

# CSSD Chronicle

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## Adult Probation expands community reporting to include the Hill South neighborhood in New Haven

The CSSD adult probation office at 867 State Street in New Haven is one of the largest probation offices in the state. The former factory building, in the Fair Haven section of the city, was renovated for CSSD over a decade ago. The office's 54 probation officers supervise close to 3,000 offenders.

Over the years, several off-site reporting stations have been established throughout New Haven to increase CSSD's community presence in the city and alleviate the strain of having all offenders report to the State Street site. One or more times a week, probation officers pack up their laptops, folders, drug testing cups, and other equipment and travel to police substations in the Hill North, Norton/Whalley, Fair Haven, and Newhallville neighborhoods to meet with clients.

**Expanding to Hill South**—A few months ago, Probation Officer Margarita Gonzalez made a proposal to expand off-site reporting to include the Hill South district, a working class neighborhood in the southwest part of the city that has a large minority population. Gonzalez and Chief Probation Officer Brian Coco identified Hill South probationers who might benefit from being supervised by a bi-lingual, female officer and incorporated them into Gonzalez's caseload. Gonzalez, a Latina who spent her early childhood in Puerto Rico before moving to the U.S. mainland, communicates easily in both English and Spanish, and has experience as a Woman Offender Case Management (WOCM) officer.

Probation Officer Keith Bullock also saw the benefit of Hill South reporting for some of his clients and asked to join Gonzalez each Friday. Bullock is a native of New Haven and has strong ties to the area. His clients include youthful offenders (YOs) from the Hill, a population he strives to mentor while they are under his supervision.

The New Haven Police Department was glad to see CSSD expand its alternative reporting sites in the city and offered space at the Hill South substation, a decades-old brick and block glass building that sits snugly on a corner lot overlooking Howard Avenue. Despite its age, the one-story building is well-maintained and has a bright, spacious community room that Gonzalez and Bullock use to meet with clients. New Haven Police District Manager Lt. Joe Witkowski, who has worked at the substation for many years, is a strong advocate of community policing and welcomes CSSD's collaboration in his neighborhood. "I'm glad they're here," Witkowski said. "It will be great to work with State Street officers on the specific needs of this area."

### Community reporting in action

**Gilberto**—It is a cold day in December, and many of Bullock's clients have met with him during the 9:00 am to 12:00 noon reporting time. The afternoon's first probationer, Gilberto, arrives to meet with Gonzalez promptly at 2:00 pm.

Gilberto is a car mechanic who works out of his backyard when he can't find steady employment elsewhere. He is on probation for possession of a firearm. Gilberto was threatened at his home and used an unregistered gun someone had given him to scare off the perpetrators. He didn't realize he would be arrested for having the gun. He is married, with three children, and has several family members who live in Puerto Rico, including his mother. He talks to Gonzalez in Spanish about the desire to visit his mother, who is elderly and in poor health, but he's reluctant to make the trip.

According to Gonzalez, many Puerto Ricans who live on the island expect money and gifts from relatives who come to visit from the mainland. Gilberto is finding it difficult to pay his bills, especially around the Christmas holiday, and doesn't want the added burden of overextending his finances, or disappointing his mother by arriving in Puerto Rico empty-handed. Gonzalez talks with him about his options, encourages him to continue making good decisions, and assures him that if he changes his mind, she will issue him a travel permit to go to Puerto Rico.

**James**—Soon after Gilberto leaves, there is a knock at the substation's front door. James, a young male who lost his driver's license because of an alcohol-related offense, comes in and sits down with a heavy sigh. He talks about his case and admits he was drunk that night, but says he wasn't driving. He was "sleeping it off" in his parked car, "but the keys were in the ignition, so they arrested me." Although he's less than thrilled to be on probation, he acknowledges that he used poor judgment and takes full responsibility for what happened.

At the start of his probation, James was overwhelmed with the 100 hours of community service (CS) he was ordered to perform. However, he and Gonzalez came up with a plan for him to do the CS hours every Sunday, when he doesn't have any other obligations or appointments, and he's slowly getting it done. He hasn't been able to find steady employment because of his lack of transportation, but



*Probation Officers Margarita Gonzalez and Keith Bullock at the Hill South police substation in New Haven.*

he helps with maintenance and other tenant issues at the several apartment houses owned by his family. In exchange for the help, the family allows him to live in one of the vacant units. James' most important goal is to get his license restored. "I hate walking, and I'm tired of asking my friends for rides. I can't always count on them." He's grateful that his probation reporting is so close to home. Gonzalez talks with him about long-term goals, including going back to college. "I don't know," James says. "I'll think about it. I need to get my license back first."

Gonzalez reminds James that he needs to keep looking for a permanent job, and gives him a three-page printout of New Haven area employment agencies and job readiness services to help with his search. The agencies help individuals with felony convictions gain employment—both temporary and permanent—and several programs are available to provide skills training, resume writing, and other services for those with criminal records.

**Donny**—The Hill South station is quiet for a while after James leaves. Gonzalez uses the time between appointments to type case notes into her laptop about the clients she has already seen. There is another knock on the door and Gonzalez ushers in Donny, who is originally from Georgia, and on probation for possession of narcotics.

Donny shivers as he crosses the room, stuffing his large furry hat, complete with ear muffs, into his jacket pocket, and rubs his hands together several times for warmth before sitting down at the table. "I ain't never get used to the cold up here," Donny drawls with a smile on his face. He settles in and happily answers Gonzalez's questions about his current employment, education goals, and the community service hours he needs to fulfill. Right now, he works part-time in the morning, and recently signed up for General Educational Development (GED) courses that will begin in January. When Gonzalez asks about his future plans, he talks excitedly about a brick mason apprenticeship he's interested in applying for once he gets his GED certificate. Donny credits Catholic Charities, a local treatment provider, for helping him stay drug free and focused on what he wants in life. Staying out of trouble is his main goal. "I realize that life ain't a game," he says. When asked about the benefits of reporting to the Hill South substation, instead of State Street, Donny laughs and says, "Well, it's warm here," but he also says how much he appreciates that it's close to where he lives on Sylvan Avenue. It's easier for him to get a ride from work to the substation, and he can walk home after the appointment before it gets dark.

Catholic Charities is one of many mental health and substance abuse treatment providers in the New Haven area, and Gonzalez is familiar with many of them. She refers clients to appropriate programs, many of them conveniently located within the Hill South area. The easy access to services means that clients are more likely to begin—and maintain—treatment.

**Pablo**—The winter afternoon begins to darken, and several probationers arrive after work, trying to see Gonzalez before the end of the day. Pablo, who was convicted of a weapons possession charge, lives in a nearby housing project called "The Jungle" because of its reputation for being dangerous. His apartment, which he shares with his wife and young family, is located on the "safer" edge of the complex, but he wants to move his family to another area of the city, where there is less crime. Right now, he works for a local temporary employment agency and has maintained a job for two years. Before he leaves, Gonzalez gives him information about several community resources that might be able to help him with his apartment search.

Gonzalez is able to see the last two clients before 4:30 pm, and then she and Bullock clean up the room in time for a local youth organization to take it over for their weekly meeting. Both officers also work to finish up some of their client case notes before going home.

For now, Hill South reporting is only one day a week, but Gonzalez and Bullock agree that more time on Howard Avenue would be helpful. They hope to have reporting hours twice a week in the near future. After spending time with them, it is easy to see why their partnership benefits the clients they supervise. Both officers have a personal and unique knowledge of the language, culture, and history of the Hill, and they gladly share what they know each Friday.

For more information on New Haven's community reporting, please contact CSSD Regional Manager Michael Hines at [Michael.Hines@jud.ct.gov](mailto:Michael.Hines@jud.ct.gov)

*The CSSD Chronicle is a regular publication of information and news about the Court Support Services Division. Questions or comments on this edition, or suggestions for future articles, can be directed to [Linda.Grzeika@jud.ct.gov](mailto:Linda.Grzeika@jud.ct.gov)*