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## “Volunteer Boards Face Challenge”

South Burlington, Vermont -- March 2, 2007

The community justice panels in Chittenden County are bracing for a big caseload increase. At issue is a prosecutor's policy change that could trigger a scramble for additional citizen volunteers.

Wednesday nights the South Burlington community reparative board helps city residents who have committed less serious crimes get headed in the right direction.

It is the board's job to determine how the offenders will make things right to the victims and the community at large.

It is one of 72 local reparative boards in 45 towns. The boards are comprised of citizen volunteers and corrections employees.

The boards are certain that forcing offenders to confront victims face-to-face is far more effective than the criminal courts.

"I've never seen a victim come and go away mad," said Don Lewis of South Burlington, a volunteer member of the city's Reparative Board.

"I like to use a little Judge Judy and Dr. Phil and I do and I enjoy it very much," said Susan Deacon, South Burlington, who also serves on the board voluntarily.

In one of the cases before the board this week, the offender is an eighth-grader. He has acknowledged that he and two teammates vandalized a city park picnic table after a football loss.

He agreed to perform a series of tasks requested by the board: to pay for the damage, write letters of apology, and write several research reports.

If he completes the tasks, he will not go to court and he will have no record. If he fails, he could be in court for months, and end up with

a permanent record.

T.J. Donovan, the new Chittenden County prosecutor, has asked the police to send more of these minor criminal cases to the volunteer boards instead of to him.

"The only types of cases that we are sending to these reparative boards or encouraging the police to send are the low-level misdemeanor cases retail theft disorderly conduct unlawful mischief. We have no choice," said Donovan. For the boards, the new policy will mean increased case loads and the need for additional volunteers. It is a prospect that draws a mixed reaction.

"It's tough enough to recruit people just for our regular weekly meetings," said Deacon.

"I've always been amazed that people are out there. You just have to know how to reach them," said Herb Sinkinson, Dept. of Corrections employee who oversees the administration of the 13 citizen Reparative Boards in Chittenden County.

For now the volunteers are certain they are reaching the offenders to change behavior and hopeful that other volunteers in their community will want to join them.

The state corrections department could not provide us with any statewide figures on how many cases have gone thru community justice boards since they were established a decade ago. But Winooski provides an example of how the system works.

Over the past five years, the city has averaged 63 referral cases a year.

The defendants have successfully completed the tasks prescribed in 82 % of the cases. usually involving an apology, paying for damage, and community service. 18% have failed to complete their tasks, so their their cases put back into the criminal court system.

Brian Joyce -- Channel 3 News

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