis to identify potential service sites and possible service projects
- Attempt to link community service to the offender’s crime (e.g., have those arrested for vandalism paint over graffiti)
- Attempt to have offenders begin community service immediately, as close in time as possible to the actual offense
- Create a structure so that information about each offender due to report for community service (contract, mandate, scheduling information) is reported accurately and immediately to the community service site
- Report promptly to the relevant authority (e.g., court, prosecutor, probation office) on each offender’s attendance under the conditions of diversion or the court mandate
- Ensure a secure, respectful work environment for the community service crews

no. 09



This practitioner tool was produced as part of the Community-Based Problem-Solving Criminal Justice Initiative, a project of the Bureau of Justice Assistance that aims to broaden the scope of problem-solving courts by testing their approach to wider defendant populations and applying key problem-solving principles outside of the specialized court context. The Bureau of Justice Assistance supports law enforcement, courts, corrections, treatment, victim services, technology, and prevention initiatives that strengthen the nation’s criminal justice system. The Center for Court Innovation is a non-profit think tank that works with criminal justice practitioners, community-based organizations, and ordinary citizens to develop creative responses to public safety problems, aid victims, reduce crime, and improve public confidence in justice.

- Maintain a high standard of offender compliance (generally considered to be in the 65-75% range, depending on the jurisdiction and the population performing community service)
- Track accomplishments of community service crews (including number of hours, dollar value of work performed) and publicize this information to community members, police, funders, and other stakeholders

## CHECKLIST

Use the following checklist to help ensure that you are establishing and maintaining a workable community service protocol.

## IDENTIFICATION OF COMMUNITY SERVICE OPTIONS: HAVE YOU DEVELOPED A PROCESS TO...

- Identify high visibility community service projects?
- Allow community members, police officers, and other interested parties to suggest projects?
- Create a screening tool to determine who's qualified for projects with lower levels of supervision, and who requires more secure options (including for persons with physical or mental disabilities), taking into account risk indicators, such as...
  - previous compliance with alternative sanctions?
  - prior convictions?
  - clinical factors that might impact risk, like homelessness, physical or mental handicaps, disabling conditions, drug use, or mental health issues?
  - age (with juvenile offenders requiring more supervision)?

## INTAKE: HAVE YOU DEVELOPED A PROCESS TO...

- Conduct an intake interview promptly after the court appearance or diversion agreement?

- Screen each defendant to determine the necessary level of supervision using the screening tool mentioned above?
- Schedule the participant to begin community service as promptly as possible, even on the same day as intake when practicable?
- Clearly communicate program rules to each participant?
- Collect and verify a phone number, emergency contact name, and address for each participant for compliance follow up?

## SUPERVISION OF COMMUNITY SERVICE: ARE YOU...

- Maintaining a ratio of supervising staff to community service workers (many programs feel that 10 participants to one supervisor is the maximum ratio)?
- Having community service workers sign in upon arrival and sign out upon successful completion of each day of community service work?
- Reading the rules and regulations aloud to crews at the start of the day?
- Having supervisors counting their crew at regular intervals (every 30 minutes, for example)?
- Allowing for a half-hour lunch break and two 10-minute breaks throughout the day?
- Having community service workers wear vests displaying the project's logo to make crews easier to supervise, while also making justice visible to the community (some projects also place a sandwich board with the program's logo in a prominent location while the work is in progress)?
- Numbering vests (writing small sequential numbers on the inside of each vest and the corresponding number next to the participant's

name on the attendance sheet to account for each participant)?

- Making sure that supervisors are clearly identifiable (by wearing identification cards and special T-shirts, for example)?
- Training supervisors in handling contingencies, including if a participant needs to use a restroom or is acting out?
- Requiring supervisors to document work performed (for example, lots cleaned, graffiti painted over, or snow shoveled)?

### **COMPLIANCE: DO YOU HAVE A STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURE TO...**

- Notify any partner agencies that are monitoring community service participants about which offenders are scheduled to work each day, and have partner agencies let you know on a daily basis which offenders have successfully completed their assignment?
- Call a participant within 24 hours of failure to show up for a community service appointment?
- Promptly send out a registered letter to the address listed for the participant, if a telephone number is not valid or a second call is not returned?
- In cases of non-compliance, prosecute diverted cases or issue bench warrants for failed judicial mandates?

### **ARE YOU MEASURING...**

- Overall compliance rate (percent of closed cases

that have completed their community service mandate)?

- Compliance rate for those with each possible mandate length (e.g., one day, two-three days, four-five days, etc.)?
- First day show-up rate (percent of participants that complete the first day as a percentage of the total number of participants who are scheduled)?
- Compliance rate for those who do and do not show up for their first day?
- Units of community service completed (number of hours performed, sites cleaned, or trash bags filled, for example) and dollar value of this work calculated at the minimum wage?

### **COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: ARE...**

- Community service projects clearly identified as such (by participants wearing vests, placement of sandwich boards, or other techniques)?
- Crews working outside in visible settings whenever possible?
- Crews working on identified hot spots and eyesores (e.g., vacant lots used as illegal dumping sites, rundown parks, etc.)?
- Crew supervisors carrying a flyer explaining your program and its goals and a business card for a contact person who can take service requests?
- Program staff publicizing achievements of community service participants on a regular basis, including taking “before” and “after” photographs of project sites?

Please visit the Center for Court Innovation’s Problem-Solving Justice Clearinghouse at [www.problemsolvingjustice.org](http://www.problemsolvingjustice.org) or contact Expert Assistance, Center for Court Innovation, 520 Eighth Avenue, New York, NY 10018, Phone: (212) 373-1690, Email: [expertassistance@courtinnovation.org](mailto:expertassistance@courtinnovation.org).

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