

Executive Summary

The Dutch Ministry of Justice and Security encourages the engagement of volunteers in probation services. The Dutch Council for the Administration of Criminal Justice and Protection of Juveniles also has recently advised accordingly. Volunteers can contribute in a meaningful way to the re-integration and re-socialisation of probationers. By engaging volunteers in the probation process, the community is involved in the criminal justice process, and it is assumed that this will help to reduce re-offending rates. Also, it is expected that involvement of community members in the sanctioning of criminals will increase general trust in the justice services.

The research aims and question

At the moment, the three Dutch probation organisations are involving volunteers only in a limited number of services (Circles of Support and accountability, volunteer visit programme for Dutch prisoners in foreign countries, and some projects that involve a small number of volunteers in befriending programmes). In the course of a government funded innovation programme, also a number of pilot projects have recently been set up by probation services. However, more knowledge on volunteer management in probation services is needed, to develop an overarching policy that includes goals, strategies for the organisation of volunteer involvement, and models for type of volunteer tasks and for the cooperation between volunteers and paid staff. In a number of foreign countries probation services have a long standing tradition and expertise in volunteer engagement and management, which could provide valuable examples for the Dutch probation services. This study has explored examples in Ireland, England, Sweden, Austria and Japan.

Three questions guided the research:

1. How is volunteer involvement in the probation services organised; what are conditions that need to be in place, what are their tasks, and how does the work of the volunteers relate to the tasks of paid staff?
2. What are effective mechanisms of volunteer management, including recruitment and assessment, training and retention, cooperation with paid staff, and what is the outcome of volunteer engagement?
3. Are the examples of the organisation of volunteer engagement and of volunteer management fit for implementation in the Dutch context?

Method

The research has been carried out as a series of five case studies, which describe the context of probation services, current practices of volunteer management, and their outcome. A comparison revealed effective mechanisms in the combination of context, practices and outcome. A concise international review of empirical research into outcome of volunteer services for probationers and influencing factors was conducted. Finally, we evaluated if the examples in the countries that were studied could be meaningful for the Dutch probation service. First, we held them against the Dutch legal context and national policies, and second, we assessed the support for the viable examples in two group sessions with stakeholders from government departments, probation services and third sector.

The organisation of volunteer engagement

The research in the five countries revealed three models for the organisation of volunteer engagement, yet none proved to be without flaws. In Ireland, the probation services have no volunteers within their organisation. Here the probation services commissions volunteer programmes, and is directly involved in the development and monitoring of volunteer programmes, which are run by third sector organizations, who are funded by the probation services. In England, third sector organisations are contracted by the probation services to provide volunteer programmes. Both commissioning and procurement result in an interdependency of probation services and third sector organisations and cooperation on a policy level and on a worker level is essential to produce the intended outcome.

In Sweden, Austria and Japan, the probation services themselves employ volunteers. These countries have a long tradition of volunteer engagement, in fact, professionalized (and paid) probation services have been largely absent until the second half of the 20th century. Only recently these probation services have introduced professional standards and methods, and risk management systems. Here volunteer engagement is seen as a means to bridge the gap between justice systems and the community, and as a way to reduce the costs for probation services.

Models of cooperation

The tasks which volunteers are entrusted with, can be classified as core probation tasks (e.g. tasks that are legally the responsibility of probation services, like supervision of conditional release) and additional tasks (tasks which support the probation services, e.g. social support). Models of cooperation between volunteers and paid staff reflect the division of tasks and responsibilities. In Ireland and England, volunteers provide services in a model of professional responsibility: professionals in probation services provide core probation tasks and volunteers provide mainly additional services. In Austria and Japan, volunteers provide services in a model of shared responsibility: both volunteers and paid staff provide core probation services and are responsible for their clients. Volunteers, however, have a lower caseload and do not work with high risk clients. In Sweden, the model of cooperation is currently changing from shared responsibility to professional responsibility, as a result of introduction of professional standards and methods. In Austria, also professional standards have been introduced a couple of years ago, yet here the volunteers are trained to work according to these standards.

Working conditions for volunteers are very similar in most countries, with regard to legal status, volunteer agreements, liability insurance and expenses. There are two exceptions: firstly, in Austria volunteers are paid a lump sum of expenses per client, which is considerably higher than in other countries. Secondly, in Japan, volunteers have a legal status as unpaid government official. In almost all examples working conditions are laid down in a volunteer agreement (which is not legally binding). Volunteer agreements differ in the level of expectations and obligations for volunteers. They are least demanding in Sweden and most in Austria and Japan.

Volunteer contributions and cooperation with paid staff

In most examples, volunteers are providing individual supportive services to probationers through befriending schemes or mentoring and peer-mentoring programmes. In peer mentoring, probationers are being supported by ex-probationers, who have successfully completed their term of supervision. In some countries volunteers are also involved in restorative justice interventions such as conferencing, mediation and victim panels. In England, some probation organisations hire the

services of an organisation of experts by experience, who perform action research with the aim of improving services. Probation services in Austria and Japan contract volunteers as unpaid probation officers. In Austria, these volunteer probation officers have their own caseload of medium to low risk probationers, and they perform all responsibilities including reports for the court.

In all countries, volunteers are supervised by paid staff of the organisation they are working for. In most cases, they are obliged to report periodically to their supervisor about their contact with the probationer. Volunteers who are employed by the probation service usually must report to their supervisor any signs of risk or violations of conditions of the probationer with whom they work. Volunteers who are employed by third sector organisations usually have to report at least risk if minors are involved. In most countries, agreements between volunteer, probationer and supervisor about what is reported and what not are made at the start of the mentoring or befriending programme.

The cooperation between volunteers and paid staff can become stressed, when the probation clients that volunteers are working with have complex problems, and volunteers cannot produce the intended outcome. Also, the cooperation can suffer from tensions when volunteers are expected to meet professional standards, which do not align with the way they see their role.

Outcome of volunteer involvement

Most organisations expect that volunteer services produce a positive outcome for probationers in terms of re-socialization and re-integration. Theoretically, these expectations are based on contemporary criminological models like the Risk/Needs/Responsivity model, desistance theory, or theories on empowerment. However, the expectations about the outcome of volunteer engagement are rarely empirically tested and researched.

A concise international review of empirical studies on volunteer involvement in probation services has shown that in many programmes goals and methods are not clearly defined, which compromises the programme evaluation. Mentoring schemes appear to have a positive effect on the re-integration of probationers, depending on the quality of programme implementation. Peer-mentoring has a positive effect on both peer-mentor and mentee, depending on the quality of selection and coaching of the mentor. Volunteers in restorative justice projects for juvenile delinquents can contribute to the reduction of recidivism, but no effect was found when dealing with drug-related crimes. Involving volunteers in restorative justice projects also improves the engagement of local communities in the probation services and sanctioning of criminals. Volunteers in COSA projects contribute to the reduction of sexual and general recidivism of sex offenders, and was proven cost-effective in the United States.

Are the examples meaningful for the Dutch context?

The Dutch policies on volunteer involvement in probation services have been somewhat variable in the past decades, but nowadays government officials and policy developers in probation services think that volunteer involvement can serve several goals: the improvement and extension of the current probation services, bridging the gap between the society and probation organisation and cost-reduction. A model of involving volunteers through third sector organisations (commissioning or procurement) is preferred, since these organisations already are actively involved in the support of prisoners and some already offer through the gate services.

According to Dutch law on volunteering, all models of organisation of volunteer involvement are feasible, as well as all models of cooperation between volunteers and paid staff. The Dutch Probation law however excludes a cooperation model in which paid staff and volunteers have shared responsibilities for core probation tasks. Therefore the Austrian and Japanese model are not feasible.

While many models of volunteer involvement are feasible, not all are deemed desirable by Dutch stakeholders. Therefore, not all goals, models of organisation and cooperation, and volunteer schemes can be implemented successfully. It is necessary to first develop a clear goals and then develop an implementation strategy based on what is known about effective implementation of innovative programs, as well as a communication strategy to build support for the innovation.

Conclusions, discussion and directions for the future

Since the Dutch probation organisations prefer to work with third sector organisations, it is necessary to develop a common ground of values and goals, both on a policy level as well as on a worker level. Both sides fear to be pushed out of the market, and this could seriously hinder the cooperation. Also, when volunteers are employed with the aim of cost-reduction, this is a real threat.

This study has some limitations. It is mainly reflecting the experiences of managers and paid staff, since only a few volunteers have been interviewed. Their experiences are included through a review of the literature. Also, the question on how to implement useful examples in the Netherlands, could only be answered to a limited extent, since the necessary groundwork needs to be done first. We were not able to provide information about the cost of implementation. Future research on the chosen models should provide information about level of goal attainment, outcome and cost.