

Colorado Probation Research in Brief

Tapping Social Networks

Source Document: Family Justice. "Tapping Social Networks: A Resource for Probation and Parole Officers to Improve Supervision." Family Justice Brochure. New York: New York.

Key Words: Family Justice, networking, social networks, offender support, family support

Summary/Conclusions

Family Justice is an organization which works with government and collateral agencies to provide services and trainings in family-focused case management. Family Justice is currently providing technical assistance to Denver Adult Probation to assist officers in addressing the overlapping issues that often manifest in probationers' families, such as unemployment, mental illness, unstable housing, domestic violence, and substance abuse. Family Justice recommends several tools and lines of inquiry for the officer to discover the hidden resources of the family and other social supports, such as friends and church members.

For more information on the Family Justice Project visit their website at www.familyjustice.org.

Limitations of Information

Family Justice defines "family" broadly and offers recommendations on tapping the resources of family members. There are other organizations and methods for tapping the strengths of social networks. It is recommended the reader contact Family Justice before engaging their tools to get a full explanation on their utility.

Caveat: The information presented here is intended to summarize and inform readers of research and information relevant to probation work. It can provide a framework for carrying out the business of probation as well as suggestions for practical application of the material. While it may, in some instances, lead to further exploration and result in *future* decisions, it is not intended to prescribe policy and is not necessarily conclusive in its findings. Some of its limitations are described above.

Social Networking as a Support for Probationers

Identifying and engaging a probationer's social support system is imperative during supervision. "Research shows that family members can have a positive influence on decreasing recidivism among their loved ones." Family Justice is an organization out of New York, which has been advocating for the inclusion of family and social networks to case management. Family is broadly defined as "friends, neighbors, and other members in a person's social network, as well as immediate and extended blood relatives."

Family and community members (ie: pastors or AA sponsors) can play a crucial role in a probationer's compliance with supervision. Even the most fractured families may assist the probationer in providing "stable housing, symptom monitoring, medication management, crisis intervention and a source of feedback to probation" officers. The family may have undetected or undisclosed resources, which become apparent through family-focused lines of questioning. For example, ask the probationer to whom he feels closest, or who he considers family. These questions may reveal allies in the community which can provide additional support and resources. They may also uncover individuals who may be used in motivating the probationer to change.

In addition to learning to ask family-focused questions, Family Justice recommends probation officers utilize a range of tools developed to identify formal and informal community resources and social network members. For example, ecomaps are employed to diagram a probationer's community

resources and describe the nature of the relationship: neutral, strong/positive, conflict. With this information the probation officer can engage the identified resources, assess relationships, and set goals for compliance.

Practical Applications

- √ At the time of initial assessment identify all of the probationer's "family" members, then note how each person can be utilized in addressing the probationer's criminogenic needs.
- √ Invite pro-social members of the probationer's support network to attend office visits and enlist their help in meeting case plan goals.
- √ Consider needs of the probationer's family members and assist with referrals, if appropriate.
- √ Compile a list of community resources for easy reference and referral.
- √ Utilize an existing list or canvass local businesses to develop a list of employers willing to hire felons; or facilitate a job fair for probationers.
- √ Have the probationer list his pro-social support network members, including names, phone numbers, and area of support. Have the probationer keep the list in his wallet for easy access to call in times of need.
- √ Encourage participation in 12-step programs, particularly involvement with a sponsor and attendance at recovery-oriented social events.

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