



Tools for Building Effective Community Corrections

# Demystifying Community Corrections: Educating the Public

Some Practical Suggestions

CCC: A public-private partnership promoting an effective system of community corrections

The Center for  
Community  
Corrections

# Demystifying Community Corrections: Educating the Public

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## THIS PROJECT IS DEDICATED TO THE FOLLOWING PROPOSITIONS:

- ⇒ That successful community corrections depends on intergovernmental collaboration which recognizes the needs and promises of each level of government;
- ⇒ That successful community corrections demands a genuine partnership with the community;
- ⇒ That the optimum use of community corrections requires public officials and a public who understand its purpose and are willing to support its programs;
- ⇒ That small, relatively inexpensive changes in the right places can do much to increase the likelihood of successful community corrections.



## PART 1

# Why the Effort

Answers from criminal justice practitioners when asked to identify the major obstacle to the implementation of community corrections:

*“The public’s lack of understanding and proof of the effectiveness of the programs.”*

*“The public’s belief that the only way to punish offenders is through incarceration.”*

## BIG GAINS LIKELY FROM PUBLIC EDUCATION

**T**he criminal justice practitioners are right. The public understands relatively little about corrections, especially community corrections. For many, Willy Horton is still the poster child of corrections. When the public thinks crime, it thinks violent crime. No wonder then, that when it thinks punishment, it thinks prison. Members of the public are unaware that 70% of people under supervision are in their neighborhoods and that prison is the real “alternative sentence.”

A poster child is badly needed for community corrections, a poster child that represents a non-violent criminal under close supervision, dealing with his addiction and lack of education, and repaying victim and community for the harm he has caused. (The term “he” is used deliberately. No need for political correctness here. The public thinks of offenders in terms of “he,” and since it’s from the “he’s” they feel they need protection, “he” it is.)

While polls support the image of an uninformed public, they also show a public willing to absorb new ideas. Well-known pollsters such as Richard Wirthlin, Peter Hart and John Doble have all reported the same findings—that the public, when told of community corrections options, is favorably inclined towards their use for the non-violent offender.

Two points emerge strongly from these polls:

- ⇒ The public's overriding concern is for its own safety. All other considerations come in a distant second.
- ⇒ Members of the public make a clear distinction between violent and non-violent. The violent, they say, belong behind bars. But they are willing to entertain various community-based sanctions for the others, particularly if the sanctions involve drug or alcohol treatment, restitution and work.

Therefore the more the public knows about community corrections, the more supportive of your work it will be.

## THE PURPOSE OF THIS PAPER

**M**ost public education materials seem to describe community corrections as a process off by itself, unrelated to the world with which the public is familiar. And the media is assumed to be the major means of conveying that information to the public.

The purpose of this paper is to offer a different approach to educating the public and its officials, different both in content and in means of communication. This paper suggests placing community corrections within a context familiar to everyone, emphasizing the common goals shared by both practitioners and members of the public. And rather than the media, this paper proposes direct contact with key segments of a community as the primary communication channel.

## NOT JUST THE MEDIA

In a recent questionnaire similar to the one which produced the beginning quotes, some members of constituencies important to community corrections—businessmen, educators, religious leaders and volunteer administrators—were asked from where they get their information about community corrections. Their response: from criminal justice practitioners and sources such as colleagues, civic organizations, and religious groups, as much as from the media.

Therefore an education initiative aimed at both the public and public officials, coming from you, will be heard. You have a real opportunity to change the climate, as you are already considered a significant source of information.





## PART 2

# The Message

## A SHARED GOAL

The criminal justice system and the public share a common goal—the achievement of safe neighborhoods.

Community corrections is the part of the criminal justice system most relevant to that goal. The public, having the most at stake, is therefore the group with the greatest interest in safe neighborhoods and the greatest interest in the success of community corrections.

It is time to emphasize this common goal. And it is time to make clear that the criminal justice system and law enforcement alone cannot ensure the goal. Members of the public also have a part to play, and they should welcome the role. A study in Connecticut concluded that when people take an active role in protecting their neighborhoods they feel safer, whether in fact they are or not.

By making the community residents and public officials aware that you are all working towards the same end, some good things can begin to happen:

⇒ The public, caring about safety above all else, will better understand the importance, capacity and contribution of community corrections to its well being. While perhaps not

remembering your words, the public will remember that your primary concern is for the safety of its neighborhoods. The public will also see more easily what the community needs to contribute to help you succeed.

- ⇒ Public officials will better appreciate the importance of your work to the lives of their constituents.
- ⇒ The roles the public and corrections each play in achieving the common goal become clear:

Community corrections provides the supervision and restraints on those who threaten the public's safety.

The community provides the resources to turn the offender's life around during that period of supervision—the educational and volunteer resources, the jobs and treatment programs.

The neighborhoods take the lead in preventing crime, as community corrections professionals, specialists in criminal behavior, help residents understand how to carry out prevention effectively.

Community and corrections move closer to one another as a problem-solving approach takes over.

## DEMISTIFYING COMMUNITY CORRECTIONS

**B**ut to really understand what you do, the public needs to understand the variety of crimes and the variety of options available to deal with them.

In explaining community corrections to the public, the focus has primarily been on the means, rather than the goal. Criminal justice officials tend to describe the justice system—and the role of community corrections within it—as an entity unto itself, not related to the “normal, everyday” life of the public. Therefore the public, while finding that interesting, feels uninvolved, not seeing the direct relationship to its own safety.

Using a familiar analogy will make the actual operations of the criminal justice system more understandable, less apart from normal life, and easier to remember.

In this regard, the health care system can provide a useful analogy:

Just as the goal of the health care system is a healthy population, so the goal of the criminal justice system is a safe population.

The structures of both are similar. The health care system is composed of prevention through collective action and individual responsibility, “out-patient” treatment in the community for minor illnesses and less serious diseases, hospitals for serious ones, and follow up in the community on discharge. So the corrections system—prevention (where neighborhood and individual responsibility come into play), community sanctions for the less serious offenses, jails for the more serious, prison for the most serious, and post-release supervision, or parole, back in the community, as the transition to reintegration with the community.

Just as doctors work to change counterproductive habits to prevent further illness, so community corrections addresses criminal behavior in order that offenders not repeat their mistakes. The means of choice: accountability through restitution to victim and community, job preparedness through GED and life skills classes, and behavioral change through addiction treatment, always coupled with the appropriate level of supervision.

And just as the public looks to health care professionals to tell them how to create healthy communities and remain healthy themselves, so the public should be able to look to the community corrections professionals for expertise on personal and community safety.

Using the health care analogy, the public will be better able to grasp and remember the criminal justice practitioners' role in relation to the safety of the community, and grasp, too, the need for its own collaboration to achieve successful outcomes. Neighborhood residents will see how they can help by enlisting municipal officials to provide better lighting and clean up empty lots and rundown houses. Educators can see their contribution to public safety through providing GED classes, the business community jobs, the religious community mentors, and so on.



## PART 3

# The Process

## STEPS IN CONSTRUCTING A PUBLIC EDUCATION INITIATIVE

**D**eveloping a public education strategy takes time and energy, but as the poll results show, it is well worth the effort. And remember, there is help available.

### Here is one approach to consider

*Look around for examples of public education programs and learn from their experience.* Think of an education initiative that, in your opinion, has either succeeded or failed. What were the elements that worked, or didn't? What, for instance, did you think of the campaign to "Just Say No?"

Talk to those involved in communications, either professionally or academically, about elements of effective strategies. They will be intrigued by your issue and they will have examples of effective strategies to offer. People enjoy sharing their knowledge. Departments of public relations or marketing at local colleges not only have good ideas, but often are looking for projects through which their students can gain some practical experience.

*Pick two ideas you want to emphasize.* Weave your information around a couple of themes, with a couple of cases to illustrate your points. This will make it easier for your audience to remem-

ber your information. The two themes might be the ones already mentioned:

- 1) That the purpose of community corrections is to help provide safe neighborhoods, and that community corrections does this through supervision and by addressing the causes of the offender's criminal behavior, thus minimizing future crime. Using the health care system analogy may help drive your points home.
- 2) That collaboration is necessary between the community corrections professionals and the community to achieve the goal that everyone desires. The professionals provide expertise in supervision and criminal behavior. The community, in turn, guards against that behavior by making its neighborhoods uninviting to crime, and by sharing resources such as jobs, classes, volunteers, and treatment with those of you who deal directly with offenders.

***Invite two or three members of the community to develop a communications strategy with you.*** These might be retired public relations persons or journalists, or members of the League of Women Voters, a group particularly good at public education. The purpose of this small group would be:

- ⇒ To review your written materials. (This is most important. You need to know how your words come through to the outsider.)
- ⇒ To select channels of communication most relevant to the community (professional newsletters, candidate nights, leadership groups, civic forums).
- ⇒ To help make contact with key segments of the community with whom a dialogue is desirable. At a minimum, this should include contacts with the Chamber of Commerce, the United Way, the educational community, ministerial alliances, and influential civic groups.
- ⇒ To develop ways of maintaining contact with at least the key segments of the community: the business, education, religious and volunteer sectors.

***Prepare written materials for the public and for public officials.***

The materials should be clear, brief, free of jargon and full of examples, to be handed out with talks, at candidate nights and community forums, when meeting with particular groups, or placed in professional and church newsletters. Consider covering the following points:

- ⇒ The overall purpose of community corrections—to help safeguard neighborhoods.
- ⇒ The similarity to the health care system—prevention, minor illnesses treated on outpatient basis, serious in hospitals, and follow up on release.
- ⇒ How community-based supervised sanctions address punishment for the crime committed (usually non-violent), and accountability to victim and community through restitution and/or service. Community-based sanctions also seek to minimize the likelihood of future crime through treatment or educational programs—an important point little understood.
- ⇒ How the public's protection is ensured through drug testing, treatment, reporting, and supervision. (Restraints without walls is a concept unknown to the public.)
- ⇒ The difficulties offenders face in turning their lives around—their chaotic histories, lack of education, few skills, and addiction. (This requires vivid examples. Most people have very little sense of the life experiences of most offenders.)
- ⇒ An indication of those for whom community sanctions are intended. Since the public makes a clear distinction between violent and non-violent, it is important to be as specific as possible.
- ⇒ Cases liberally sprinkled throughout—both good outcomes, and ones that end in jail to give credibility. People remember stories.
- ⇒ What communities and individuals can do to help make themselves and their neighborhoods safe.

⇒ An individual's name from your agency to contact for further information.

Colleges can often be helpful with layout through their design classes, and are often on the lookout for projects. Chambers of Commerce or civic-minded businesses can sometimes help subsidize or provide the printing.

***Meet with key segments of the community.*** These segments are groups who can bring the “turn-around” dimension to community corrections—jobs from the business sector, GED slots and job preparation classes from the education sector, mentors from the religious community, collaborative action with certain community groups or neighborhood associations, etc. By educating them about community corrections, you are also laying the groundwork for future collaborations to enhance the lives of your charges. You also educate particularly influential constituencies who can then testify to public officials and funding sources about the importance of your work.

For these groups it is better to engage in dialogue in addition to making written materials available. And it is important that corrections leadership be present at these meetings. The fact that leadership takes the time to meet those outside the system will emphasize the importance accorded to educating and potentially involving members of the public. Dialogue is important because for most people, criminal justice is foreign territory and information about it requires a fair amount of time to assimilate. People will want to ask questions and points will need to be clarified.

### Selecting the key constituencies

⇒ *Identify your needs and those constituencies most likely to be of help.* Do you need tutors? If so, the colleges and churches are likely ports of call. Do you need job preparation classes? Community colleges and high schools can help. Do you need political support and jobs? The Chamber of Commerce can point you to civic-minded businesses.



- ⇒ *Prepare talking points based on written materials*, using the same examples and cases at each meeting. (Repetition will help the material sink in. Other illustrations can be added later.) Allow plenty of time for questions and answers because you're dealing with such an unfamiliar and potentially scary area. Be sure to acknowledge the audience's concerns.
- ⇒ *Develop specific requests with rationale*: x number of slots in GED or job preparation classes, three tutors of basic English, x number of entry level jobs, etc. Your audience may ask, "What can I do to help?" in which case you want to be prepared. And remember, any contribution, no matter how small, will serve to make the donor feel a commitment to the success of your work.
- ⇒ *Arrange meetings with senior people: the directors and board chairs of the Chamber and the United Way, the president of the community college, etc.* If someone makes the contact for you, bring that person along with you. Otherwise don't worry about making a "cold call." The recipient will be surprised, intrigued, and if unable to see you himself/herself, will arrange for you to see someone who will then report back.
- ⇒ *Probe for the audience's perceptions of crime and punishment*, and ask them for their own concerns and priorities in this area. Meetings need to be educational for you too, so you can finetune your policies and procedures if need be to accommodate the community's feelings.
- ⇒ *Discuss what your agency believes constitutes success*, to minimize unrealistic expectations in your audience.
- ⇒ *Leave written materials.*
- ⇒ *Stay in touch*, if only through an occasional letter with an update of activities.

**Look for opportunities to discuss community corrections.** In thinking of venues for talks, look at existing forums such as Rotaries (movers and shakers), Leadership programs such as Leadership Evansville or Leadership Mobile, issues forums, and

meetings of civic, religious, and victims' groups. Some of these provide excellent opportunities to consider community corrections in some depth. In Tulsa, Oklahoma, for instance, Tulsa Metropolitan Ministries conducted a series of public seminars on the subject of corrections. In New York State, the League of Women Voters is leading a series of study circle groups on "Balancing Justice" (see Resources list).

## When speaking to a group

Never worry about your prowess as a public speaker. Your topic is compelling, one in which people will be very interested and about which they know relatively little. The content of your talk will carry the day. And base your talk on the written materials you will have already developed—repetition breeds remembrance!

- ⇒ Engage the audience. Think of opening your talk with a case, asking the audience how it would handle it were it the judge. Show how the case actually was handled, including the role of community corrections' dual track of providing "restraints without walls" and dealing with deficiencies to minimize future crimes. Then give another case where compliance was disregarded and the person ended up behind bars. People remember stories more than statistics, and they need to hear what happens to those who don't succeed to make credible the tales of those who do.
- ⇒ Give costs—that's one statistic people do remember! If you have comparative costs between community corrections and prison or jail, people will listen. Include the benefits derived from victim restitution and community service. And a useful fact: \$1 spent on drug treatment has been shown to save \$6 in further correctional costs.
- ⇒ Ask for something—clothes for job interviews, furniture for the probation office, volunteers for specific activities if you have the capacity to provide training and supervision. Again, as before, people will feel invested if they have an opportunity to contribute, no matter how small the donation.
- ⇒ Hand out the written materials on which your talk is based.

***Arrange face-to face-meetings with state and county elected officials and their staff.*** Despite the polls, many public officials are not persuaded that the public is willing to support community-based sanctions. So as you meet with officials and their staff, tell them of the reactions of members of the community with whom you have already met, of any contributions they have made to your programs, and of any collaborations you may be pursuing.

- ⇒ Take along a judge, if possible, to show judicial support, or a community leader to show public support.
- ⇒ Invite questions and clarification. This will allow you to know how you are being heard.
- ⇒ Ask about their own concerns and priorities.
- ⇒ See the staff of elected officials as well as the officials themselves. They are critical for maintaining contact.
- ⇒ Give everyone you see your written materials.
- ⇒ Ask what information would be helpful to them.
- ⇒ Arrange a way to stay in touch.
- ⇒ Invite elected officials and their staff to view local offices/ programs, to talk to program volunteers and advisory council members, and to victims where restitution is involved.
- ⇒ Take back to your colleagues all the comments you have gathered in the course of your meetings, to see whether policies or procedures could or should be adjusted to meet any concerns expressed.

Finally, in thinking about educating those important to your work, think about those within the criminal justice system itself. But that is a subject for another time and place.



## PART 4

# Resources

### THE LEAGUES OF WOMEN VOTERS OF THE UNITED STATES

1730 M Street, NW, Suite 1000  
Washington, D. C. 20036  
(202) 429-1965

In many states the League has conducted studies around corrections issues. The League is very good—and helpful—at mounting educational campaigns. The national League office can give you the address of your state League, and tell you of the studies in which it has been engaged.

### STUDY CIRCLES RESOURCE CENTER

P. O. Box 203  
697 Pomfret Street  
Pomfret, CT 06258  
(860) 928-2616

The Center helps organize small-group, democratic, peer-led discussions that give people opportunities to make a difference in their communities. In study circle programs, communities are bringing diverse people into face-to-face groups to address critical issues. The Leagues of Women Voters in Oklahoma and New York State have led study circles using the curriculum, “Balancing Justice: Setting Citizen Priorities for the Corrections System,” a curriculum available through the Center.

## NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF CORRECTIONS

Contact: **Phyllis Modley**

320 First Street, NW  
Washington, D. C. 20534  
(800) 995-6423

The Community Corrections division of NIC knows where correctional agencies may have conducted particularly good public education programs.

## THE JUSTICE EDUCATION CENTER

Contact: **Sherry Haller, Executive Director**

62 LaSalle Road, Suite 308  
West Hartford, CT 06107  
(860) 231-8180

The Center has developed many public education campaigns, and has established a close working relationship with the Connecticut Legislature and its Judiciary Committee.

And an excellent outline:

*Educating the Public About Community Corrections.* A public education strategy for the Michigan Office of Community Corrections and Community Corrections Advisory Boards

## MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS

Office of Community Corrections

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## About the Center for Community Corrections

The Center for Community Corrections is a broad coalition of former public officials, researchers and correctional professionals representing local, state, and federal concerns. The Center was created in 1987 to promote the overall concept of community-based sanctions as well as specific program options.

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