

### The Evolution of Juvenile Justice:

# Community-based Partnerships Through Balanced and Restorative Justice

By Andrew J. DeAngelo

**Author's Note:** *Juvenile Probation services in Lehigh County, Pa., have evolved from the traditional approach of having youths report to the county courthouse to see their probation officer to the present-day operation of school and community-based probation services. Although this article speaks specifically about Lehigh County initiatives, there are many Pennsylvania counties that have developed similar practices and programs.*

In the summer of 1990, representatives of the Lehigh County Juvenile Probation Department and the Allentown School District in Pennsylvania met to discuss methods to improve communication and better handle problematic juvenile probationers enrolled in the Allentown School District. From this collaboration came the development of school-based probation.

A three-year state grant was secured that provided funding for two additional probation officers who would be physically located in the middle schools of the district so they could interact more with their clients and be accessible to deal with any problems that arose. The daily routine of the school-based probation officer was designed to address issues that presented problems within the school building, maintain an advocacy role with the youths, participate in student assistance programs, participate in reentry conferences and maintain contact with the youth's family.

One of the most unique services that was developed as a result of the collaboration between school and probation officials was the Out of School Suspension Work Program. When a probation student is suspended from school, he or she is assigned to community service for the duration of the suspension.

In 1997, the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency contracted with David Metzger of the University of Pennsylvania to conduct an in-depth evaluation of school-based probation services. The following information is based on Metzger's 1997 report, *School Based Probation in Pennsylvania*.

A case control study found that school-based probation cases had significantly more time in the community without criminal charges and placements, and were significantly less

likely to be charged with serious new crimes. When it was necessary for placement, school-based probation cases had significantly fewer days in placement. Placement cost savings projected at that time amounted to \$6,665 for every case assigned to a school-based probation officer. Surveys of the probation officers, teachers and students involved with the school-based probation program found it to be effective in increasing school attendance and academic performance, and improving behavior in and out of the school environment.

As a result of the success of school-based probation, officials of the juvenile probation department felt that the department could be even more effective by increasing its presence in the Lehigh County communities. Citizen involvement was solicited to aid in the department's work and in 1997, the department established a restructuring process to move most of the probation officers out of the courthouse and into the schools and the community. At that time, Balanced and Restorative Justice had been enacted into law in Pennsylvania. This new concept addressed the priority of repairing the harm done to victims and the community while still ensuring that the needs of the young offenders were met. Under the balanced and restorative justice plan, the juvenile probation department would provide services designed to address the areas of community safety, holding youths accountable for their actions and arranging for youths to participate in competency-development activities.

## Court and Community Involvement

In order to ensure a coordinated effort of the department's personnel, committees were formed to address and develop services for victims, the community and the offenders. In addition, a steering committee was formed comprised of representatives from various public organizations and the judicial departments to guide the process. Community participation was seen as essential in this new approach to achieving justice. To obtain the involvement of the public, the community needed to know the work of the juvenile justice system. Various public outreach initiatives were implemented, which included public speaking engage-

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ments at neighborhood centers, with senior citizen groups, the faith community, etc., as well as the publication of a community newsletter and brochures describing the department's services.

As a result of this public awareness effort, the department has been successful in recruiting volunteers from all walks of life to participate as members of the Community Justice Panels. These panels were formed to review low-level offenses and determine appropriate action to hold the youths accountable for their behavior. The youths perform community service, raise money for charities and attend counseling services, if necessary.

## Community Protection

Supervision and visibility have increased with the probation officers' move from the courthouse to the community. Creativity has also flourished, with probation officers devising methods to increase their presence in the neighborhoods where the department's clients live. One such creative idea was the initiation of probation officers on bicycles in the center city area of Allentown, which during the first year found an increase of 300 percent in probation contacts for youths under supervision and increased involvement with community organizations and crime watch groups.

To more effectively deal with the violent and chronic juvenile offenders in the Allentown area, the Serious Habitual Offender Comprehensive Action Plan was established. It is designed for youths who require intensive supervision as well as community counseling services. The probation officers who have these cases work very closely with the police and conduct routine curfew checks during the week and weekends.

Intensive aftercare services have been arranged through grants and contractual arrangements to aid in the readjustment of youths returning home from residential placement. Additional supervision and support is provided by community caseworkers. The results from one of these programs in 2003 showed a decrease in further placement by 67 percent among this clientele, and the net savings for that calendar year were projected to be approximately \$500,000 in juvenile placement costs for Lehigh County.

## Competency Development

Through a federal grant and collaboration between the juvenile probation department and a local community-based program, college mentoring services were established that provide advocacy and tutoring for youths under supervision with students at Moravian, Muhlenberg and Lehigh Carbon Community Colleges. The college programs work to help these youths improve their grades and encourage them to continue their education after high school.

After-school programs also have been established with several local agencies to provide supervision for youths in the community during high-risk crime hours. The youths are required to report to these centers and participate in recreational and tutoring programs. In addition, counseling services can be provided on an individual and family basis.

## Victim Services and Accountability

The department also has initiated a partnership with the Crime Victims Council of the Lehigh Valley to provide victim advocate services to address the special needs of victims of juvenile crime. In addition, probation officers instruct victim awareness classes. Youths who participate in the victim awareness classes develop an appreciation of the impact that crime has had on victims and the community.

There are more than 200 active community work service sites within Lehigh County that are designed to hold youths accountable for their actions and allow them to earn money to pay their victims for any damages or injuries sustained by their acts. Through a special partnership with the City of Allentown, youths work at the Allentown Recycling Center, which generates income for payment of restitution to victims of juvenile crime. Since this initiative was started in 1987, more than \$430,000 has been secured for payment of restitution to victims of juvenile crime in Lehigh County. In addition, approximately 42,000 hours of community service have been completed during the past year.

Through participation in the community service programs, youths learn marketable job skills such as construction, carpentry, home repair, office skills, gardening, etc. The impact for the community is significant. Approximately 5 million pounds of materials are recycled each year from Lehigh County residents. More than a ton of fresh produce is grown and delivered to needy families each year. Homes in the community have been renovated and offered to first-time homebuyers through Habitat for Humanity. Painting, construction, and major clean-up of roadways and trails occur. Graffiti removal and community clean up is also arranged.

## Treatment

The department has also established partnerships with several agencies that provide in-home counseling services such as the nationally recognized evidenced-based programs, Multisystemic Therapy and Functional Family Therapy. Since 2002, the first year of the initiation of Multisystemic Therapy in Lehigh County, 84 percent of the youths who were referred to the program completed it and have not re-offended. These were high-risk youths who were



Community projects the youths participate in include gardening, construction and carpentry, which provide them with marketable job skills.

either returning from placement or on the verge of being placed.

Through collaboration with the county mental health and mental retardation agency, S.P.O.R.E. (Special Program for Offenders in Rehabilitation and Education) was developed. This service provides intensive casework by both a probation officer and mental health specialists. Probation officers also facilitate programs such as LifeLine Theater, Prisoners Against Drugs, and the Alcohol and Drug Awareness Program.

As a result of the team effort of the department's staff and the community to initiate accountability practices, competency development activities and community protection services, the social climate and quality of lives for the residents of Lehigh County, Pa., is improving. Recidivism has been reduced by 10 percent from previous years.

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*Andrew J. DeAngelo is deputy chief probation officer for the Lehigh County Juvenile Probation Department in Allentown, Pa.*