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Advocacy Plan for Social Change



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Abstract

In the United States today, society is looking to reform criminal justice practices to bring positive social change to the community. Social work has one primary objective: to create a better society, community, nation, and world, specifically the work of the probation officer. Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoyevsky stated, "A society should be judged not by how it treats its outstanding citizens but by how it treats its criminals." Based on that standard, the United States is not a good society. This paper advocates for policy change in how the government deals with offenders while on probation, which must be conducted to allow more significant opportunities for offenders to become productive community members. Probation is a second chance to become a productive member of society, and as social workers, we need to facilitate that opportunity.

Keywords: Social Change; Criminal Justice; Social Work; Stakeholders; Government; Community

Introduction

Social work has one primary objective: to create a better society, community, nation, and world [1]. Social Workers achieve this by helping the less fortunate obtain the resources they need to sustain life [2]. The front line of bringing positive change for its clients is in the Probation Department. A probation officer's work is dedicated to rehabilitating the offender to become productive members of society and protecting the community from violent offenders or those who refuse to make a positive change in their lives [3]. Education and employment are the two items that significantly affect completing probation and making positive social change [4]. Advocating for policy change in how the government deals with offenders on probation must be conducted to allow more significant opportunities for offenders.

Problem Statement

According to Robert Merton [5], crime is a result of strain on the lives of offenders. When an individual cannot obtain goals in life through legitimate means, these same individuals will turn to illegitimate means to obtain those goals [5]. Once the individual is convicted of a felony, they become labeled as an offender, and obtaining employment becomes difficult because they must check the box. Offenders, called defendants in Criminal Justice, cannot pay their fees and fines and are eventually sent to prison. This threat of incarceration only increases the strain on the defendant, causing a return to criminality (ibid.). Another policy that gets in

the way of creating positive change is the prohibition of Federal student financial aid being made available to those convicted of drug charges [6]. This policy must be changed to allow offenders to live better through increasing education. The current practice puts offenders in the endless loop of offending and reoffending. This review is essential to start a dialogue in changing the policy of how probation approaches rehabilitation.

Advocating Policy Change

The first step that needs to take place is there needs to be a community employment program that hires people who have been placed on probation. The State of Texas has a program called Project Re-Integration of Offenders (Project RIO) to help offenders re-integrate into the community upon release from prison [7]. The Project Rio program requires the offender to have a Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) Identification Number to receive services from the project (ibid.). Project Rio has shown to be effective in decreasing the State of Texas. This project needs to be expanded to assist those people who have been placed on probation and face the same problems of not finding, obtaining, and keeping employment. When offenders cannot get a job that supports their families, it sets them up for failure. Project Rio, only helping those offenders who have gone to prison, fails to help those offenders who are on probation, increasing their odds of having their probation revoked and being sent to prison. Probation, the

TDCJ, and the Texas Workforce must establish a training program to provide employment where they make enough money to support their families. This program will also require support from the State legislature.

According to the current rules, convicted drug users are prohibited from using Federal Financial Aid for education [6]. Obtaining financial aid for offenders on probation for drug charges is a meaningful policy change that needs to be addressed and changed, allowing offenders to get an education and better their lives. Together with the retraining and employment programs made available through Project Rio, the Federal student financial aid programs can help pay for the education programs up to and including a bachelor's degree, allowing the defendant the opportunity to increase their education and to obtain employment which meets the needs of strain theory. The offender becomes a productive member of society and can meet their goals through legitimate means and avoiding criminality [5].

The idea of probation is to give the individual a second chance to become a productive member of society. However, society currently ostracizes offenders placed on probation by not giving them employment and not allowing education programs [8]. Expanding the Project Rio program and allowing offenders on probation to continue access to the Pell Grant will increase their chances of completing probation and being successful agents of social change.

Stakeholders

With every social change agency, some stakeholders have groups to answer [9]. The first Stakeholders impacted by these policy changes are the offenders themselves. The offender can influence the outcome of probation based on their attitude toward their rehabilitation. If the offender is serious about their rehabilitation, the State and Federal governments should make rehabilitation easier.

A second stakeholder is the State of Texas. The State of Texas will be responsible for implementing the employment and training program within the probation department. The State will want to ensure that the program is effective and want to have a voice in how the program is administered. State programs cost money, and if they are ineffective, that program needs to be ended.

A third stakeholder is the Federal Department of Education. The Federal Government might have the most significant stake in the policy change. Allowing people convicted of drug charges to have financial aid while on probation will be a step that must be taken to be efficient. There is a significant movement to not allow drug users to receive aid because of the "war on drugs." Offenders who have not been sent to prison and are on probation must receive the aid they need to become successful.

Conclusion

As agents of positive social change, if we are serious, we need to start changing the lives of those on probation. Probation is a second chance to become a productive member of society [10]. Allowing financial aid to drug users and expanding employment programs and training to those placed on probation will increase the self-esteem of the clients on probation, decreasing recidivism [11].

The felony box and the prohibitions of federal financial aid to those convicted on drug charges only continue to prevent offenders from bringing about positive change to their lives and further prevent positive social change from coming to the greater community. These restrictions do not allow the offender to achieve the American dream. As mentioned by Merton [5], if a person cannot meet their basic needs, the individual will return to criminality to meet those needs. The extremely high levels of recidivism evidence this return to criminality because of a lack of availability.

Removing the limitations of the felony box on employment applications and allowing offenders the ability to gain financial aid to go to college will drastically change the lives of offenders. The Probation Officer can bring real change to the offender's life with tools that ensure that offenders can increase their education and avoid having to check "the Box," actually allowing the offender to have a real second chance at life.

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