



National Association of Probation Executives
Supporting Executives in Community Supervision Agencies

Monthly Newsletter

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Signalling a Change: Appealing to GenZ Probation Officer Recruits

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Recruiting and hiring talented probation officers is becoming a daunting task. Hiring lists in the hundreds are dwindling to mere wading-level depths, even worse, single candidate lists in smaller, more rural departments. Unfortunately, probation departments will not be garnering any sympathy from the private sector as they are experiencing the same drought in hiring capable staff. Probation officers continuously adapting to changes in case management, departmental policies, and court expectations may be driving some of these shortages. As with any other modification in behavior, agencies will need to identify the problem, understand the next generation of officers, and develop viable ways to raise the interest in our profession. Most importantly, we need to set aside pride and acknowledge that the ‘ace in the hole’ fallback phrase, “but that’s the way we’ve always done it,” is hindering the ability to not only recruit, but retain already diminished staff. This review will not have an antidote for the conundrum we find ourselves in, but simply starting the discussion and acknowledging the need to change will improve chances.

Anyone in a leadership role has fleeting thoughts about the ‘glory days’ of hiring. Ironically, the next generation of administration will have the ‘the old person talking about walking uphill through feet of snow both ways’ analogy when recalling hiring woes. As a 10-year veteran in community corrections, I stepped into the profession during the height of the evidence-based practices movement. Hiring pools were plentiful when I started in the field in 2007. Trying to be the next person to fill a role was extremely competitive. Even if you knew someone within the department, the countless list of qualified candidates reduced aspirations of many.

With the towering piles of applications and resumes, agencies had the luxury of focusing minimal resources on recruitment tools. The simple advertisement or post on the employment website were more than enough to fill a list with potential candidates. Hiring fairs, recruitment fliers, and department ‘swag’ were rare, flippant concepts. The profession of probation was enough to recruit candidates. Unfortunately, the moral fascination with serving our communities has been compromised by a combination of poor wages and difficult caseloads. We have a responsibility to hire and retain qualified adults who provide respect and dignity through humble service.

In times of economic prosperity, recruiting in community corrections can be difficult.[i] This is because community corrections agencies must compete for job candidates with similarly situated industries

such as manufacturing companies, among other fields.[ii] One of the keys, then, for community corrections agencies is to understand what attracts potential recruits to their organization. No doubt, these incentives for recruitment look a bit different to those in younger age groups. For both hiring agencies and probation officer candidates, this may mean signalling to one another what each is looking for.

Signalling Theory

Employers face a dilemma in hiring practices where they are unsure the quality of a candidate until, at the very least, they can see that individual working. This is true in community corrections, where there are several employment “hurdles” placed in front of a candidate, such as background checks, written exams, drugs tests, etc. One way to cut down on this uncertainty is for candidates to send “signals” to prospective employers that they are appropriate for the job. Early research in this area considered the role of higher education in signalling a candidate is of high quality.[iii] Additionally, education may point to greater critical thinking skills for officers and hiring agencies may wish to look for signals such as prior experience in the field, displays of leadership (i.e., military service), and being a member of a team. That being the case, there may be some appeals which are particular to certain generations of recruits.

What do Gen Z'ers Value?

The GenZ generation is anyone born between 1997-2012.[iv] According to research, this cohort places a large value on connecting via social networks.[v] This way of connecting has likely evolved from the “early” use of Facebook to now using Instagram, Tik-Tok, and X (formerly known as Twitter). Regardless, this group seeks to connect with others quickly and on a near constant basis. Additional traits of this generation include independence and the desire to be entrepreneurs.[vi] These qualities can be embraced by community corrections agencies as they seek to recruit candidates who go out into communities and connect with clients. That is, hiring officers who will take the initiative to engage the community and use discretion while conducting their work. These appear to be desirable traits for any employee, but especially a community corrections officer, where the use of job discretion is important. Community corrections agencies may find these qualities attractive and encourage or promote new hires to employ these traits in their work. This might mean, for community corrections agencies, recognizing the importance of independent working atmospheres.

Conclusions

Recruiting, and retaining, high quality community corrections officers in the 21st Century is possible. In fact, there are excellent candidates available who would add value to a probation organization. It is true, especially with smaller hiring pools, that community corrections agencies will be competing against each other (and against other fields) for some of these recruits. Some of the necessary recruitment tools will be based on financial incentives and other attractions such as department culture, benefits packages, and work flexibility, to name a few. Recruiting Gen Z'ers to the field of community corrections will take creativity from hiring managers. Appealing to the values of this age group through advanced technology connection (social media), acknowledging the significance of entrepreneurship, and promoting independence will be a few of the key areas for community corrections agencies to focus on.

GenZ probation officers can co-exist with the ‘old hats.’ Part of this is incumbent on newer generations of officers assimilating into the probation culture. The other, and arguably equally important part, is that the ‘gatekeepers’ of probation acknowledge the changing values of new generations of officers. If each party can compromise aspects they value in an employer/employee, while still maintaining stan-

dards and autonomy, it is possible to realize successful searches and hires of GenZ probation recruits.

^[1] Brown, T., Hudson, J., Rodgers, Z., & D'Arcy, B. (2024). How can we 'inspire' people to want to become Probation Officers? *Probation Quarterly*, (34), 36-41.

^[1] Carr, N. (2020). Recruitment, training and professional development of probation staff. *Academic Insights* 2020, 2.

^[1] Spence, M. (1978). Job market signaling. In *Uncertainty in economics* (pp. 281-306). Academic Press.

^{iv} Pew Research Center (2019).

^[1] Agarwal, H., & Vaghela, P. (2018, December). Work values of Gen Z: Bridging the gap to the next generation. In *National Conference on Innovative Business Management Practices in 21st Century*, Faculty of Management Studies, Parul University, Gujarat, India (Vol. 1, p. 26).

^{vi} Mahesh, J., Bhat, A. K., & Suresh, R. (2021). Are Gen Z values the new disruptor for future educational institutions? *Journal of Higher Education Theory and Practice*, 21(12).

A promotional poster for a 'CoffeeChat!' event. The background is a dark wood-grain surface with a white coffee cup on the left and a laptop keyboard on the right. The text is centered and reads: 'You are invited to a CoffeeChat!' in a large, teal, cursive font. Below that, in white sans-serif font, is 'April 29, 2025 | 10:00am CST | Zoom Webinars'. A paragraph of white text follows: 'Join NAPE members as we discuss the future direction of NAPE, explore topics of interest, leadership struggles, and how the association can best meet the needs of its members. This will be an interactive discussion with a focus on hearing and learning directly from our NAPE members.' Below this is a teal link: 'Please register in advance at www.napehome.org/coffeechats'. At the bottom left is the NAPE logo (National Association of Probation Executives) and at the bottom right is the 'CoffeeChats' logo in a white cursive font.

You are invited to a

CoffeeChat!

April 29, 2025 | 10:00am CST | Zoom Webinars

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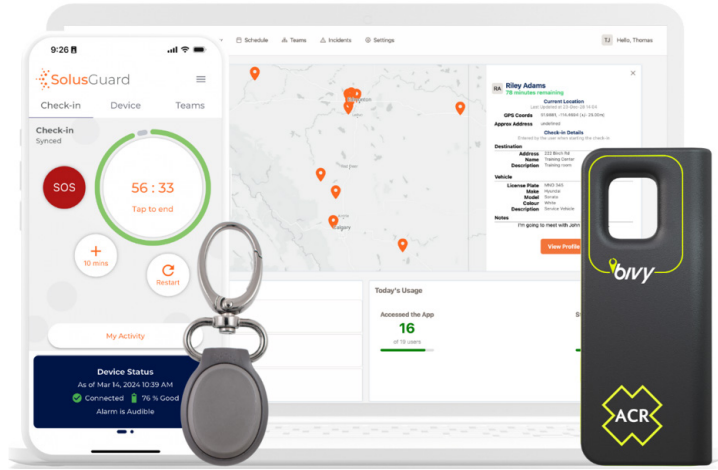
CoffeeChats

Corporate Corner

Probation Officer Safety

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For general insights and strategies on improving fieldwork safety, download our free white paper:
www.solusguard.com/resources/probation-white-paper



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- Retired
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NAPE is dedicated to enhancing the professionalism and effectiveness in the field of community corrections by creating a national network for executives, bringing about positive change in the field, and making available a pool of experts in community corrections management, program development, training, and research.

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