

**PUBLIC OUTREACH AND
HALFWAY HOUSES
RESEARCH AND
INTERGOVERNMENTAL SOLUTIONS
FINAL REPORT**

Summary of Findings

August 2002

**Center for Community Corrections
In partnership with
Doble Research Associates, Inc.**

**For the Open Society Institute
Criminal Justice Initiative**

PART ONE:

Exploring the Importance of Community Voices in Establishing Halfway Houses and Other Community Justice Facilities

This project explored the ways that the establishment of community justice services and residential halfway houses could be made more acceptable and to find evidence of whether listening to the voices of community members has in fact helped in the location of community justice services and halfway houses.

About the Dimensions of NIMBY

A goal of the project was to gather information about how to successfully establish and improve the use of halfway houses and other community justice services and facilities by addressing a major obstacle: the Not In My Backyard (NIMBY) syndrome. Despite surveys that show public support for the concept and many of the services of community-based correctional programs, when the concrete proposal is made of siting a future halfway house close to home, the community inevitably develops opposition. The opposition is increasingly successful in derailing the establishment of a new program, and several states have not been able to open new halfway house facilities for months or years at a time despite frequent requests for proposals.

The NIMBY syndrome is all too familiar to providers and the public alike. Thanks to the generosity of the Open Society Institute, in the Spring of 2002, the Center for Community Corrections (“Center”) undertook a series of interviews to see whether there are ways in which community-based programs for probationers at risk of being sent to prison, or for those being released on parole, particularly residential pro-

grams, could be made more acceptable to both communities and neighborhoods.

A Description of this Research

This project consisted of a preliminary literature review, collecting contextual information about each jurisdiction, meetings with justice agency leaders and a panel of distinguished advisors to explore the roots, costs, complexity and dimensions of this phenomena. We have gathered information through focus groups and telephone interviews. The 75 telephone interviews, each lasting a minimum of half an hour, were conducted with public officials, members of the business, social service, religious, and civic sectors, and neighbors of these facilities. Six sites were selected in different areas of the country. They included communities housing a significant number of small residential programs, areas which had experienced major neighborhood confrontations when a particular program sought entry, and one community in which, once an “appropriate site” had been selected, there was full public acceptance and support.

PART TWO:

Findings and Conclusions

Interviews and focus groups affirmed that when people identify factors to be considered in thinking about a new community justice facility or halfway house, public safety is the paramount consideration. A number of other factors contribute to the notion of public safety and what is acceptable with respect to persons under supervision in the community.

About the Findings

Many studies of both successful and unsuccessful siting of halfway houses have been conducted, enumerating the fears of neighbors around public safety and depreciation of property values. Our purpose in this project was to explore in greater depth the public's perceptions of any and all halfway houses, and then to probe for suggestions on how to make them more acceptable, particularly those for people under supervision. From a search of the literature, this appears to be the first time public officials, community leaders and neighbors have been asked not only for their views about community programs, but for their suggestions on how to make these facilities more acceptable to a neighborhood.

From these interviews and conversations, six elements emerged as critical to the public's and the neighbors' acceptance of community-based programs, especially of residential programs for people under supervision. The elements are:

- an engaged public;
- a well-managed program, with access to drug and alcohol treatment and job development;
- community input and ongoing involvement;
- visible contributions to the community;
- placement of all but very small programs away from residential neighborhoods; and

- a careful assessment of the community prior to entering it.

Many programs already contain most of these elements, but all of them, we found, are critically important to community acceptance.

An Overview of the Findings and Conclusions from the Interviews

1. AN ENGAGED PUBLIC.

To be successfully integrated into a community, a halfway house needs a public that understands its purpose and neighbors who are comfortable with its procedures. Those interviewed had at least a sense that halfway house programs were to prepare residents for successful living in the broader community. Participants in focus groups and a good number of telephone interview participants indicated empathy and concern for those under the criminal justice system. Many had direct experience with community corrections, either because a family member or they themselves had been in a program or facility. Some called for more rehabilitative programs that would erase stigma, and make those who had served their time "whole" again.

However, when it came to those services and programs for people under supervision, the fears for the safety of themselves and their families were

clearly a major obstacle. There was little understanding that there can be safety without walls, and that there are measures of control that can be exercised “on the street.” And the public failed to see the programs as a long-term public safety measure. They understood the benefits to the residents, but did not see that a gradual easing back to “normal life” might prevent a return to crime.

That a need to educate the public to the purposes of these programs was advocated by many was therefore not surprising. And because of the overriding concerns for safety, information needs to be stressed about control elements that can be in place to help ensure no untoward events and, if incidents were to happen, immediate consequences for the offender.

But imparting information alone is not enough. To assure understanding and comfort about safety, community members need also to be sufficiently engaged with the programs as to know that operations are meeting expectations, and that measures one expected are in fact in place. And to ensure integration into the community, programs must be sufficiently open to allow volunteers to help residents in their transition back to the broader world.

2. A WELL-MANAGED PROGRAM, WITH ACCESS TO DRUG AND ALCOHOL TREATMENT AND JOB DEVELOPMENT.

The public needs to have confidence in the competence of those running the programs. People in each of the focus groups saw authorities as untrustworthy and many telephone interview respondents voiced similar views. Concern for quality and professionalism was mentioned by many. Programs run by local providers, known to and trusted by the community, obviously stand the best chance of acceptance. For providers coming from the outside, particularly for for-profit providers, the trust will be difficult to develop. In those cases, a convincing track record and the prior support of a cadre of local people whom the community respects will be essential.

The need for alcohol and drug treatment and for job skills and placement was universally recognized. While spiritual support and educational opportunities were deemed important, treatment and jobs emerged as the number one priority, with jobs taking pride of place in the eyes of the community. This understanding bodes well for future funding.

Participants in focus groups spent a lot of time talking about management of effective facilities. Many telephone interviews and focus groups indicated a need for “zero tolerance” in dealing with residents who cause trouble. Most wanted community members to help in screening placement of prison releasees in their communities.

3. COMMUNITY INPUT AND ONGOING INVOLVEMENT.

The need to solicit early input from the community and a measure of continuing local oversight emerged loud and clear. Despite the fact that by so doing opposition will have time to organize, the importance of early contact with the neighbors before rumors arise, and of public meetings despite their contentiousness, was mentioned repeatedly.

Mentioned even more frequently was the importance of a local advisory committee to attest to the quality of the ongoing program, to provide a channel for input or questions, and to provide access to community resources.

A local provider with a local board of governance is an obvious asset, giving members of the public a sense that those they trust are looking after their interests. A local advisory committee can provide linkages to needed services, judgment of relevant professionals, and communication with the neighborhood.

4. VISIBLE CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE COMMUNITY.

The programs are seen as helpful to the individual residents, but not to their surroundings. Although a few respondents easily came up with such positives as making meeting rooms available to the community, rehabilitating run down houses or cleaning up a street, most could not name a contribution that the program had made or was making to their area. This points up the feeling of exploitation, that a neighborhood is being asked to accept a less than exemplary element without any quid pro quo.

While programs may well be contributing to an area’s well being, those contributions are not noticed, and need to be given publicity.

Program directors, when introducing themselves to a new neighborhood, need to show how the program will enhance the area and the services it will provide on an ongoing basis. Focus group and interview

suggestions included a welcome array of additional benefits such as improved lighting, more community police presence, and neighborhood improvement such as parks and recreation centers.

5. PLACEMENT OF ALL BUT VERY SMALL PROGRAMS AWAY FROM RESIDENTIAL NEIGHBORHOODS.

Because the focus groups and telephone surveys were held in neighborhoods with community facilities, participants were often concerned about equity of placement of facilities—that they are disproportionately located in their neighborhoods where there are many minorities or persons of color.

The impoverished or transient neighborhoods where traditionally such programs are located have left residents feeling “dumped on” and demeaned. While willing to accept some programs, the tendency to load an unresisting neighborhood has left its inhabitants determined to accept no more.

We had hoped to find suggestions for procedural initiatives that would make residential programs more acceptable, or at least less unacceptable, to neighborhoods. Reluctantly, we conclude from our findings that, until such programs are understood to make a significant contribution to an area that is in need, they are more likely to be located either in light industrial areas or in buildings that are somewhat removed from the surrounding houses. This becomes particularly important as correctional officials plan to increase the number of inmates transitioning back to the community through these facilities. The public has a universal objection to those convicted of sex and violent crimes in their neighborhoods.

The residents of the more affluent areas know how to mount the political opposition in such a way as to defeat virtually any and all correctional programs. And it appears that only once a program has been experienced, and without incident, will it then become an accepted part of the area.

6. A CAREFUL ASSESSMENT OF THE COMMUNITY PRIOR TO ENTERING IT.

Each community has its own distinct flavor. A knowledge of the demographics will alert a potential provider to the presence of children, which will automatically trigger in the neighbors strong fears about the safety of their families.

Each community has its own history, perhaps of prior halfway houses intended for a different population, that succeeded or failed. The building selected may have a history that will affect how its proposed use will be felt. An assessment of those histories will allow a sensitivity to the situation, and prevent the opening of old wounds.

A careful assessment of a community will also allow a potential provider to understand the needs of a particular neighborhood or area. Those interviewed often found it hard to see how a halfway house contributes to the broader community or to its immediate neighbors, as mentioned in (4). Knowledge of those needs will allow a provider to fashion a service or other contribution to the neighborhood which will address its particular need.

Providers, both public and private, meeting with the Center in June, enthusiastically supported the concept of some generic educational materials which would describe the purposes and methods of halfway houses for those transitioning from institutional life back to their home communities. The providers also signaled strong support for advisory boards where no local governing boards of provider agencies exist. Most of the providers present already have such channels of communication constructed with the broader public, and have produced useful materials on which to build.

Again, the Center wishes to emphasize the importance of all five elements to the successful siting and operating of programs. If they become a standard part of all residential programs, they will help members of the public better understand the public safety dimension, know what to expect, feel they have some input into siting and external procedures, allow them a back-and-forth with the residents and, through a local board, a measure of oversight of ongoing operations. Given that federal and state agencies are planning to use halfway houses to transition as many inmates as possible back to the community, we hope these elements, drawn from members of the community and neighborhoods, can provide a smoother entry than the ones experienced by so many providers.

PART THREE:

Findings from the Literature Review and Suggestions for Future Research

The literature and research in the field should address ways that the public can become more familiar with community justice programs, participate in problem-solving around issues of perceived public safety and equity, and develop mechanisms for determining that their local programs are well-managed, provide quality treatment and services and respond to community needs.

Suggestions From the Literature Review and this Project's Advisory Groups

1. Literature in the community corrections field and research in social science areas should be directed to developing ways that the public can become more familiar with community justice programs, services and halfway houses. A number of studies have been done on the public safety impact of correctional facilities on their communities. The overwhelming majority of studies show that there is no negative effect on public safety in the vicinity of a correctional facility. Coverage of NIMBY is rare in the area of community corrections literature, and this leaves little written information for the public, professionals and researchers to help solve complicated problems of siting programs for persons under supervision in the community.
2. Public officials and program developers should become more aware of both the empathy and equity concerns of immediate neighbors in areas where halfway houses are located. The case studies of selected sites indicate that where there are neighbors' concerns about "dumping" or "concentration" of facilities in a residential area, facilities are more likely to eventually be located in a more removed industrial or commercial area. Very little recent research has focused on community corrections or halfway houses where neighbors have been accommodated, but there is similar research on prisons, alcohol treatment, mental health and toxic waste sites related to NIMBY.
3. Literature and research need to address the public's concern with the needs of persons under supervision for drug and alcohol treatment, employment skills, education and mental health assistance and community availability of programs. The depth and variety of public attitudes to siting have been explored in several studies. The Department of Health and Human Services published a comprehensive study entitled: *Siting Drug and Alcohol Treatment Programs: Legal Challenges to the NIMBY Syndrome*.
4. Openness to the idea of accepting a community justice facility or halfway house needs to be examined in more detail. Although the research details the predictable concerns about public safety and property values, few questions have been asked of the public. For example, it has long been speculated that property values decline in a community with a correctional facility. However, the existing studies involving correctional cost impact indicate that property values nearby do not decline and that they may even increase as a result of location of a facility.

5. The importance of public motivation in siting needs to receive additional attention in the areas of zoning, legislation and program management. Public ownership, involvement and participation in siting has been suggested as a key to resolving NIMBY problems. Existing studies in the field include case studies and surveys of various aspects of public opinion. (See listing in Part Four.)

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