



Implementing Probation Group Reporting

James E. Henderson Jr., MSW and Stephanie Avalon
May 2018

The Battered Women's Justice Project
1801 Nicollet Ave South, Suite 102 Minneapolis MN 55403
technicalassistance@bwjp.org
800-903-0111, prompt 1

This project was supported by Grant No. 2016-TA-AX-K056 awarded by the Office on Violence Against Women, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed in this (document/program/exhibit) are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women.

Traditional probation practice involves a great deal of tracking of offenders. Probation officers (POs) need to keep current information about probationer's addresses, phone numbers, employment status, and compliance with other probation requirements. Many probation officers meet at least monthly with people on their caseload. Caseloads can vary by jurisdiction.¹ Meetings may be scheduled for anywhere from fifteen to thirty minutes per offender and follow a fairly routine pattern with domestic violence offenders.

The probation officer:

- asks the probationer to update any contact information,
- asks about job searches, housing, any police contact, etc.,
- inquiries about failure to comply with probation requirements, like enrollment in Batterer Intervention Programming (BIP) or providing Urine Analysis (UA) to prove abstinence compliance,
- explains the importance of compliance and lets the probationer know what will happen if he/she fails to comply, and,
- sets up a new appointment.

On a typical day of back to back meetings with probationers, the probation officer will spend most of the time repeating advice and recommendations over and over to people who may be skeptical about the whole process due to various barriers and/or distrust of the system. As caseloads increase and resources shrink, Probation Group Reporting (PGR) provides an effective solution for balancing accountability and demand. The use of PGR for domestic violence cases was developed by James Henderson when he was a probation officer in Ann Arbor, MI. PGR streamlines some of the daily tasks allowing probation officers to develop and build connections with other partners and advocacy programs that can benefit victims and offenders.² Furthermore, since offenders are in a group setting, it enables probationers to inform each other of the consequences of non-compliance, the impact of which may be very different from that of probation officers informing offenders of the consequences.

Site Visit Observations

James Henderson has been promoting the practice of PGR for domestic violence offenders through his trainings³ around the country, and he wanted to see how early adapters had implemented the practice. He wanted to specifically observe a) how probation officers with little experience facilitating groups were faring, b) any changes that were made locally, and c)

¹ It is well documented, that since 1980 probation caseloads have been steadily increasing. See M.T. DeMichele, "Probation and Parole's Growing Caseloads and Workload Allocations: Strategies for Managerial Decision Making, April 2007, American Probation and Parole Association, <https://www.appa-net.org/eweb/docs/appa/pubs/SMDM.pdf>

² Henderson, Jr., James E, with Sadusky, Jane, "Probation Group Reporting: Innovative and Effective Supervision in Domestic Violence Cases" April 2014, BWJP technicalassistance@bwjp.org

³ Jim Henderson is nationally recognized for his work on PGR and has trained and written on this practice for many years.

some of the challenges that PGR presented in localities. Site visits were arranged in two communities that had adopted the use of PGR and were conducted by James Henderson and Stephanie Avalon. The sites chosen were Rockford, IL and Coeur d'Alene, ID. Probation officers from both communities had heard James speak about PGR and his work in Ann Arbor at national conferences. Further, both sites invited him to provide them with numerous intensive trainings onsite. He had also worked closely with the Probation Departments to develop policy and practice. It was thought that it would be best to observe the adoption of the practice in localities where there was a commitment from many systems' players to ensure victim safety and offender accountability.

The two communities were geographically and racially different. One community was urban and the other rural. Both were progressive on the issue of domestic violence in their state because they have a well-coordinated criminal justice response, a strong commitment from the bench and probation, and a long history of valuing victim and community safety within the practices of the criminal justice process. The observations were intended to examine the ways in which group reporting had been implemented, document any challenges that were encountered, and assess how group reporting was working. The site visits at both locations included meeting with judges and probation officers, observing groups, and discussing the group process following observations.

Rockford, IL Observations

The first site visited was Rockford, IL, the county seat of Winnebago County. Rockford has a population of 148,278 in 2015 with an outlying metropolitan area population of 349,431. While the metropolitan area shows a slight increase from 2010, the city itself saw a 3.1% decline from 2010. The city is mostly white (65.1%) with a black population at 20.1%.⁴

PGR is the standard practice established by departmental policy in Rockford and adopted as early as 2014. Four groups of probationers were observed.⁵ All the groups consisted of adult males on probation for domestic assault. Each group was conducted by a different probation officer. The groups enabled us to observe not only differences in how individual officers conducted the groups, but also the commonalities among groups because of the standardization resulting from the policy. The groups were relatively small. Three of the groups had only six probationers. One group consisted of nine probationers, one of whom was white. No matter the size of the group, the sessions lasted an hour.

Details of the Observations

⁴ Data from: <http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045215/1765000>

⁵ BWJP's James E. Henderson, Jr. and Stephanie Avalon observed group reporting July 5 and 6, 2016. The day began with an overview of Winnebago County Domestic Violence Coordinated Court provided by Presiding Judge Rosemary Collins and Jessica Maveus, Project Manager.

Each group began with the probation officer (PO) in charge handing out a form called “Winnebago County Adult Probation” to be filled out by the probationers. The form tracks changes in address, contacts with victims, new offenses or police contacts, employment, treatment, public service work, payments, and drug and alcohol use. Lying on the form is considered lying to the PO and can lead to revocation. Each PO also provides a reminder card with the date of the next group report. One PO even took photos of the reminder card to be able to demonstrate in court that the probationer knew the date of the group report.

During each of the one-hour groups, the PO asked each probationer questions like: “What’s been going on?” “What are you doing that makes things safer for your wife and kids?” “How are you doing on fees and fines?” When the client had an issue, the PO asked the group, “You guys have any feedback for ___?” Each PO used lots of encouraging comments like “Awesome, congrats on that!” These questions established rapport early on and made the probationers feel comfortable with the group processes.

The largest group was led by a probation officer who started groups in January of 2014 when



Figure 1: Probation Group Reporting in Rockford, IL.

the department first implemented group reporting.⁶ The men in this group were connecting with each other. They were animated and freely responded to each other during the group session. When asked what they were learning from the Partner Abuse Intervention Program (PAIP)⁷ they said, “Abuse is not just putting your hands on a woman,” and, “It made you see how bad you really are.” Although there are a number of different PAIP programs, the men in any one group all attend the same PAIP program. POs also receive reports from the PAIP programs on compliance and/or non-compliance for each of the offenders. This facet of the program allows for more accountability and establishes connections between the men and enabling them to take more responsibility when there is a new offense. For example, two of the men in the large group had been arrested for driving after suspension and one had a DUI as well. They were pretty despondent about that. One referred to “catching a new case,” but the group suggested he rephrase that to take more responsibility.

⁶ They first heard about Probation Group Reporting in 2011 at a Center for Court Innovation open house in New York. They, then witnessed a group, led by Ann Arbor Probation officer Dave Oblak at an open house in 2012. After attending this session, they requested a 1.5-day training by BWJP trainer James Henderson in 2013. Nicole Tichner supervisor of Winnebago Domestic Violence Probation established group reporting in 2014 as the standard practice guided by agency policy.

⁷ By statute, all domestic violence offenders on probation are required to attend Partner Abuse Intervention Program (PAIP).

The smaller groups did not interact with the observers, but the largest group agreed to be photographed. They also agreed to share with observers their thoughts on group reporting. The probationers in this group said they liked PGR better than seeing the PO alone which they said could be “scary” since they couldn’t tell what he was thinking. According to some of the probationers, group reporting provided them opportunities to connect and learn from each other. It enabled them to hear and gain knowledge from different perspectives. This group was the only one of the four observed that functioned like a group; the men responded to each other without prompting, and appeared animated and engaged. This group had been meeting for close to a year, which may explain their level of comfort with each other.

Post Observation Discussions: Concerns and Solutions

Following each group, the observers discussed their perceptions with the PO who had led it. The POs also raised issues and concerns, and offered potential solutions. The following notes summarize the areas of discussion:

1) Time Management: Although it is departmental policy, Winnebago County POs do not see all their clients in group reporting. One PO admitted that in a total caseload of 125 DV offenders only 15-20 were doing group reporting. Sometimes this was unavoidable. Probationers with mental illness issues, for example, might not be appropriate for group because they could be too disruptive. POs recognized that Probation Group Reporting is more efficient than meeting individually because:

- Probationers challenging and questioning each other is far more compelling than hearing from PO who is seen as part of the “system.”
- When probationers assist each other in overcoming barriers like transportation, this builds connections among them.
- Resistance to programming can be addressed by probationers themselves who describe their own consequences for missing groups.
- Probationers encourage each other to attend PAIP, saying things like, “You’ll get it by the 13th week.”

However, POs still need to see many on their caseloads individually. They then have to record all the reported information for each probationer gathered from the group session as well as individual session on the court computer. All this work ate significantly into the potential time-savings resulting from using the group reporting method.

Two possible solutions were offered on the time issue: One suggestion was to have a group that ended around 6 p.m. on Mondays. The county building is open until 6 p.m. on Mondays, allowing some potential for later groups. However, groups cannot be offered at night, because of union contracts and overtime concerns. Winnebago County employees are represented by a union that prohibits working evening hours. A better solution could be that meeting individually

with a probationer not be a choice. Besides attending the group session, probationers could also attend an individual session; however, this could pose a problem for probationers with day jobs, adding to their burden. A policy mandating attendance in PGRs was implemented in Ann Arbor by James Henderson, and requests for individual meetings dropped dramatically.

2) Linkages with PAIP: Rockford has the ideal situation in that all the probationers attend the same batterer intervention program. POs found this helpful for monitoring compliance. Further, a goal of PGR is partly to provide feedback to probationers in synergy with the PAIP. The POs thought that better linkages would improve both the PAIP and the group reporting. Although several POs have observed PAIP sessions to see how groups are facilitated, they have not been able to attend the 20-hour informational program offered by the PAIP.

A solution offered was to invite both victim services and PAIP programs to observe probation group reporting. Facilitators would see how probation supported their work and offer feedback on group facilitation.

3) Group Facilitation: Some of the POs expressed concern about not having much group facilitation experience. This may have been partly why they were not scheduling more of their probationers into groups. However, observations demonstrated that the POs were conducting the groups with little difficulty and were offering a supportive setting to the probationers as confirmed by the endorsements of the probationers themselves.

Observing groups can help probation officers overcome their own concerns about facilitating groups. Some of the more inexperienced POs were present to observe the large group that was being conducted by a PO with considerable experience. That group demonstrated easy, relaxed, and amiable relationships. The men's comments about their preference for the group setting was a huge endorsement of this practice. Two probation officers from McClean County in Illinois also observed the group reporting and were inspired to immediately implement group reporting for all their domestic violence offenders. One of them, a seasoned PO, was concerned that she might not have the skills to facilitate groups. Observing the groups gave her the confidence that she could do it. The McClean POs were also a bit concerned that they might have complaints from their probationers about meeting for a longer time. They were surprised and pleased that no one in the Rockford groups complained about the longer time for reporting in a group session. In fact, the experience of probationers in Rockford had been entirely positive with good feedback from the group members.⁸

Coeur d'Alene, ID

The second site chosen to observe Probation Group Reporting was Coeur d'Alene, ID.⁹ A more rural city, Coeur d'Alene, county seat of Kootenai County, ID, had a population in 2015 of

⁸ Conversation with Nicole Tennison on 11/15/2016.

⁹ BWJP's Stephanie Avalon and James E. Henderson Jr observed probation group reporting in Coeur d'Alene, ID on September 7th and 8th, 2016.

49,122. The city is 93.8% white with other ethnic groups making up the rest.¹⁰ Two of the groups observed consisted of female offenders. A third group was made up of male domestic violence offenders.

Details of the Observations



Figure 2: Probation Group Reporting in Coeur d'Alene, ID.

Each group was conducted by two probation officers: Mark Heid and Connie Morris, sitting side by side in a semi-circle with the offenders facing the POs. Both the first and the second groups consisted of six women on probation for a variety of offenses, not just domestic violence. Male and female offenders are never

included in the same probation group. Gender-responsive programming recognizes that each gender has differing needs and relate differently to other group members, hence the need for separate groups. The male offender group was a bit larger with eight domestic violence offenders attending. All the groups were held in the same manner. One of the POs held a laptop which he used to update information as the group reported. The other PO took the lead in questioning the probationers about their compliance.

Coeur d'Alene is mostly a white community, and this was reflected in the groups. The first female group was all white. The second one was mostly white with one Latina and one Native American. The male group was also a white group. During the session, it became obvious that the male group was clearly helping each other with jobs. One of the men had mentioned his employer was hiring and at least one other man had obtained employment through that connection.

The groups were conducted in an efficient manner, and, similar to Rockford, written forms were used to collect data and follow up appointments were made before the group ended. Each probationer is required to have random urine analysis (UA). Failure to do so would result in potential consequences. Similar to Rockford, POs opened the with encouraging questions in order to establish rapport, encouraged their probationers to share their stories, and complimented them on compliance and progress in areas like finding housing and employment.

¹⁰ <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045215/1616750>

Post Observation Discussions: Concerns and Solutions

1) Time Management: After observing the group, the POs shared their appointment book with the observers to demonstrate how much time they were saving. Once group was over, they had no updating left to do, since it was entered during the group. The POs used the saved time to



Figure 3: Probation Group Reporting in Coeur d'Alene, ID.

make field visits to probationers' homes and to connect with the BIP providers. The POs who were observed shared that they were the only POs in Coeur d'Alene who had the time to do field visits and connect with providers. Their practice stood out in the department. Having two probation officers hold each of the group reporting sessions together was beneficial: It allowed the POs to fully know each

other's caseloads. So, when one was ill or on vacation, the other could handle groups alone or respond to individual needs. They encouraged their probationers to communicate via email, noting that it provided a record.

Coeur d'Alene has a domestic violence court led by a judge who understands the issues for domestic violence probation. The POs were confident that their recommendations were taken seriously and they could inform probationers with confidence about the consequences they faced for noncompliance.

2) Linkages with BIPs: Like Rockford, Coeur d'Alene probation officers admitted that a stronger knowledge of BIPs would improve their ability to address issues in the group reporting. Holding a meeting where BIPs could describe their programs to judges, POs, and victim advocates could help to close this gap.

3) Group Facilitation: Some of the women in the group were on probation for intimate partner assault but the probation officers said they included women with other offenses, like driving under the influence, to have enough women for a group experience. A lot of supportive feedback did not occur during the group reporting observed because the women were there for varying offenses. The POs were certain the women were talking to each other and providing support outside the group. They could see this happening as they walked away from the group to their cars. They also described a recent situation where a woman who needed to get a UA done that day had no money on hand. The other women in the group opened their handbags and all provided her cash so that she could get the UA done without facing consequences.

The men's group was run like the one in Rockford and the probationers felt that being in a group setting assisted them in relying on each other and enabling them to take responsibility for their actions.

The POs were convinced that Probation Group Reporting promoted offender behavior change and made their jobs more interesting and effective.

General Recommendations

Coeur d'Alene and Rockford both demonstrate strong commitments to improving their response to domestic violence. Watching group reporting and engaging in discussions with judges and probation officers revealed some challenges to implementing group reporting as well as ideas for overcoming them. The Rockford probation department fully supports Group Reporting and is well on the way to full implementation. In Coeur d'Alene, two probation officers holding groups together was a very efficient approach with the added benefit that they both became familiar with all the probationers.

Challenges remain because this method of dealing with probationers' reporting differs from the norm. Rockford probation officers have strong support within their office and are beginning to reap the time-saving benefits of this practice. In Coeur d'Alene, the probation officers admitted that they were viewed skeptically by other probation officers in their county. In both communities, the judges and the POs felt that more connection with the BIPs that were operating in their community would improve their ability to promote offender behavior change. POs in both communities, as well as judges who spoke with the observers, were enthusiastic about inviting BIP staff and victim services to observe groups. With more information about individual differences POs would be better able to recommend certain programs over others for their probationers.

The observations validated the use of Probation Group Reporting. Despite the lack of experience POs had with group facilitation, they learned quickly that the groups basically run themselves. Greater facilitation skills might lead to an even better group process but it is not necessary to reap the benefits. Using Probation Group Reporting frees time for POs to engage with BIPs and conduct field visits to probationers' homes. Still, the greatest benefit is the increased engagement of the offenders who connect with and support each other while attending programming. Ultimately, Probation Group Reporting appears to be+ beneficial for all parties involved.