Connecticut’s Collaborative Approach to Sex Offender Supervision & Treatment and the Role of the Victim Advocate

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Connecticut is the only state to utilize sexual assault victim advocates throughout their state parole and probation sex offender management programs. What began as an innovative pilot program in 1998 between sexual assault victim advocates, probation, and treatment providers has developed into a nationally-recognized model for the supervision of sex offenders.

Connecticut’s Sex Offender Supervision Unit/Parole Special Management Units consists of Probation/Parole Officers who supervise sex offenders, treatment providers from the Center for the Treatment of Problem Sexual Behavior (CTPSB), and victim advocates from Connecticut Sexual Assault Crisis Services (CONNSACS). The role of the victim advocate was created in order to ensure that sexual assault victims have a voice in the supervision and treatment of sex offenders on probation and parole. This collaborative approach is instrumental in holding offenders accountable, providing sexual assault victims with comprehensive services, and promoting community safety.

For many years Connecticut Sexual Assault Crisis Services (CONNSACS) and its member centers had little interaction with probation. Typically, victim advocates assisted and supported victims as they gave impact statements for the pre-sentence investigation and statements at the time of sentencing. As an agency, CONNSACS had some experience working with sex offender treatment providers. This relationship developed as a result of victims asking advocates, “why – why me, why did he/she do this?” CONNSACS did not have the answer, so they looked for people who might. Conversations began with CTPSB in an attempt to find out what sex offenders were thinking in order to answer these questions for victims. In time, CONNSACS conducted cross training and education with CTPSB and then together to outside audiences. During this same time, CTPSB established a working relationship with probation after having done years of evaluations and treatment with probation clients.

When Connecticut passed its version of Megan’s Law in 1995, adult probation was charged with providing guidelines to officers regarding community notification. They had the foresight to invite all agencies with a vested interest to the table. Probation, parole, treatment, CONNSACS, law enforcement and others came together to discuss the guidelines. As these discussions progressed, the agencies involved found that they had common goals. These goals included victim safety, community safety, and wanting offenders to succeed in treatment in order to reduce recidivism and therefore prevent future victimization.

Also during 1995, a federal crime bill was passed. STOP VAWA (Services, Training, Officers, and Prosecutors formula grants from the Violence Against Women Act) money became available to address violence against women. There was strong encouragement from the federal government that these projects should be collaborative approaches. CONNSACS received a grant that was awarded to a community-based rape crisis center to pilot a program in which an advocate would work with probation, parole, law enforcement and treatment providers. This original model was tested in the New London, CT area. This advocate was employed by the community-
based center serving this region. As such, she was pulled between the responsibilities at the center (hotline, counseling clients, community outreach, etc.) and the needs of the collaboration. Subsequent discussions were held by the involved agencies as to how to improve the program. Through these discussions, a second unit was created in the New Haven area in 1998. It was an enhanced version of the New London model. Added to the New Haven unit was a victim advocate who would work with probation and treatment as an equal collaborative partner. In this model, the advocate would be employed by CONNSACS but would spend four days per week in the New Haven Office of Adult Probation to eliminate some of the conflicting priorities the previous community-based advocate had experienced.

The team staff came from each of three agencies: CONNSACS, CTPSB, and Court Support Services Division - Adult Probation (CSSD). Each agency held a distinct and separate role from the others but everyone worked together as equal, collaborative partners. This meant constant communication among all members during weekly unit meetings, team field visits, officers and the advocates sitting in on treatment groups, as well as meeting with offender support systems as a team.

This model became a national mentoring site through the Center for Sex Offender Management. Soon after, a victim advocate was added to the New London unit once again and a third unit was created in the Hartford area. In 2007, CSSD decided to make the program statewide. Today, a combination of state and federal funds support CONNSACS victim advocates on all Sex Offender Supervision Units in Connecticut as well as victim advocates on the Parole Special Management Unit.

Robert Santoemma, Chief Probation Officer II assigned to Sex Offender Supervision and Special Projects, notes the importance of the collaboration: “The supervision of sexual offenders in the community requires a partnership between victim advocacy groups, sex offender treatment, parole, probation, other law enforcement agencies and the Court. Connecticut’s collaborative model is inclusive of all of these disciplines, which serves to increase community safety and offers the opportunity to end the cycle of sexual abuse. We truly cannot do this work alone.”

**The Role of the Unit Sexual Assault Victim Advocate**

The Role of a Sex Offender Supervision Unit Victim Advocate(SOSU VA) differs greatly from the role of other advocates. The SOSU VA works with the victims of offenders who have been convicted of a sexual offense and have been sentenced to probation or parole. The SOSU VA may begin working with the victim at the time that the pre-sentence investigation is being written. She/He will notify the victim(s) once the offender has come to probation and will keep the victim informed of issues related to the offender’s status as well as answer their questions and address their concerns. She/He will act as a liaison between the victim and the SOSU to give the victims a voice in the supervision/treatment process. Throughout this process the victim may also be working with community based sexual assault victim advocates through CONNSACS member programs through a pre-existing relationship or through a referral made SOSU VA.

The SOSU VA works in the probation office and will have contact with the offender through office visits with the offender’s probation officer; presence and participation in treatment groups; family meetings with the SOSU, the offender, and the offender’s support people; and visits with probation officers into the offender’s home and workplace. The SOSU VA will provide feedback to the rest of the unit regarding the offender’s treatment and probation. This feedback can come as a result of a request from a victim, information from a tertiary victim or community member, or from the SOSU VA’s general experience in victim dynamics.
The SOSU VA role is also unique in the contact with and support they provide to tertiary victims (offender’s family and friends). The SOSU VA reaches out and provides services to these individuals including to education on sexual assault, education on the probation process/probation conditions, information on being an approved supervisor, information regarding the tertiary support group, and any other services needed to be supportive of the tertiary victim.

While SOSU VA’s have contact with the offender, their client remains the victim. The SOSU VA always presents the requests of the victim to the SOSU in an effort to provide the victim with what she/he needs.

**Victim-Centered Unit Response: Case Example**

John* was convicted of sexually assaulting his girlfriend Jill* after they bought their first home together. At John’s parole board hearing, Jill submitted a statement not only asking that he be released, but that they also be allowed to resume their relationship. John was granted an early release at which time I contacted Jill to explain the conditions of his release. Jill requested that I advocate for her request for reunification with John. I explained that unfortunately because of John’s parole stipulations, he would not initially be allowed to have contact with her. With Jill’s permission, I shared her request with John’s parole officer who informed me that a decision could not be made regarding reunifying John and Jill until after John had been evaluated for treatment. For several weeks I maintained contact with Jill and acted as a liaison with the unit. Before a decision could be made regarding reunification, John’s parole officer discovered John and Jill had been having contact with each other without approval. This was a direct violation of John’s parole stipulations, and John was taken back into department of corrections custody. Jill was distraught and blamed herself for John’s re-incarceration. I worked closely with Jill over several months to ensure she had the resources and information that she needed to get through this difficult time. Six months passed, and John was once again granted an early release. This time when I contacted Jill to inform her of John’s release, she did not wish to proceed with reunification but did not want John to know. She feared if John found out she wanted to end their relationship that he would retaliate. She explained that John had a drinking problem and would become violent.

I received a frantic phone call from Jill one day informing me that John had been calling her on the phone all day attempting to meet with her. She was afraid to tell him that she did not want to meet with him and that their relationship was over. When she did not meet with John as planned, he continued to threaten and harass her. Fearful that John would find her, Jill called and asked for assistance. At that time I went over a safety plan with Jill and informed John’s parole officer of his phone calls. John’s global position satellite (GPS) indicated that he was in the geographic area of where Jill was currently residing. After a discussion with the parole officer about my concern for Jill’s safety, the parole officer made a decision to pick John up immediately. When the officers arrived at John’s location, he was intoxicated and was contemplating disarming his GPS. John was taken into custody without incident, and Jill experienced some relief knowing that her safety was of primary concern, not only to the victim advocate, but to the Parole Special Management Unit as well.