Ex-offenders contribute $1 million in community services.

What happens when a community member in Arlington or Falls Church is assigned community service instead of being sent to jail? The judge tells the defendant to go to OAR.

Over the past year, 1,733 ex-offenders who are clients of Offender Aid and Restitution of Arlington County completed 75,000 hours of community service because they were court-mandated to provide the service, they wanted to work off their court fees, or they wanted to demonstrate to the judge their willingness to give back to the community.

During OAR’s fiscal year ending June 30, OAR community service clients performed a record $1,081,351 worth of services—an increase of 14 percent over the previous year.

OAR also provides ex-offenders with coaching and practical information about finding employment, managing money, and developing important career and life skills. This assistance has helped thousands of ex-offenders to have a second chance in the workplace and in their families.

OAR works with the courts in Arlington County and the City of Falls Church to assist clients in the completion of court-mandated community service. The success rate for clients finishing service hours was 90.3 percent.

Heather Pritchett, OAR’s director of community service and special projects, said, “Community service is a cost-saving way to hold people accountable while benefitting the community. These clients work at various non-profits, faith-based organizations and government agencies in our community. They also help staff many of the community events throughout the year.”

Pritchett cited one client who within hours of his initial meeting at OAR contacted the American Legion and a local Goodwill. He fulfilled his commitment of 100 hours within two months and received excellent performance evaluations from both sites. “His attitude and work ethic offer every ex-offender an opportunity to get back on the path to restoration,” she said.

In July, OAR Executive Director Gail Arnall testified before the Arlington County Board that over the past eight years, OAR’s number of community service clients has nearly doubled.

“Why is this good news? Because community service is a restorative justice model. Judges are giving defendants the opportunity to give back to the community instead of being locked up. These individuals perform a service to our community and they typically do not have to bear the brand of an ‘ex-offender’ the rest of their lives,” Arnall said.

Other examples of organizations with whom OAR clients work include the Arlington Street People’s Assistance Network (A-SPAN), which serves the homeless. OAR clients clean, serve meals, staff the registration desk, sort donations, and assist with operation of A-SPAN’s Emergency Winter Shelter.

OAR clients also help serve free meals to presently homeless individuals and families at Arlington Assembly of God. Blanca Alaf, assistant to Pastor Lynn Carter, said, “OAR volunteers perform greatly needed kitchen and cleaning duties for our feeding ministry. They’re all doing a wonderful job.”

The organization served more than 2,500 clients during its 2012-2013 fiscal year. Fewer than 8 percent of OAR clients return to prison—a far lower recidivism rate than the Virginia-wide rate of 27.3 percent. For $500 per client, fewer than 8 percent of OAR clients are court-mandated to provide service instead of being sent to jail?

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