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An Overview of Community Service for Sex Buyers in the United States

Summary Based Upon Research from the
National Assessments of Prostitution and Sex
Trafficking Demand Reduction Efforts



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An Overview of Community Service for Arrested Sex Buyers in the United States

Community service programs are among the less frequently used interventions that target the buyers of sex, although they have a relatively long history of being used in some areas. As of June 2021, at least **189** U.S. cities and counties have used this demand deterrence tactic. Arrested sex buyers can be ordered to perform community service as a condition of a sentence or a diversion program. Service might include such activities as cleaning streets where prostitution is known to occur. For most people sentenced on charges related to buying sex from adults, community service obligations range from four to 250 hours, and are coupled with other sanctions such as fines, fees, shaming, probation, and/or completion of “john school” education or treatment programs. For those arrested for buying sex with minors, the charges are far more serious felony-level offenses, and diversion options are usually not applicable (although fines, fees, shaming and community service may be applied as conditions of sentences, and in addition to terms of incarceration).

In most of the cities and counties known to use community service for arrested sex buyers, including the “early adopters” of this tactic listed in Table 1, the service programs are not very precisely targeted toward addressing demand, but instead appear to be sanctions applied to misdemeanors in general, and are considered appropriate to apply to the buyers of sex as misdemeanants. For example, a man caught attempting to purchase sex from two women in prostitution in Aurora, Colorado in 2017 pleaded guilty to one count of soliciting prostitution, a Class 3 misdemeanor, and was sentenced to six months’ probation and 60 hours of community service.¹

Table 1: Sites with Earliest Known Use of Community Service for Sex Buyers		
Year	City or County	State
1975	Miami	FL
1980	High Point	NC
1981	Grand Rapids	MI
1981	Little Rock	AR
1985	Chattanooga	TN
1991	Eugene	OR
1991	Pawtucket	RI
1992	Kingsport	TN
1993	Coffee County	TN
1993	Palm Beach County	FL
1994	Austin	TX
1995	Santa Cruz	CA
1997	Waynesville	NC
1998	Tucson	AZ
1999	Wichita	KS

Community service in some locations is programmatic and specifically designed to deal with demand. For example, the Red Zone program in Indianapolis coupled a “john school” educational intervention with community service specifically designed for arrested sex buyers. After four hours of hearing from a community impact panel and a health educator in the john school, the men were required to pick up trash around the streets known to be “strips” with high levels of prostitution activity. Men frequently encountered used condoms and syringes that usually accompanies street prostitution, and that was by design. Documents regarding the Red Zone program, including instructions for arrestees entering community service, are provided in our web page for Indianapolis at the demand-forum.org website, and in the site’s “john school” page. The type of community service required is more variable in Norfolk, Virginia than it was in Indianapolis. In Norfolk, sex buyers are

¹ <https://www.denverpost.com/2017/03/27/aurora-prostitute-solicitation-body-camera/>.

added to community service details established for all kinds of low-level offenders, and perform a range of jobs such as painting buildings and cleaning public areas. More detail about the Norfolk program is provided below.

Example 1: Community Service Program for Sex Buyers in Norfolk, Virginia

In the program of the Norfolk Sheriff's Office, sex buyers are required to serve eight hours of community service. It usually occurs on a Sunday and begins between 7:30-8:00 AM. The community service program for sex buyers is coupled with the john school, a brief educational intervention that occurs on the previous day. If the john school gets out early on Saturday, then the sex buyers will sometimes pick up trash downtown for an hour or so and then continue the next day. On the full day of community service, sex buyers are added to community service details for other kinds of low-level offenders, and perform a range of jobs such as painting buildings and cleaning public areas.

The kinds of service details that occur are driven by civic leagues. The Sheriff's Office sends out press releases and mass emails every six months about whom to contact at the Sheriff's Office about community service they would like performed. The civic league president makes the request, and the sites that would make use of the community service labor must be the city, the state, or a nonprofit 501c3 organization.

A Norfolk Sheriff's Office Major and other supervisors review the requests; particularly important is ensuring that the sites selected to receive the service are appropriate - they use GIS and mapping to ensure that it is city, state, or nonprofit. When a candidate site is questionable, the Major goes on-site to examine the situation. For example, with requests for landscaping, carpentry, or cutting down trees in wetlands, they must ensure that there is a valid permit in place for that action.

Also important is making the best use of the community service labor, and ensuring public safety while it is being performed. When the sex buyers (and others) show up for community service, they have to sign in and complete an application/interview. The Sheriff's Office staff can see if they have some particular skills and can assign them to suitable types of tasks (especially where carpentry, painting, or operating equipment are concerned). Types of community service to which sex buyers can be assigned include:

- Cleaning the grounds of schools, parks, soccer fields, football fields
- Painting
- Carpentry
- Unloading food and supplies for the local zoo, and some zoo cleanup
- Putting up tents, tables, and chairs for public events

Norfolk usually has about 75 individuals doing community service every Saturday and Sunday, and about 60 every week day. Sex buyers are charged \$15 per day for a supervision fee while performing community service.

The community service program is designed by the Sheriff's Office for all types of offenders. It is not a service program that has been created for sex buyers specifically. Sex buyers are funneled into the Sunday weekend crew of the larger community service program, after attending the Johns School class on the previous Saturday. However, the Sheriff's Office will often assign sex buyers to community service details in the area where they were arrested to make the point that they have to give back to the community that they have harmed in various ways, such as by providing the revenue stream for local commercial sex markets, and drawing pimps and drug dealers to neighborhoods. They may also avoid sites that may be sensitive to having arrested sex buyers on their grounds, such as a public daycare center or domestic violence shelter.

Example 2: Community Service as a Condition of Sentence for Sex Buyers in Ashland, Ohio

In May 2015, 15 sex buyers were arrested by a collaborative task force including officers in the Ashland and Mansfield Police Departments. Sentences for the 15 men included jail time, suspension of driver's licenses, community service, and probation. For example, one man appeared in Ashland County Municipal Court for a scheduled bench trial, but before the trial could begin, his attorney asked to change his plea to guilty to his two

charges, which were soliciting sexual acts for hire and possessing criminal tools (both misdemeanors). After accepting the guilty pleas, the court sentenced the defendant to 60 days in jail for the soliciting count. The court also suspended his driver's license for six months, fined him \$650 between the two charges, placed him on one year of probation and ordered him to complete 100 hours of community work service. At least nine others arrested in this operation were sentenced to 30-60 days in jail, all suspended, one year of probation, 200 hours of community service, and a \$250-\$400 fine.²

Example 3: Community Service Program for Sex Buyers in Marshall, Minnesota

In May 2019, a man arrested as part of an October 2018 web sting in Marshall, MN pleaded guilty to charges of hiring or agreeing to hire a minor for prostitution. He responded to an online advertisement posted by an undercover agent who was posing as a 15-year-old girl. The man received a stay of imposition of sentence, and 10 years' supervised probation, with conditions that he serve 75 days in jail, complete 120 hours of Sentenced to Service, have no contact with minor females without approval from a probation agent, and not access the internet without approval from probation.³

Sentencing to Service is a program operated throughout Minnesota, with almost 80% of the state's counties participating. The program was established in 1986 as a way to provide sentencing alternatives for courts throughout the state. Sentencing to Service (STS) is operated by the Minnesota Department of Corrections in partnership with sheriff's departments, community corrections, courts, and local governments. STS can be used as an alternative to jail or fines, in combination with jail time, or as a probation sanction. Judges can order offenders to be placed on an STS work crew and specify the number of hours required to be worked.

The program is not specific to sex buyers, but is an option for carefully selected non-violent offenders to work on community improvement projects, including litter pickup, river cleanup, trail development, flood control and storm damage cleanup, and work for nonprofits. Offender work crews are closely supervised as they work in parks and other public areas. The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, local county, and other agencies identify work activities and supply equipment.⁴

Example 4: Community Service as a Diversion Option in La Crosse, Wisconsin

In August 2012, La Crosse police posted a decoy internet ad and placed an undercover team in a hotel. Five men who offered to pay for sex with the police decoy were arrested. The arrestees were able to gain release from custody by posting a \$200 bond meant to assure their court appearance. In October 2012, the first man to plead guilty was fined \$505. In November 2012, one of the arrested men entered a plea agreement allowing him to avoid a conviction if he complied with a diversion agreement.⁵ The man plead guilty in La Crosse County Circuit Court to misdemeanor prostitution, but the charge would be dismissed in one year if he paid a fine, completed 25 hours of community service, attended both individual and group treatment, wrote an essay about what he learned, and avoided new crimes. We are uncertain about whether the "group treatment" would qualify as a john school program. If the conditions of the diversion agreement were not met, the sex buyer could face up to a \$10,000 fine, nine months in jail, or both.

References

References for the materials cited in this summary can be found in the bibliography of the National Assessment final report, and in each site's webpage at demand-forum.org.

² <https://www.times-gazette.com/news/20150813/mansfield-man-is-latest-defendant-sentenced-from-may-prostitution-bust>.

³ <https://www.marshallindependent.com/news/local-news/2019/05/sioux-falls-man-pleads-guilty-in-marshall-sex-sting/>.

⁴ https://mn.gov/doc/assets/2-7_STS_tcm1089-275845.pdf.

⁵ http://lacrossetribune.com/news/local/crime-and-courts/rd-man-gets-diversion-deal-in-prostitution-sting/article_03057d1e-2d55-11e2-ad0b-0019bb2963f4.html; <http://www.wxow.com/story/20076904/man-pleads-guilty-to-prostitution-charge>.