

PERILS OF PROCESS

Working with volunteers at the International Office*

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The International Office is part of the Dutch Probation Service. It works on behalf of three probation organizations in the Netherlands. The International Office provides information, advice, and support to detainees serving prison sentences abroad and their social network. In the regular probation and after-care service, working with volunteers has made a complete come back. There have always been volunteers at the International Office. Ever since its foundation in 1975, the International Office has been working closely with volunteers. Thanks to this experience, the International Office has a unique position within the probation and after-care service.

This article first briefly introduces the International Office's working practice and then discusses the deployment of volunteers and the dilemmas this entails.

Arrested abroad and then what?

Every year, the International Office counsels more than 2100 detainees in foreign detention. Most of them are detained in Europe, especially in Belgium, Germany, Spain, France, and the United Kingdom. When a Dutch citizen is arrested abroad, the local authorities first inform the embassy. Through the embassies, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs provides consular assistance. The embassies provide the detainees with an information package. This package contains an information brochure on the International Office and the application form with which counselling can be requested. That application form is necessary, as, unlike the probation and after-care service in the Netherlands, there is no judicial framework. Counselling is provided voluntarily.

The International Office employs thirteen regional coordinators. They are experienced probation officers who each coordinate a part of the world. With the help of the volunteer probation officers, they maintain contact, and support detainees abroad. In addition to this, the regional coordinator supports the social network of detainees through, among other things, office services and information days for the home front.

The mission of the International Office includes humanitarian motives (attention to the interests and needs of detainees) and rehabilitation motives (reduction of recidivism by the promotion of social inclusion) (see www.reclassering.nl/over-de-reclassering/bureau-buitenland).

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Visit of a volunteer probation officer

The International Office has a worldwide network of 300 volunteer probation officers. These are Dutch nationals living abroad. They visit the detainees every six to eight weeks and report back to the regional coordinator and the embassies. The regional coordinators of the International Office manage, coach, and train the volunteer probation officers.

During their visits, the volunteer probation officers encourage debate on the areas of life, that are justice and detention, finance, housing, social relations, education and work, and health. The volunteer probation officers list how the detainee operates in these areas of life, provide information and advice, and encourage reflection on behavior and choices made.

Professionalization of volunteers

Volunteer organizations are increasingly focusing on the professionalization of volunteers. Volunteers are given more tasks and responsibilities that require specific competencies and skills. They often follow an appointment procedure, sign a cooperation contract, and are obliged to abide by a volunteer policy. The range of courses offered by volunteer organizations is also expanding. Professionalization offers volunteers self-development; volunteers feel motivated and challenged to deepen their knowledge and skills. On the other hand, it also excludes volunteers who are not willing or able to do so. Moreover, the organization runs the risk of losing its individuality because volunteers have something different to offer than professionals.¹

The International Office recognizes these developments. The complex work practice and target group require professionalization. However, the 'individuality' of volunteers referred to sometimes clashes with the trend for the professionalization of volunteers. At the International Office, we see this individuality in the preferred attitude of many volunteer probation officers, best described as 'being present': being there, connecting and attuning to the other, the client perspective first, taking care of the relationship. It is from this attitude that the volunteer probation officers build a bond with the detainee. This attitude means that they connect detainees to the International Office by motivating them to apply for counselling and creating support for activities and interventions on the part of the International Office.

The International Office, at the same time, pursues goals that extend beyond the relationship and the 'bond' with the detainee. These goals are around encouraging self-reflection and promoting self-determination.

¹ M. van Bochove et al, *Deployment of volunteers at the probation service. Roles, dilemmas and success factors*, Rotterdam: Erasmus School of Health Policy & Management 2019.

To work on this, volunteer probation officers, for example, are trained in the principles of motivational interviewing, with which they are given tools to give substance and direction to a conversation. They are also trained in the life area method, that helps them to apply in the interview the aforementioned life areas over a long period, as foreign detentions often last several years.

These methods encourage self-reflection and promote self-determination by investigating the meaning of choices made and their consequences.

Applying such methods requires a different attitude from volunteer probation officers. It is necessary to keep a certain distance from the detainee and the situation in which the detainee finds him- or herself. The aforementioned goes against the said preferred attitude of the volunteer probation officers that is based on closeness, on the contrary.²

It is a complicating factor that detainees often focus on the present; they live in the here and now and are surviving in captivity. Detainees are preoccupied mainly with judicial procedures, detention conditions, and liaising with the social network. They appeal to the volunteer probation officers to pay attention to the 'here and now'. At the same time, the methods call for a broader view, i.e. the present, the past, and the future.

It is not at all easy for a probation officer, to tailor to the detainee and his or her needs, and, at the same time, keep one's distance and apply methods and techniques.

Search for balance

The International Office does see that volunteer probation officers have qualities that meet the needs of detainees. Applying methods and techniques is difficult. Volunteers are not professionals. It is a constant search to see to what extent the professionalization of volunteer probation officers is possible without compromising their 'individuality'. Solutions are sought in both recruitment and selection of volunteer probation officers as in training activities. By appointing volunteers with specific qualities and skills, a network is built of volunteers who are up to this complexity. Methods and techniques are taught through training activities. We adapt these activities to the possibilities of volunteer probation officers.

The International Office seeks the right balance between the preservation of the individuality of the volunteer probation officers, the needs of the detainees, and the department's social mission. It is not easy, practice is stubborn, but it is a fascinating challenge.

² M. Pape, *From misery to management. How may volunteers contribute to the development of self-determination in detainees abroad during an interview?* (master thesis), Utrecht: Dutch Probation Service, International Office.