

# **MEDIA RELATIONS AND COMMUNITY CORRECTIONS**

## **The CSOSA Experience**

**By Leonard A. Sipes, Jr.**

The Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency (CSOSA) is the parole and probation entity for Washington, D.C. It is a federal, executive branch agency. CSOSA prides itself on state-of-the-art practices, with some of the lowest caseloads and best contact standards, drug treatment options and programmatic initiatives in the country. Our information systems are first rate.

CSOSA decided in 2004 to embark on aggressive and comprehensive public relations outreach efforts to support strategic initiatives. Community corrections (and corrections in general) face immense public relations challenges. According to national surveys of confidence in the criminal justice system, corrections pales in comparison to law enforcement and the judiciary (see Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics from the Bureau of Justice Statistics).

The emphasis on offender reentry from prison is one example as to how the public looks at our activities. Although most of the rhetoric on reentry comes from national sources, the great majority of decisions regarding supervision and services for returning offenders will be made at the state and local levels.

The public will support this and other community corrections initiatives based solely on their ability to trust the local system assigned with implementation. The average citizen and reporter have never been exposed to national reentry advocates and their positions. All fellow citizens know about corrections is what they read in the paper and view on local TV. But when the media carries endless stories of offenders committing violent crimes as the sole message, our ability to enter or affect the discussion is greatly diminished.

### ***Critical ingredients in media and public relations***

#### **A Service Orientation**

The news media is very important to us. Unless you have an advertising budget, everything will be filtered and distributed through them. Establishing favorable media relations can only be accomplished by taking their needs into serious consideration. We believe that you have to be honest and fair in order to get the same in return.

We are available around the clock through agency cell phones and Blackberry's. We have access to the CSOSA information system through home computers. We have laptops with wireless broadband capacity. We have the authorization, tools and knowledge to take care of media needs.

#### **Proactive Marketing**

We market to the media as often as we market to the public. In a hyper-competitive media market like the nation's Capitol, we know that our proactive efforts will not

get all the exposure we want. But when a reporter writes about a parolee involved in a violent crime, we are hopeful that the reporter or editor also knows of the quality and comprehensiveness of our efforts closely supervise and obtain services for our clients. At the very least, they will know what we are trying to accomplish.

We are also concerned about our national reputation. We want recognition for developing and implementing best practices. We have sometimes found it easier to market to CBS News and National Public Radio than to local media. But while national exposure is valued, our local media connections are the ones that will play the greatest role in defining our effectiveness.

We believe in proactive efforts as the foundation of good public relations. Beyond pitching story ideas to reporters, we are systematic in our outreach efforts. These include:

1. A quarterly television show that is played approximately 600 times each year by D.C and metropolitan government and community access stations. Considering the majority of reporters (and other important partners) do not live in Washington (it's an expensive town) regional exposure allows us to reach them in communities where they live.
2. A first-rate web site ([www.csosa.gov](http://www.csosa.gov)) due to be unveiled this spring. We believe that upon completion, it will rank among the best criminal justice web and pod and video casting sites in the nation. A fully functioning site can become the equivalent of a full time public relations staff position.
3. Writing story-oriented articles for national criminal justice publications and using them to populate the web site. In three years, staff has created approximately 40 articles and fact sheets to explain our activities in a friendly, non-technical way.
4. The creation and promotion of podcasts (radio shows) for placement on the web site. We will use podcasts to explain what we do, to promote special initiatives, and recruit new employees. We will also strip audio from video products to use as podcasts (<http://media.csosa.gov> or [www.csosa.gov](http://www.csosa.gov)).
5. The creation and promotion of videocasts, which is nothing more than using existing CSOSA TV shows and video products and promoting them as web-based internet products(<http://media.csosa.gov> or [www.csosa.gov](http://www.csosa.gov)).
6. The creation of a comprehensive e-mail and fax list to carry our message to local and national media and to interested national professionals and citizens of the District. Our new web site will also contain an e-mail signup option.
7. Our Community Justice Programs section employs 5 community representatives whose job is to attend community functions in the city where crime is on the agenda.
8. Our Office of Legislative, Intergovernmental and Public Affairs is in constant contact with federal and D.C. government officials and staff and other institutions to explain and advocate our agendas. The public affairs team is part of this office.

The above is simply a sample of what we are trying to accomplish through our public relations efforts. The bottom line is that we believe that we are major players in the effort to protect the safety of the citizens we serve. We are dedicated professionals who are operating in everyone's best interest, thus we have little to hide and much to contribute.

When the inevitable criminal act is committed by one of the 15,000 offenders we supervise daily, we hope that most members of the media will place the crime into proper perspective. We believe that this is done through an honest acknowledgement of our efforts to closely supervise offenders and help them to transform their lives.

Successful community correctional programs depend upon a working partnership with the media. Bad media relations will impede progress and undermine your ability to reach the public. In governmental public relations, the public's trust and respect are everything. Without it, nothing good will happen. To get it, you need the media.

***Len Sipes spent 14 years as the Director of Public Relations for the Maryland Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services. Independent university research documented a gain of 30 percentage points (from 20 to 50 percent) in the public's favorable opinion of the agency during his time there.***