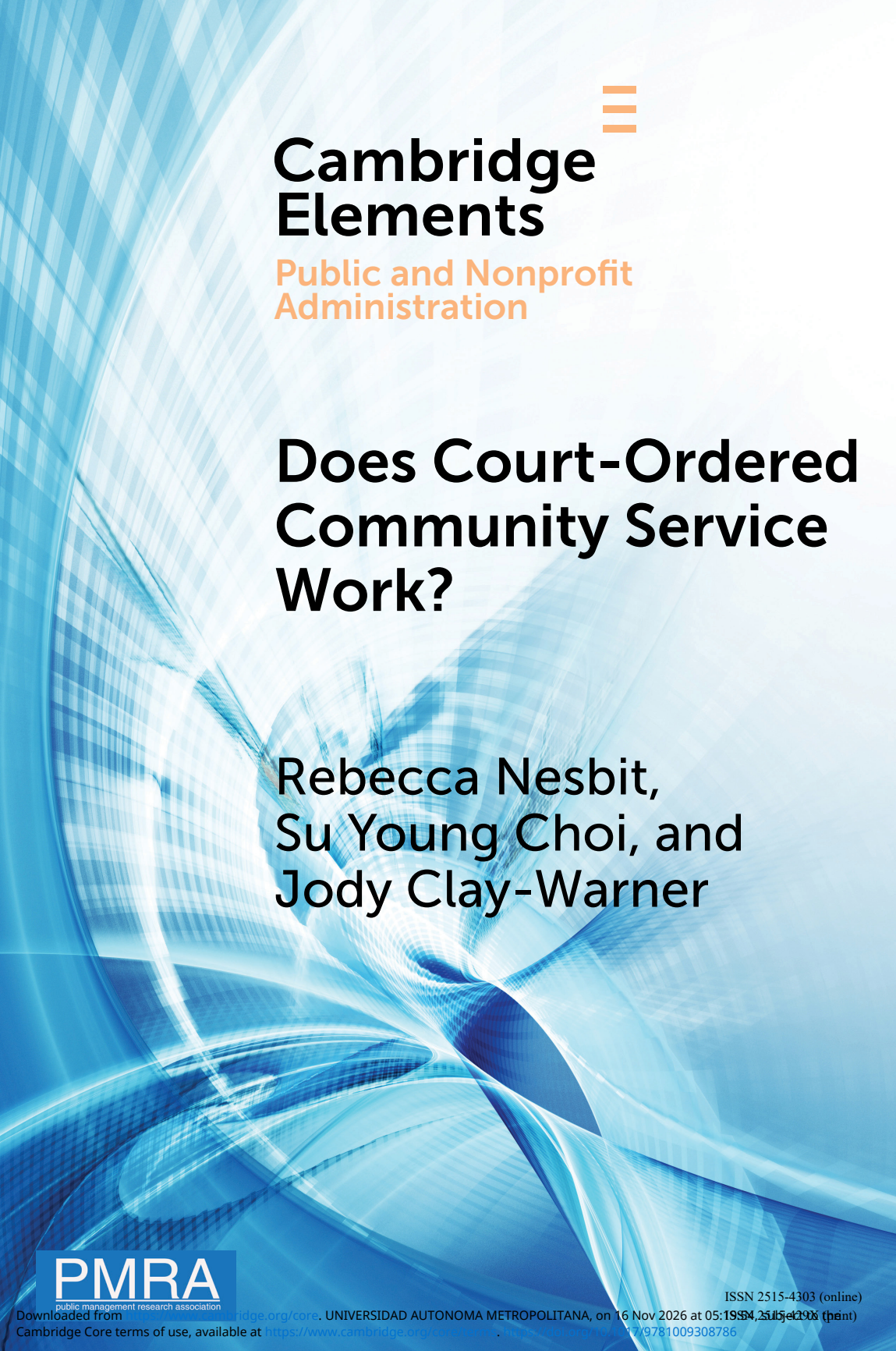


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DOES COURT-ORDERED COMMUNITY SERVICE WORK?

Evidence from a Case Study

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Does Court-Ordered Community Service Work?

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Abstract: Based on interviews with thirty-one managers in community organizations and thirty-four court-ordered community service workers (CSWs) in Georgia, this Element asks whether community service programs are likely to achieve their stated goals of restitution, cost savings, and rehabilitation and what conditions support or undermine success. While some individuals perceive a benefit, these programs often shift costs to under-resourced nonprofits, impose administrative burdens, and fail to foster meaningful community connection or long-term rehabilitative outcomes. The Element indicates that cost savings are illusory, restitution is weakened by supervision demands, and rehabilitation is inconsistent across participants. For community service to realize its restorative potential, it must be restructured across the criminal legal system with attention to organizational capacity, both of probation offices and the community organizations working with CSWs. This title is also available as Open Access on Cambridge Core.

Keywords: probation, community service worker, court-ordered volunteer, volunteer management, court-ordered community service

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1 Background and Theoretical Foundations

Community service is foundational to modern civil society, with benefits for both the volunteers and their communities. The work that volunteers perform promotes the common good and is the backbone of the organizations – both nonprofit and public – that seek to meet their communities' needs (Putnam, 2000; Verba et al., 1995). Volunteering also promotes people's connection to their communities, as well as their own health and well-being (Musick & Wilson, 2007; Wilson, 2012). Not all people who perform unpaid labor in community organizations, though, are "volunteers." Instead, millions of people each year who are convicted of criminal offenses are ordered by the courts to perform community service work as part of their probation sentence. For these individuals, community service is a form of conscripted labor, and we know very little about whether the benefits associated with volunteering also apply to court-ordered community service.

Community service requirements are part of a larger set of punishments typically given to probationers in lieu of incarceration (Petersilia, 1997). Probationers continue to live in the community but must meet regularly with a probation officer, pay fees to compensate the government for the costs associated with probation supervision, and may also be required to undergo random drug screenings. Probationers in the United States and other Western nations are also often assigned court-ordered community service, which involves the completion of a designated number of hours of unpaid work for a nonprofit or governmental organization (Carter et al., 1987; Harland, 1980; Pease, 1985). While there are no nationwide estimates of the number of people sentenced to community service, state reports suggest that as many as a third of probationers participate (Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority, 2011). In 2023, over three million adults were on probation in the United States (Kaeble, 2025), suggesting that this sanction is imposed on more than a million people each year.

There is a surprising lack of research on court-ordered community service, given its widespread use. This stands in contrast to research examining the effectiveness of other common criminal legal system interventions, including custodial sentences, non-custodial sentences, prison education, boot camps, traditional probation, and drug treatment programs (e.g., Andrews & Bonta, 2010; Cullen & Gendreau, 2000; Lipsey & Cullen, 2007). Research examines the effects of these interventions on recidivism and other indicators of success, such as job placement and

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well-being, which are also goals associated with court-ordered community service. Research on evaluation of criminal legal system interventions is so vast that there are numerous systematic reviews of empirical research on these topics (e.g., Loeffler & Nagin, 2022; Mitchell et al., 2012; Phelps, 2020) and at least one published book that synthesizes the published reviews (Weisburd et al., 2016).

Though court-ordered community service affects millions of people each year and has become a taken-for-granted component of probation in many jurisdictions, there is minimal research on its effectiveness. As a result, millions of people each year are subjected to a largely untested intervention with unknown outcomes. Failure to evaluate these programs is due, in part, to the lack of a single set of agreed-upon goals associated with court-ordered community service (Bouffard & Muftic, 2006; Delens-Ravier, 2003). Instead, different groups support court-ordered community service for different reasons and subsequently have different criteria for determining success. Goals for court-ordered community service, such as reducing costs, benefiting the community, and rehabilitating offenders (Bazemore, 1991; McIvor, 2010), vary across time and jurisdiction (and among different court actors operating at the same time, in the same jurisdiction). These goals may also conflict, as a punishment that promotes reintegration may not be the most cost-effective.

Because there is so little research on court-ordered community service, we do not have a foundational understanding of how this probation sanction may or may not serve criminal legal system goals or how it might be affecting those involved – both the CSWs themselves and the community organizations hosting them. This gap matters because policymakers routinely rely on court-ordered community service, raising questions about whether scarce resources are being allocated effectively. We therefore take a holistic approach to understanding whether this phenomenon "works." Building on our previously published scholarship (Nesbit et al., 2025), which focused on the interpersonal and organizational dynamics that surround court-ordered community service, we examine whether the experiences that people have with court-ordered community service reflect policies and practices that are consistent with the program goals. We accomplish this through an exploratory case study of court-ordered community service in Georgia, entailing interviews with court-ordered community service workers (CSWs) and the community agency staff who manage them.

To provide context for this Element, we begin by describing the history of court-ordered community service, discussing program goals, and

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reviewing the limited empirical literature. Next, we present our methods, including details about the probation offices and CSW and community agency participants. We then report our empirical findings about participant perceptions of the effects of court-ordered community service on community organizations, communities, and CSWs. Our final two sections pull the findings together to assess how well the operation of court-ordered community service in our case study reflects program goals, leading to policy recommendations.

1.1 History and Goals of Court-Ordered Community Service

The use of court-ordered community service as a condition of probation originated in the United Kingdom in the 1970s, when the Wootton Report recommended the practice as an alternative to incarceration (Advisory Council on the Penal System, 1970). The Criminal Justice Act of 1972 reflected the report's recommendations, establishing the circumstances under which court-ordered community service should be utilized and offering guidelines for its implementation. Importantly, court-ordered community service, intended to serve as an alternative to incarceration, was only an option when the charged offense was one for which incarceration would otherwise be required (Pease, 1985). The option was also limited to those aged 16 and over and included a term no longer than a year, with probationers assigned to complete between 40 and 240 hours. The assignment of community service was a standalone punishment and not an add-on to other probation requirements. Once the practice was established in the U.K., many European countries and the United States began to adopt court-ordered community service as a probation sanction, though countries implemented it differently (see Nesbit et al., 2025, for a review). In the U.S., for example, community service is rarely a standalone punishment but is, instead, issued alongside other sanctions, such as drug testing, victim restitution, fines, and house arrest (Martin et al., 2018; McIvor, 1993a, 1993b).

By the end of the twentieth century, court-ordered community service was in wide use, with its popularity likely tied to the long list of goals used to justify its implementation. First, proponents argue that probation sanctions save money (Gelsthorpe & Rex, 2004) by reducing costs for communities and for maintaining prisons and jails (Brown, 1977; Harland, 1980; McDonald, 1986, 1988). This assumes, of course, that those sentenced to community service would, otherwise, have been sentenced to incarceration. The second stream of arguments in favor of

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court-ordered community service focuses on the potential restorative benefits to the community. Adherents of this goal see the community, at large, as a victim of the offender's crime and community service as restitution (Brown, 1977; Eglash, 1977; Hudson et al., 1980; McIvor, 2004). Thirdly, community service can help the offender, particularly juveniles, in meaningful ways by developing the skills and experience necessary for paid work (Bazemore, 1991; Brown, 1977; Klein, 1982), reducing recidivism and increasing reintegration.

Given the range of goals for court-ordered community service (McIvor et al., 2010), it is not surprising that judges who sentence probationers may have different agendas than the officers who supervise them (Bazemore & Maloney, 1994). This problem is compounded by the aims and goals of local receiving organizations, as their interest in working with CSWs usually involves accomplishing their organizational mission. Additionally, these entities may communicate incompletely and sporadically about their objectives for community service, further complicating their ability to meet these goals. Bazemore and Maloney (1994, p. 24) observed that, in many places, this goal misalignment had rendered community service "little more than a bureaucratic function at best and a burden to staff and community agencies at worst." Given these competing objectives, it is important to examine the scholarship on the success of court-ordered community service (see Gelsthorpe & Rex, 2004).

1.2 Empirical Research on the Cost-Effectiveness of Court-Ordered Community Service

A widely stated goal of court-ordered community service (and probation in general) is to reduce costs: it is assumed to be less expensive to administer probation than it is to incarcerate an offender. This logic applies, though, only if probation is truly used *in place of* incarceration. Probation has been shown to be a powerful tool for "net-widening" (Phelps, 2013), a well-known phenomenon in which the criminal legal system extends its control to those who commit offenses that do not typically result in incarceration (e.g., Tonry & Lynch, 1996). Since probationers might otherwise have received a suspended sentence, it is difficult to argue that probation sentences, in general, save money, given the costs associated with maintaining probation offices and coordinating probation sentences. Because court-ordered community service is largely reserved for low-level, nonviolent offenders, it is particularly unlikely that those sentenced to community service would spend time in prison or jail.

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Court-ordered community service also has its own unique costs, as community agencies must invest time and personnel costs into training and supervision of CSWs (Nesbit et al., 2025).

While a few studies have attempted to examine the claim that court-ordered community service saves money, most of these studies were conducted in Europe, so their findings may not be directly transferable to the U.S. context. Knapp, Robertson, and McIvor (1992), comparing costs of community service and alternative custodial sentences in Scotland, concluded that community service is less expensive than incarceration but that the cost savings are lower than the government claims: it costs the court system about the same amount of money to administer a community service sanction as it does a six-week custodial sentence. This excludes costs to the convicted person or their families, who are often responsible for paying fees for probation services, or the costs that the supervising agencies incur.

1.3 Empirical Research on the Impact of Court-Ordered Community Service on Communities and Community Organizations

It is important to understand the impact of court-ordered community service on community organizations and the community at large when considering whether its role as a court sanction is meeting its intended goals. The U.S. Court system has declared that "in addition to the specific sentencing purpose to be served, the desired by-product of community service is always to benefit the community" (Administrative Office of the United States Courts, 2024). In addition, restitution is an often-cited goal of CSW programs (e.g., Austin & Krisberg, 1982; Bazemore & Karp, 2004; Harris & Lo, 2002).

The limited research on this topic focuses primarily on agency workers' perceptions of CSW programs and the attitudes of those whom CSWs serve. In this vein, McIvor (1993b) found that the vast majority of people surveyed in Scotland who received CSW assistance – mostly elderly residents getting help with household tasks – reported that they benefited from the work and that it was well done. Ninety-six percent of those surveyed said they would use CSW teams again. Similarly, Caputo (1999) found that six of the eight community agency representatives interviewed as part of a larger project on the effectiveness of community service orders were either satisfied or very satisfied with their work. In addition, half of the agency employees noted the value of CSWs

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completing work that the agency otherwise would not have been able to manage. Recent research similarly finds that (1) agencies often engage CSWs because they perform labor that volunteers do not want to perform and (2) agencies with short-term, labor-intensive projects, such as stocking shelves at a food bank, are particularly likely to report a benefit to CSW labor (Clerkin, Coggburn, & Lawrence, 2025).

Studies have also considered the monetary value and concrete products of the labor CSWs perform in assessing program success. An evaluation of an intensive community service program in New York City that involved probationers, as well as those on parole, found that the program produced 60,000 hours of labor for the community (McDonald, 1986). In arguing for the success of CSW programs, Bazemore and Karp (2004) cite Dickey and Smith's (1998) study listing the tangible products of CSW labor: "gardens, graffiti-free neighborhoods, less dangerous alleys, [and] habitable housing for the homeless" (p. 35). Some agencies also report more flexibility with how CSW labor is used as compared to volunteers, as CSWs can be assigned to tasks that volunteers do not want to perform (Clerkin et al., 2025; Nesbit et al., 2025). Review articles have also noted generally positive outcomes for communities (e.g., Harris & Lo, 2002).

While these studies indicate that CSW labor can benefit communities, the costs of the programs might offset the benefits for some agencies (Clerkin et al., 2025). Probation programs are generally expensive to operate, and there are additional personnel costs when probation officers coordinate with community agencies. Agencies also incur costs when they utilize CSW labor: the time and effort involved in managing CSWs often exceeds that for agency volunteers, given the time reporting requirements (Nesbit et al., 2025). Further, while proper onboarding and training matter as much for CSWs as they do for volunteers, the time investment in CSWs is much less likely to yield long-term commitment to the organization (Nesbit et al., 2025). Research also finds that agency staff report having to engage in closer supervision of CSWs than of volunteers, which is time-consuming (Nesbit et al., 2025). Thus, the benefits that communities receive may be offset by the costs associated with CSW programs.

1.4 Empirical Research on the Impact of Court-Ordered Community Service on Community Service Workers

Another goal of court-mandated community service programs is to reduce recidivism. Empirical research examining the extent to which

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court-ordered community service fulfills this goal focuses on CSW attitudes and reoffending and/or rearrest rates. We focus here on studies featuring an appropriate comparison group, which is necessary for making causal claims.

Research on recidivism comparing CSWs to persons receiving a jail sentence shows mixed findings. Killias, Aebi, and Ribeaud (2000) conducted a field experiment in Switzerland that compared people randomly assigned to community service work or to a jail sentence of up to fourteen days. There were no significant differences in new convictions across the two groups, but there were fewer police reports involving the CSWs than those jailed. Participants were also interviewed immediately after completing their sentence and then surveyed two years later, though only 65% of the CSWs and 51% of the incarcerated group returned the follow-up survey. While there were no differences in employment or satisfaction with social life across groups, the group sentenced to jail reported more optimism about their future compared to CSWs. An eleven-year follow-up on a subset of these participants revealed no significant differences between the CSW and jailed groups in either reconvictions or measures of social integration. Interestingly, the participants assigned to jail were significantly more likely to report income in the follow-up year than were those in the CSW group (Killias et al., 2010).

In contrast, Wermink and colleagues (2010), in an eight-year follow-up of over 4,000 persons in the Netherlands, found significantly lower rates of recidivism among those sentenced to court-ordered community service compared to those who were imprisoned. At least two other studies also find lower recidivism among CSWs than among those sentenced to jail (e.g., Bol & Overwater, 1986; Spaans, 1998).

1.5 Current Study

Given the wide-ranging goals of CSW programs, it is not surprising that findings from the limited evaluation research are mixed. Much of this research also takes place in Europe, where CSW programs operate in a significantly different social and judicial context than in the U.S. This suggests the need for research that compares program outcomes cross-nationally and that assesses the potential success of all three primary goals of CSW programs simultaneously.

Before embarking on wide-scale evaluation research, though, we need preliminary data to understand more about how CSW programs operate and how CSWs and community agencies experience the programs. Here, we take a first step in assessing whether court-ordered community service

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in the U.S. can meet its varied goals by focusing on the experiences of CSWs and the agency staff who supervise them within the jurisdiction of two probation offices in Georgia. Our goal in presenting this case study is to identify facets of program operations that bear further investigation. We do this by examining how CSWs and organizations experience these programs and whether their experiences mesh with the intended goals. For example, if the CSWs experience the programs as stigmatizing, then the reintegration goal would likely not be realized. Similarly, if agency managers report that participating in the program is overly burdensome and they do so out of a sense of obligation, then restitution goals are in question.

Specifically, we assess the potential effectiveness of court-ordered community service in the districts under study by examining whether organizations' and CSWs' experiences lay the groundwork for program success. As Bazemore and Karp (2004) point out, chain gangs were also a form of "community service," albeit a highly degrading and punitive form. While CSW programs for probationers are very different from chain gangs, they still involve conscripted labor. It is an open question whether conscripted labor can effectively lead to rehabilitation and reintegration, and even restitution goals are called into question if program costs are excessive. In considering this issue, we implicitly examine the philosophical underpinnings of CSW programs, as well as the practical implications of the programs on communities and probationers.

We organize our research around the perceived effects of court-ordered community service programs on the community organizations that participate, the community, and CSWs. We also examine the role of court-ordered community service on CSWs' volunteer intentions, drawing on insights from the volunteer management literature. We bring these questions together to assess whether CSW programs operate in ways that advance program goals and then provide policy recommendations.

2 The Study and Study Participants

In this exploratory study, we conducted interviews with thirty-one managers at community organizations receiving CSWs and thirty-four CSWs performing community service in the same area. The study was approved by the University of Georgia's Institutional Review Board as STUDY00005182 and STUDY0005804, and data collection was carried out in 2017 and 2018. This section overviews the two partner probation offices and the data collection procedures and describes our study participants.

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2.1 The Probation Offices

The research team worked with two probation offices within the same judicial district in Georgia. The first office, which we will call the Dogwood Office, serves an urban county, while the second office, called the Azalea Office, serves three rural counties. Like other probation offices, these offices are tasked with supervising probationers within their jurisdiction, under the auspices of the Georgia Department of Community Supervision (DCS) (2017). The offices identify public and nonprofit agencies in the community to receive their CSWs. Participating organizations agree to supervise CSWs appropriately and to properly maintain and return their time sheets. The probation offices typically provide a list of community service sites to each CSW and allow them to select where to serve, but officers have the latitude to assign CSWs to a location at their discretion. DCS policy requires felony offenders to complete their community service hours within three years, while misdemeanor offenders have twelve months to do so. Probation offices have the latitude to assign additional community service hours in lieu of a fine. Within the judicial district where our study takes place, judges typically require 40 community service hours for the first DUI and 240 for a second. However, probationers vary in the number of community service hours they are required to perform.

The Dogwood Office is an independent probation office supervising 1,500 active probationers. After discovering instances of CSWs paying for fraudulent time sheets, the Dogwood Office adopted stricter policies for its partner agencies, including a required training module. At the time of the study, the Dogwood Office was consistently working with twenty-two nonprofits and ten public agencies. The Office also provided CSWs to an additional five nonprofits for special events once or twice a year.

Due to its more rural placement, the Azalea Office struggles to find enough partner agencies across the three counties it serves. At the time of the study, the Azalea Office was partnering with eight agencies – two government and six nonprofit. The Azalea Office would also permit CSWs to do some service hours at their own office, particularly when staff felt the CSW would need extra supervision or assistance. The geographic spread of the area and demographic make-up of the counties served by the Azalea Office compound the challenge of identifying sufficient partners to receive CSWs, especially for those with transportation challenges or mental/physical disabilities. At the time

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of data collection, the Azalea Office was supervising 100 probationers with community service requirements.

2.2 Data Collection Procedures

Our two partner probation offices shared their lists of CSW-receiving organizations, and we invited each agency, specifically the person responsible for managing CSWs, to participate in the study. (Typically, this individual also supervised the organization's volunteers.) We conducted semi-structured interviews with thirty-one managers representing thirty organizations (twenty-five associated with the Dogwood Office and six with the Azalea Office). Most of the interviewees (n = 25) were employed by nonprofits, and the remainder were with public organizations. Interviews were conducted in Fall 2017 (with the exception of one interview in June 2018), either in person or on the phone, and were recorded and transcribed. Interview topics included questions about the benefits and challenges of working with CSWs and how community service affects the organization and its CSWs.

We also conducted interviews with individuals who have community service requirements as a condition of probation. We tried to screen for individuals who had completed at least ten hours of service, but four study participants had not yet completed any community service. Probation officers used an Institutional Review Board (IRB)-approved recruitment script to recruit study participants during their regular follow-up visits. Offering a $15 Walmart gift card as an incentive for participation, we interviewed thirty-four probationers, eighteen associated with the Dogwood Office, and fourteen with the Azalea Office. We collected data between February and March 2018. Most of the interviews occurred in a private room in the respective probation office but thirteen were conducted by telephone for the respondents' convenience. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Interview questions covered barriers to completing service hours, their perspectives on how community service has helped or hurt them, attitudes about community service as a punishment, and intention to continue as a volunteer.

2.3 Qualitative Coding and Analysis

The research team used a two-cycle coding technique to analyze the data (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2020; Saldaña, 2016). In the first cycle of coding, the main topic for each passage was identified and coded with a descriptive word or phrase. In the second cycle, the descriptive codes were grouped into themes.

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The CSW interviews included a handful of closed-ended questions that asked about CSWs' perceptions of community service as a policy intervention. They responded using a five-point Likert scale: (1) strongly disagree, (2) somewhat disagree, (3) neutral, (4) somewhat agree, and (5) strongly agree. Throughout this document, we report the percent of CSWs who agreed or strongly agreed with each question. CSWs were asked to verbally elaborate when they disagreed with one of the statements. These elaborations were translated into descriptive codes, following the two-cycle coding procedure outlined above.

2.4 Community Organizations and Managers

The community organizations in our study work in a variety of areas, including thrift stores (7), recreational facilities (4), human services (4), medical (3), and animal welfare (2). Most of these organizations have worked with CSWs for ten or more years, though two had only recently started doing so. While most organizations work with CSWs on an ongoing basis, four of them use CSWs only on an ad hoc basis to help with large events. Some organizations only work with a couple of CSWs each month and others (primarily the thrift stores and animal welfare organizations) would use dozens over the same period.

We interviewed the person at each organization who manages the CSWs. Our final sample included five "volunteer coordinators," a few executive directors or assistant executive directors, and employees in other managerial roles (e.g., facilities manager). A few respondents were board members. We refer to all of these individuals as "managers" throughout. Tables 1a–1c summarize basic background information on the managers, who are assigned pseudonyms.

Managers had an average tenure of nine years at their current organization. Because most had other duties besides managing volunteers, volunteer (and CSW) management responsibilities typically took less than 20% of their work time. Only two of the managers had received any specific credentialing for managing volunteers, although several had master's degrees that included management education. The managers also varied greatly in how much professional development they had received regarding working with volunteers. Seven reported having no professional development, and another seven had only taken the required training offered through their probation office. The rest of the managers reported participating in trainings offered through their community, a university, or other nonprofits. A more detailed description of the managers is provided in our prior work (Nesbit et al., 2025).

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Table 1a Managers' Background Information: Human Services and Health

No.	Pseudonym	Org. Name	Type	Role	Total Exp. (years)	Current Exp. (years)	Percent Time Managing Vols/CSWs	Background
1	Oliver	Human Services	Nonprofit	Facilities Manager	1.5	1.5	10	First-time employee
2	Ava	Health/Medical	Nonprofit	Principal Manager	37	35	5	Nonprofit
3	Isabella	Health/Medical	Nonprofit	Events and Communications Coordinator	15	4	30	Nonprofit
4	Luna	Human Services	Nonprofit	Assistant Director	2	2	10	First-time employee
5	Mia	Human Services	Nonprofit	Executive Coordinator	25	5	30	Business (banking)
6	Lucas	Human Services	Nonprofit	Volunteer Manager	15	5	45	Nonprofit
7	Aurora	Human Services	Public	Communications Director/ Property Manager	Some	7	5	Nonprofit
8	Ella	Health/Medical	Nonprofit	Executive Director	Some	18	18	Public organization (navy)
9	Mila	Human Services	Nonprofit	Service Director & Case Manager	Some	3.5	8	Nonprofit
10	Aria	Human Services	Nonprofit	Director of Development and Volunteer Services	Some	2.5	13	Public organization (state park)
11	Ellie	Human Services	Nonprofit	Director	5	5	10	First-time employee
12	Grayson	Human Services	Nonprofit	Kitchen Manager	Not asked	8	85	Small business & nonprofit

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Table 1b Managers' Background Information: Arts, Education, and Sports

No.	Pseudonym	Org. Name	Type	Position	Total Exp. (years)	Current Exp. (years)	Percent Time Managing Vols/CSWs	Background
1	Elijah	Education/Literacy	Public	Volunteer Coordinator	30	30	25	Public organization (library)
2	Sophia	Sports/Recreation	Nonprofit	Volunteer Manager (volunteer position)	30	0 (Volunteer)	25	Management
3	Evelyn	Sports/Recreation	Public	Parks Manager	Some	2.5	10	Public organization
4	Harper	Sports/Recreation	Public	Assistant Director	Some	15	40	Nonprofit
5	Asher	Education/Literacy	Nonprofit	Program Manager	1.5	1.5	34	First-time employee
6	James	Arts & Culture	Public	Security Manager	21.5	1.5	15	Public organization (law enforcement)
7	Gianna	Sports/Recreation	Nonprofit	Assistant Director	26	26	20	Nonprofit

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Table 1c Managers' Background Information: Specialized/Other

No.	Pseudonym	Org. Name	Type	Position	Total Exp. (years)	Current Exp. (years)	Percent Time Managing Vols/CSWs	Background
1	Liam	Thrift Store	Nonprofit	Store Manager	30	1.4	No response	Business (investment)
2	Olivia	Thrift Store	Nonprofit	Store Manager	Not asked	4	15	Nonprofit
3	Emma	Thrift Store	Nonprofit	Outreach Coordinator	0.4	0.4	25	First-time employee
4	Noah	Religious Organization	Nonprofit	Facilities Manager	4	4	13	Nonprofit
5	Amelia	Membership Association	Nonprofit	Board Secretary (volunteer position)	26	10	No response	Private probation
6	Charlotte	Animal Welfare	Nonprofit	Director	10	10	10	Nonprofit
7	Mateo	Animal Welfare	Nonprofit	Director	Not asked	4	8	Nonprofit
8	Levi	Human Rights	Nonprofit	Director	12	8	10	Nonprofit
9	Scarlett	Thrift Store	Nonprofit	Store Manager	12	12	13	Nonprofit
10	Nova	Thrift Store	Nonprofit	Volunteer Coordinator	1.5	1.5	43	First-time employee
11	Leo	Animal Welfare	Public	Animal Control Supervisor	Some	21	5	Nonprofit
12	Sofia	Thrift Store	Nonprofit	Thrift Center Manager	Not asked	8	28	Small business

2.5 The Community Service Workers

We interviewed thirty-four CSWs, 18 with the Dogwood Office and 14 with the Azalea Office. Tables 2a–2d show the basic demographic characteristics of our sample of CSWs, who were each assigned a pseudonym.

The CSWs in our sample leaned toward being male (19), white (27), and young (17 under age 30). They also had low levels of education (four have a bachelor's degree or higher) and were relatively poor. Twenty-six CSWs claimed an annual salary of less than $40,000. Their employment situations varied greatly – unemployed (12), employed full-time (12), and employed part-time (10). Seven CSWs were university students.

The CSWs were on probation for a variety of crimes, including larceny (32%); underage drinking (26%); vehicular crimes, such as DUI (21%); drug offenses (15%); and violent crimes (6%). The length of their probation ranged from six months to five years or more, with eighteen on probation for a year or less. The amount of required community service ranged from 20 to 330 hours (average = 66 hours). The typical CSW had completed 40 hours of community service at the time of data collection, although four respondents had not yet completed any.

The CSWs in our sample performed community service in a variety of environments, including nonprofit organizations (16), like thrift stores or animal shelters; public agencies (13), like libraries or recreational facilities; and a church (3). Two disabled individuals received alternative service assignments. Many of the organizations working with the CSWs in our sample were also part of our manager sample; however, several CSWs did service work at organizations that were not represented in our interviews (i.e., those not appearing on the preapproved lists provided by the probation offices). We share a more detailed description of the CSWs in our prior work (Nesbit et al., 2025).

3 The Impact of Court-Ordered Community Service on Community Organizations

A primary goal of community service is that it benefits the organizations receiving CSWs, which facilitates restitution to the community. However, surprisingly little is known about the impact CSWs have on their assigned agencies. While it is easy to presume that these organizations are better off when they have CSWs, the associated administrative burden and additional supervision may offset some – or even all – of these benefits. CSWs are essentially conscripted labor, which complicates the dynamic between CSWs and the agencies. It is even possible that the net costs of

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Table 2a Community Service Workers' Demographic and Probation Information: Short-Term (6–12 Months and Worked Less than 30 Hours)

No.	Pseudonym	Gender	Race	Year of birth	Employment (hours/week)	Education	Household income	Offense	Total probation period (months)	Completed hours/total community service (hours)
1	Ethan	Male	White	1956	Unemployed	Bachelor's degree	$20,001–$40,000	Vehicular crimes/theft	12	330/330
2	Layla	Female	White	1998	20–28	Some college	Up to $20,000	Vehicular crimes/ underage drinking	12	120/120
3	Wyatt	Male	White	1998	Less than 20	Some college	Up to $20,000	Underage drinking	12	40/40
4	Willow	Female	Hispanic	1993	Unemployed	Less than High school	Up to $20,000	Theft by receiving	12	40/40
5	Sebastian	Male	White	1999	Less than 20	High school/GED	More than $120,000	Fake ID/underage drinking	12	22/40
6	Hazel	Female	White	1989	20–28	Bachelor's degree	$20,001–$40,000	Theft by taking	10	100/160
7	Mason	Male	Black	1982	Unemployed	High school/GED	Up to $20,000	Drug offenses	12	12/40
8	Chloe	Female	White	1998	Unemployed	Some college	$100,001–$120,000	Fake ID/underage drinking	12	24/60
9	Henry	Male	White	1986	Unemployed	Bachelor's degree	$20,001–$40,000	Vehicular crimes	12	30/40
10	Hudson	Male	Black	1995	Less than 20	Some college	Up to $20,000	Drug offenses	12	31/120
11	Jack	Male	Other	1998	Unemployed	Some college	More than $120,000	Underage drinking	12	30/30

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Table 2b Community Service Workers' Demographic and Probation Information: Short-Term (6–12 Months and Worked 30+ Hours)

No.	Pseudonym	Gender	Race	Year of birth	Employment (hours/week)	Education	Household income	Offense	Total probation period (months)	Completed hours/total community service (hours)
1	Ezra	Male	White	1980	40 or more	Some college	$20,001–$40,000	Vehicular crimes	12	40/40
2	Violet	Female	White	N/A	40 or more	Some college	$20,001–$40,000	Theft	12	30/80
3	Luca	Male	White	1986	40 or more	Bachelor's degree	$40,001–$60,000	Vehicular crimes	12	15/40
4	Lily	Female	White	1972	40 or more	Some college	Up to $20,000	Traffic ticket	6	11/30
5	Camila	Female	White	1999	40 or more	High school/GED	$20,001–$40,000	Theft	6	20/40
6	Benjamin	Male	White	1996	40 or more	Less than high school	$40,000–$60,000	Drug offenses/ underage drinking	12	10/80
7	Avery	Female	Other	2000	30–39 hours	High school/GED	$20,001–$40,000	Theft	6	30/40

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Table 2c Community Service Workers' Demographic and Probation Information: Mid-Term (36–48 Months)

No.	Pseudonym	Gender	Race	Year of birth	Employment (hours/week)	Education	Household income	Offense	Total probation period (months)	Completed hours/total community service (hours)
1	Aden	Male	White	1973	Unemployed	High school/GED	Up to $20,000	Vehicular crimes	36	144/240
2	Jackson	Male	White	1999	20–28	High school/GED	$20,001–$40,000	Vehicular crimes/ underage alcohol possession	36	130/130
3	Penelope	Female	White	1997	20–28	Less than High school	Up to $20,000	Theft	36	26/540
4	Eleanor	Female	White	1969	Unemployed	High school/GED	Up to $20,000	Drug offenses	48	11/40
5	Gabriel	Male	White	1960	40 or more	High school/GED	$40,001–$60,000	Vehicular crimes/ drug offenses	48	5/40

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Table 2d Community Service Workers' Demographic and Probation Information: Long-Term (60+ Months)

No.	Pseudonym	Gender	Race	Year of birth	Employment (hours/week)	Education	Household income	Offense	Total probation period (months)	Completed hours/total community service (hours)
1	Elena	Female	White	1988	20–28	High school/GED	Up to $20,000	Theft	60+	0/40
2	Owen	Male	Black	1978	40 or more	High school/GED	$20,001–$40,000	Drug offenses	60+	0/50
3	Daniel	Male	Hispanic	1993	40 or more	High school/GED	$100,001–$120,000	Vehicular crimes/ drug offenses	60	6/120
4	Paisley	Female	White	1990	Unemployed	High school/GED	Up to $20,000	Theft	60	3/40
5	Eliana	Female	White	1982	Unemployed	Some college	$60,001–$80,000	Theft/drug offenses	60+	6/40
6	Alexander	Male	White	1982	40 or more	Some college	$20,001–$40,000	Drug offenses	60+	34/40
7	Maverick	Male	White	1968	40 or more	High school/GED	Up to $20,000	Property Crimes	60+	0/20
8	Ivy	Female	White	1989	Unemployed	Some college	Up to $20,000	Theft	60+	0/40
9	Kai	Male	White	1976	Unemployed	High school/GED	Up to $20,000	Other (family violence)	60	20/20
10	Elizabeth	Female	White	1986	30–39	High school/GED	Up to $20,000	Drug offenses	60+	4/40
11	Carter	Male	White	1997	40 or more	Less than High school	$20,001–$40,000	Vehicular crimes/ violent crimes/ theft/disorderly conduct	60	29/40

working with CSWs may be too high for some organizations. As our sample only represents organizations currently working with CSWs, we cannot include the perspectives of those who might have stopped such relationships because of a cost/benefit imbalance. That said, our sample can shed light on the positive and negative impacts that CSWs can have on community organizations, which provides insight regarding the potential of CSW programs for reaching the goal of community restitution. In this section, we review three primary benefits and five significant challenges of working with CSWs.

3.1 Benefits to the Organization

The managers reported three primary benefits of working with CSWs. First, most feel that many CSWs are good, compliant, reliable workers. Second, they can be used almost as quasi-employees because they are scheduled to come in at regular, predictable intervals. Third, they help to build the organization's long-term human resource capacity. We discuss each of these benefits below.

3.1.1 Community Service Workers as Good Workers

The managers reported that many – or at least some – of their CSWs are better workers than their regular volunteers. CSWs can be more willing and compliant, more reliable, and do better work than other volunteers (Nesbit et al., 2025). They are also willing to do work that regular volunteers do not want to do. Emma described it this way:

> Being able to tell someone what to do and having that authority is great. The work that is being done in [our thrift store] by CSWs is very laborious, and I can't imagine a regular volunteer would want to do it. Loading couches into and out of a truck 8 hours a day is really difficult.

While not every CSW is a reliable worker (see below), managers report that a subset are consistent, reliable, quality workers willing to do pretty much any task asked of them. This willingness is likely due to CSWs' role as conscripted laborers. Their fear of further legal repercussions makes them more compliant and possibly afraid to refuse an unpleasant task.

Another human resource benefit of CSWs is that they can bring unique skill sets that benefit the organization. For example, Evelyn reported, "We just had [a CSW] redo the roof on one of our buildings, so we didn't have to call a roofing company. They [the CSWs] come out and really like what they do if they're working in their field." Other managers also recognized that many CSWs find satisfaction in using their occupational skills as part

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of their community service. When managers took the time to talk to their CSWs and learn more about their occupational skills and background, they found that they could expand their tasks beyond general labor to more skilled assignments, which would further benefit the organization.

3.1.2 Community Service Workers as Quasi-Employees

The managers really appreciated the ability to schedule CSWs and to know that they would show up on certain days and give a certain number of hours. They almost viewed CSWs as quasi-staff – individuals who are obligated to come in and work on a consistent schedule. The managers voiced how much they wanted to be able to count on CSWs coming in to work because it allowed them to better plan the organization's overall workflow. The managers also liked being able to adjust the flow of CSWs to meet the organization's needs – requesting more when more help is needed and fewer during slow times. A couple of managers also mentioned that having CSWs relieved some of their volunteer recruitment challenges. In essence, the managers indicated that having CSWs on a set schedule (similar to staff) increases their value to the organization.

Managers also preferred when a CSW has a lot of community service hours (i.e., 100–200), because it is enough time for the CSW to become really familiar with the organization and its work and to become proficient at their tasks. It also allowed the manager to develop trust in the CSW and to give them more responsibility. Luna expressed it this way:

> When I first started this position as a coordinator, [a CSW] came in who I think needed like 180 hours. So, she was trained by me in my early part of this. She became so consistent that we thought of her as part of the team. We could rely on her as she was with us for months; we gave her more responsibility out of the typical volunteer role. She proved that she could handle that. She really helped out … we gained such an asset to our team for the time that she was with us.

When CSWs spend a lot of time at an organization, it reduces supervision and training costs because the organization gets more labor for a given amount of invested onboarding effort. Having more assigned hours allowed the CSW to grow into roles requiring more responsibility and autonomy.

3.1.3 Community Service Workers Help Build the Organization's Long-Term Capacity

Another benefit of working with CSWs is that it adds – at least in some small way – to the organization's long-term human resource capacity.

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Two-thirds of the managers indicated that they have had at least one CSW continue as a volunteer for a period after completing their community service hours, with several reporting it as a regular occurrence. Charlotte said: "We've actually had several [CSWs] who started out in community service, and they started asking us questions about what we do and why we do things. They get interested in how we operate, and they'll come back as regular volunteers."

When CSWs return as volunteers, they add to the organization's capacity. In Section 6, we will discuss the factors that lead CSWs to continue as volunteers.

Even more striking, almost one-third of the organizations in our sample have hired at least one CSW as staff. Emma described what happened at her organization:

> There is a guy … who had, I don't know how many hours, but it was enough to get to know him, and he was really, really great. This is just ideal. He got back up on his feet and worked really hard and got along really well with everyone. When he finished, we offered him a job and he took it.

Other managers indicated that they would have been interested in hiring a CSW, but they could not due to a lack of financial resources. In essence, community service provided community organizations with the opportunity to prescreen and scout out potential employees.

Not only do CSWs bring additional labor to the organization, but they can also attract other resources, which further facilitates the goal of restitution. At some organizations, CSWs made donations to the organization or solicited donations from others. Asher explained, "[W]e've even had [CSWs] who work for local businesses who've been able to provide donations in various capacities." Additionally, CSWs connect the organization to more people in the community – potential clients, donors, or volunteers. Mateo said:

> We've had multiple [CSWs] come back as volunteers, donors, [and] adopters, and spread the word. They tend to bring the community in with them. We've done a lot of adoptions and alternative events and made a lot of connections in the community that might not be there if somebody didn't get that DUI.

CSWs not only added to the organization's human resource capacity by continuing to volunteer or coming on as staff, but they also brought other opportunities, connections, and resources.

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3.2 Challenges of Court-Ordered Community Service Workers

While organizations experience important benefits when working with CSWs, the managers also articulated several drawbacks. The major challenges include (1) some CSWs being difficult workers, (2) CSWs with unrealistic expectations, (3) challenges related to CSW fit with the organization or the work, (4) supervision/administrative costs, and (5) challenges interacting with probation offices.

3.2.1 Community Service Workers as Difficult Workers

The managers also experienced some CSWs who were very difficult to work with. Common problems included CSWs having "bad attitudes," lacking respect for others, and having poor decision-making skills. Some CSWs were difficult to motivate and did poor-quality work, while a few were argumentative with staff and had outbursts when they did not get their way. One manager went so far as to say that sometimes a CSW would bully the staff and push too hard against boundaries. The managers also complained that some CSWs lacked both hard and soft skills (e.g., basic cleaning abilities), engaged in poor workplace behaviors (e.g., arriving late, missing shifts, or spending too much time on their cell phones), or violated organizational policies (e.g., not wearing closed-toe shoes). On occasion, CSWs engaged in inappropriate behaviors, such as showing up for their shift intoxicated.

Though these organizations continued to work with CSWs despite the laundry list of potential problems, the current sample does not include organizations that opted to stop receiving them, preventing that perspective from being reported in this study. Nevertheless, these difficulties highlight an organizational conundrum, articulated by Emma: "But other things, like disrespectful workers, can be a little tricky … we really do need the workers, but also you kind of have to judge when it is worth it to deal with someone who is difficult."

Both positive (CSWs as good workers) and negative (CSWs as difficult workers) situations can be experienced by the same organization simultaneously. In essence, managers reported much more variation in the quality of their CSWs relative to the quality of volunteers. Therefore, it was not uncommon for organizations to have a subset of CSWs that were very high quality (even better than volunteers) and a subset who were incredibly difficult to work with. Some managers only experienced an isolated incident with one difficult CSW; other managers seemed to have more problems.

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The main point is that CSW quality could run to the extreme in both directions, which is why we discuss it as both a benefit and a challenge.

3.2.2 Unrealistic Community Service Worker Expectations

Another challenge is that CSWs can have unrealistic expectations about how community service works. For example, many CSWs call managers at the last minute, seeking to pack a lot of community service hours into an unrealistically short period of time. Mia referred to "… the ones who call on October 1st and say I need 90 hours by the 15th. We get a lot of those who procrastinate to the last minute and expect somebody to help them. It's not gonna work." Additionally, CSWs often do not realize that organizations have an onboarding process, such as an application, background check, interview, orientation and/or training, that prevents immediate community service work. Some CSWs assume that community organizations are always prepared to take them on, when some might not always have work available.

While organizations like to treat CSWs as quasi-staff members, CSWs sometimes balk against this expectation. They view community service more like a leisure activity – something to be done at their desire and convenience. This mismatch in manager-CSW expectations causes challenges, such as this experience described by Mila:

> We scheduled an interview time, and the worker did not show up. The next day [when] the worker came in, we were in the middle of the meeting … I explained we couldn't stop the meeting we are having right now to do an interview. She was angry, rude … I said we would be willing to reschedule for the interview. She yelled and said something like, 'It's not like a job. I should be able to walk in and get something to do to do my hours. I shouldn't have to interview.' I said, 'Well, that's how we do it here, and if it's not going to work for you, I think you're gonna have to do your hours somewhere else.'

While this manager's experience was extreme, the CSW's comments indicate their frustrated expectations. CSWs did not understand the organizational realities facing the managers, and the probation offices did little to provide them with realistic expectations.

3.2.3 Challenges Related to Fit

The managers agreed that some type of screening process was necessary when receiving CSWs, particularly to check for mismatches between the CSWs' time availability and the organization's capacity to accommodate

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them. Many indicated that they had few – if any – opportunities for community service on the weekends or evenings. Often, they would have to turn away interested CSWs whose work schedules prohibited them from doing service hours at times when the organization had available work. Screening – and even quick prescreening phone calls – helped the managers ferret out these types of situations and direct the CSW to a different organization. Further, many CSWs did shift work at their regular jobs, with work schedules that changed from week to week. Managers struggled to balance their need for CSWs with their ability to accommodate their work schedules and family situations.

Another fit-related issue was matching CSWs to appropriate (and meaningful) work at the organization. Several managers had the desire to use CSWs' particular skill sets in their community service work, and one expressed a desire to find a better way to assess CSWs' skills and interests in their intake and onboarding processes. Another issue was accommodating CSWs who have disabilities, mental health challenges, or physical limitations that restrict the jobs they can perform. Elijah said:

> Because of what we do here, I need a literacy level … I would like an idea of what people could physically do. I don't want people to feel like, oh gee, if I admit I can't lift a heavy box, he's not gonna use me. That's not the case. I need to know if you can lift a heavy box for placement purposes. I need to know your reading level for placement purposes. It's not gonna determine yes or no. It's gonna determine where.

It can be challenging for managers to find alternative tasks for those unable to complete work typically assigned to CSWs.

3.2.4 Supervision/Administrative Costs

The managers also reported that CSWs often require more supervision than volunteers, as they were more likely to shirk their responsibilities. In fact, some managers mentioned that they would sometimes find CSWs hiding rather than working. Nova related her experience: "I went by and saw a pair of shoes on the floor. I thought somebody had brought a pair off the shelf. I reached down to pick them up and saw a community service worker under the pillows. She laid down on the couch [and] covered herself in pillows."

Because of this, managers felt that they had to spend more time watching CSWs and checking to make sure they were completing their tasks. This reduced the amount of time they could spend on other projects, increasing the burden of supervision time for CSWs relative to volunteers.

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CSWs, who require more supervision time and record-keeping, also incurred higher administrative costs. Mateo struggled with "the amount of data keeping, because [for] our regular volunteers, we don't track their hours unless they ask us to. But, for [CSWs], it's more of a process, more paperwork, more filing, more emailing." In particular, it takes time to maintain and verify the CSWs' time sheets. Several managers learned along the way that they should not give CSWs free access to their time sheets or to the volunteer sign-in sheet because of the potential to falsify those records. Instead, staff had to keep track of when CSWs showed up and how many hours they worked without automation of any of these processes. Most of the organizations in our sample did not use any type of volunteer management software to help track hours; some used Excel and others still relied on paper logs. Additionally, probation offices lacked automated procedures for receiving time sheets back – sometimes a probation officer would pick it up, sometimes the manager emailed it to the probation office, and sometimes the CSWs themselves would deliver it back to the probation office. Keeping track of all this paperwork, especially without the benefits of modernized, automated processes, was another managerial burden.

Another supervision cost is the time needed to provide sufficient onboarding for new CSWs. This is particularly burdensome when CSWs stop showing up or work a few community service hours. As Luna lamented:

> The biggest challenge is just managing the time to train compared to the high turnover rate. I give an hour of training to them, individual training. They're here for a couple of days (or just 10 hours), and then they're gone. [This is] compared to someone who is here for a couple of years [per] hour of training.

In those cases, the managers felt that their time investment in the CSW had not paid off, especially when they struggled to find the time for a thorough orientation in the first place. This also precluded most organizations from being able to receive walk-in CSWs, because they could not guarantee they would have the time to do proper onboarding. Developing and executing a high-quality onboarding process is time-consuming, especially given that most managers spend only a small percentage of their work time on volunteer management tasks.

3.2.5 Lack of Support from Probation Offices

The final challenge is a lack of support from probation offices. The managers needed more information regarding the CSWs, including their

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contact information and a picture, so they could verify that the person showing up for service is actually the individual on probation. When a CSW was arrested and sent to jail or when a CSW finished their community service hours, probation officers rarely notified the organization, leaving them to wonder why they did not show up for their shift. This lack of follow-up was frustrating for managers, who expressed a desire for more information and better communication from probation offices.

They also felt that the probation officers were reactive instead of proactive. Several managers felt that the probation offices could do a better job preparing CSWs and communicating expectations for their service, such as showing up on time and calling before missing a shift. They also found it off-putting when probation offices did not reach out to verify a CSW's hours. Ellie stated:

> Probation officers are not as involved in making sure the probationer does find a site that will work for them. Sometimes, they don't seem to follow up as closely with their probationers to make sure they're doing the hours and getting things signed off. I have had some officers who never followed up with me at all to confirm that one [CSW] was doing hours with me at the location.

It is important to add the caveat that several managers were happy with the level of support they received from the Dogwood Office. They felt that the Dogwood Office was more professional and organized than other probation offices they worked with. Many of the Dogwood Office's procedures for working with CSWs, such as helping to set expectations up front, improved their transition to community service work.

3.3 The Restorative Potential of Court-Ordered Community Service: Increasing Benefits to Community Organizations

Our findings suggest that while there is potential for court-ordered community service to provide restitution through work in community organizations, this is not always realized. While CSWs can benefit community organizations in some important ways, working with them represents real organizational costs and challenges. Some of these costs can be mitigated or reduced through a greater investment in good volunteer management practices, as discussed in detail in our prior work (Nesbit et al., 2025). However, it is important to note that many community organizations work with CSWs because their limited financial and human resources adversely affect management capacity. There is also a lack of evidence-based best practices for working with CSWs. Therefore, it is likely that

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many community organizations find that the costs of working with CSWs outweigh the benefits, especially when they have limited volunteer management capacity. These organizations might either choose not to receive CSWs at all or quickly discontinue doing so. Prior research supports this: larger organizations that have a volunteer manager were more likely to use CSWs relative to smaller organizations and those without a dedicated volunteer manager (Clerkin et al., 2025). Future research is needed to provide more insight into why organizations either choose not to work with CSWs or discontinue doing so. Clearly, management capacity is part of that equation.

In our sample, the Azalea Office worked with a much smaller number of community organizations than did the Dogwood Office, possibly due to its location in a more rural area. Nonprofits in rural areas tend to be smaller and have less organizational capacity than those in urban areas and face significant funding challenges (Newstead & Wu, 2009), and report greater challenges with staffing and volunteer management capacity (Walters & Wallis, 2021). Therefore, community organizations in rural places might find it more difficult to work with CSWs in ways that provide sufficient benefits to the organization. This is an important consideration for lawyers and judges assigning community service; not every community has equal capacity to absorb and productively work with CSWs. Unless community agencies are able to engage with CSWs in ways that provide a true benefit to the community, it is unlikely that the goal of restitution can be met.

Our results also indicate that the legal system and probation officers should play a greater role in preparing CSWs for community service. At the time of sentencing, judges and lawyers should carefully consider whether an individual has the soft skills necessary for community service work. Probation offices should provide training to CSWs to help them understand how community service works and set reasonable expectations for their service. Probation offices should be familiar enough with their community partners to direct CSWs to organizations that fit their interests and work schedules. The Dogwood Office provides many of these services, and community organizations greatly appreciate the structure and support they receive from that office (Nesbit et al., 2025). More probation offices need to take such a proactive role to guide their CSWs to success.

Finally, we want to highlight that many organizations in our sample have hired a former CSW and more would have done so if they had the necessary resources. This is an important and interesting policy outcome. Prior research on community service initiatives also revealed instances

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where CSWs were hired by their host organizations (McIvor, 2016). Given that employment is strongly related to a reduction in recidivism (Delgado, 2012; Laub & Sampson, 2003; Petersilia, 2003), the fact that community service can potentially lead to stable employment is important. Employment can provide economic stability, social integration, and a sense of purpose, benefitting community organizations, CSWs, and the wider community. (It is also striking that so many organizations had CSWs continue as volunteers after their community service; we will address that topic in more detail in Section 6.)

4 The Perceived Impact of Community Service on Communities

Though CSWs provide restitution to communities via benefits to community agencies, they may also impact communities more directly through the work performed as part of their CSW sentence. Many of the crimes for which community service is punitively assigned are public order offenses, such as speeding, drug use, underage drinking, and DUI. Proponents of court-ordered community service argue that, in the absence of an identifiable victim, offenders can make indirect restitution by doing work that generally benefits the community. Our aim in this section is not to assess whether communities ultimately benefit from CSW programs. Instead, we report CSWs' and managers' perspectives on (1) ways that community service might – or might not – benefit the community and (2) community service as a policy tool.

4.1 Community Service Workers' Perspectives on Community Benefit

We asked CSWs several closed-ended questions about whether they perceived their community service work as benefiting their community. Table 3 summarizes responses to these items.

Overall, CSWs expressed a range of views about whether and how their service benefited the community. Many CSWs indicated that community service allowed them to give back and helped them learn more about their community, while fewer felt confident that their work contributed to addressing the problems of their community in a meaningful way. While these responses might be subject to social desirability bias, these data suggest that CSWs often distinguished between participation in community service and impact on the community, reflecting mixed perceptions about whether they felt that their community service work was a positive thing for their community.

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Table 3 Community Service Worker Perspectives on Connection to Community

No.	Item	Strongly agreed	Somewhat agreed	Neutral	Somewhat disagreed	Strongly disagreed	Not answered	Average/Total
1	Community service is a way for people who have committed crimes to give back to their community (Q14.I)	21 (62%)	4 (12%)	4 (12%)	2 (6%)	3 (9%)	0	4.12 (out of 34)
2	Completing my community service helped me to learn something about my community. (Q14.K)	18 (55%)	7 (21%)	6 (18%)	0 (0%)	2 (6%)	1	4.18 (out of 33)
3	I can help solve the problems of my community. (Q14.O)	9 (26%)	11 (32%)	6 (18%)	4 (12%)	4 (12%)	0	3.50 (out of 34)
4	I feel that I really helped my community through my community service. (Q14.P)	13 (38%)	10 (29%)	5 (15%)	2 (6%)	4 (12%)	0	3.76 (out of 34)

The interview data support this divide about perceived community benefits. CSWs who felt positively seemed to consider community service an appropriate price to pay for their misdeeds. For example, Camila stated: "You feel like you're making up for it in some way." Alexander expanded this idea:

> This time it helps me because I'm giving back … to realize that I can do something for the wrong I've done. Not just to my community, to the people around me as well. And so, I'll stay at [my community service organization until] I know that I have cleaned up some of the mess that I left behind before.

This indicates that CSWs who felt guilt for some harm to their community viewed community service as a way to make things right. For these CSWs, the mere act of engaging in community service was enough to feel that they had made some type of restitution.

Other CSWs, in contrast, viewed community service strictly as a punishment. They observed that their crimes had not hurt anyone (beyond themselves), so they resented the notion that restitution was necessary. Sebastian voiced his frustration:

> Any crime where you've endangered someone else's life or put someone at risk in any way, I think community service should be required because I think it's important to realize how they jeopardized someone else in your community. But I don't think that someone just choosing to drink a beer … requires me to do [community service] because I've endangered my community … It's just ridiculous.

Therefore, the nature of an individual's offense could be an important factor influencing CSWs' views on this subject.

For other CSWs, the nature of their community service experience shaped their perspectives about community benefit. Those who had difficult experiences or who felt that their tasks were meaningless were more adamant that community service did not benefit their community. Chloe expounded on this view by saying that manual labor or janitorial work does not make her feel that she is helping her community. She said, "I know a lot of [CSWs] do jobs that aren't really interacting directly with people. They may be just cleaning toilets or something, and I don't know if that would make me feel more connected to my community." Henry added, "I don't feel like I'm helping at all; it just feels like I'm a janitor. I feel like free labor." In the absence of direct contact with people they are serving, CSWs might just feel used or punished rather than feeling like they are providing a meaningful service. This meaningfulness matters.

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4.2 Community Service Workers' Perspectives on Community Service as a Policy Tool

We also sought to ascertain CSWs' thoughts about the use of community service as a punishment in the criminal legal system. Table 4 shows their responses to the closed-ended questions about the fairness of community service.

Across interviews, CSWs expressed varied and sometimes ambivalent views about community service as a policy tool. Many CSWs described the number of community service hours they received as fair, while others, particularly those assigned substantially higher numbers of hours (Ethan, Hazel, and Jackson), much more than the average number of community service hours (69) within the sample, questioned the proportionality of their sentence.

When asked whether people should be forced to do community service, CSWs offered a range of reactions, reflecting tension between the compulsory nature of the sentence and its perceived advantages related to incarceration. But the majority of CSWs indicated that they would rather do community service than spend time in jail. Interestingly, a few CSWs would prefer jail time to service, implying that community service was not universally perceived as the least burdensome or most appropriate sanction. These responses indicate that CSWs are somewhat tolerant of community service as a punishment, particularly if it keeps them from serving jail time.

Halfway through the interview process, we added a question: Should community service be required as a punishment? While just half of our full sample responded to this question, the thirteen answers were mixed across feeling it should be required, that it should not be required, or that it should be situational. Chloe felt that community service was a fair policy tool. She said, "I think it's a fair way for people to give back to the community and … keep people accountable for themselves to make sure that they're not gonna make the same mistake again, that they're being productive members of society." Henry expressed an opposing view. He felt that community service was too much of a burden on people – labor with no benefit – saying: "To require somebody to do free labor, like, if someone has a job, like, they have to take time out of their job to possibly do … a free job for somebody else … and you're not getting career building skills or anything like that to help you in the future."

These competing views indicate that CSWs do not hold universal views about community service.

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Table 4 Community Service Worker Perspectives on Fairness of Community Service

No.	Item	Strongly agreed	Somewhat agreed	Neutral	Somewhat disagreed	Strongly disagreed	Not answered	Average/Total
1	The amount of community service hours I have to perform is fair. (Q14.B)	23 (68%)	2 (6%)	3 (9%)	4 (12%)	2 (6%)	0	4.18 (out of 34)
2	People should not be forced to do community service. (Q14.H)	5 (15%)	4 (12%)	6 (18%)	8 (24%)	11 (32%)	0	2.53 (out of 34)
3	I would rather do community service than spend time in jail. (Q14.J)	30 (88%)	1 (3%)	0 (0%)	2 (6%)	1 (3%)	0	4.68 (out of 34)

CSWs felt that the assignment of community service should depend on the individual's crimes and be conditioned by their family and personal situation. They did not approve of community service as a blanket or catch-all sentence for any crime. Aden considered community service to be appropriate in some situations (e.g., for a DUI) but felt that some individuals' family situations should preclude the assignment of community service. He reasoned:

> I think that in those situations, yes, it's appropriate. In some situations, it may not be because of pregnancy, children, maybe, you know, sick or elderly at home, that type of thing … If the community service is going to take away from the probationer's time that could inflict death or injury on themselves or members of the family, then I think … it's more of a nuisance than anything.

Ezra agreed that community service could be a substantial detriment to people trying to support their families, especially those from disadvantaged situations, saying: "If they work and they're taking time from their job that they need to feed themselves and their families, then it's not right …. it nets a lot of the poor people in society and makes their lives worse to stay out of work, so it disproportionately comes to socioeconomic status."

In Section 5, we will discuss the barriers CSWs face when trying to complete their community service work, including the challenge of managing paid work and family responsibilities while still trying to complete community service. The CSWs' comments about community service as a policy tool highlight the depth of their concern about these barriers – for themselves and for others.

Ezra also expressed concerns about giving community service as a punishment on top of other sanctions. He felt that community service by itself could be an acceptable policy in some circumstances, but the addition of other punishments reduced the value of community service.

> If your punishment was just community service or something that bettered yourself and the lives of others and your community, then yes, very much, strongly agree, but since they tack on all the other ten different punishments with your license and taking your money and taking you to jail and keeping you on … and all this other shit, no. They need to reduce punishments somewhere.

Ezra's concern echoes scholars and advocates who have called attention to the utilization of community service to widen the criminal legal net. Instead of an alternative to incarceration, consistent with the original

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intent of the policy, courts tack community service onto other probation sanctions, increasing the likelihood that people will be unable to complete their probation successfully.

4.3 Managers' Perspectives on Community Benefit

When asked to reflect on whether they feel that community service meets the objectives of the criminal legal system, managers' answers were mixed. While most believed that community service can benefit most CSWs in some way (as we will discuss in Section 5), they were also skeptical about the benefits to the larger community.

A few managers, though, believed that community service benefits the community. "I think it's a very good program," said Harper. "Having them do community service is beneficial for the community and for them." This view represents an assumption that if CSWs do positive work in a community organization, it will naturally benefit the wider community.

A more common theme, however, was the potential impact of community service on recidivism – one of the policy's major goals – rather than broader community benefit. While most conceive of reducing recidivism as an effect of community service on individual CSWs, the managers' responses made it clear that they were also thinking about reduced recidivism as a broader community benefit. The managers who doubted whether community service reduces recidivism offered two rationales: (1) community service does not address the underlying problems that led the CSWs to commit a crime, and (2) they see many individuals who return to do more community service at a later date for another offense. Aria scoffed at the idea of community service preventing future crimes: "If it's a DUI and they're here working for 40 hours, nah, that ain't gonna make them stop drinking and driving." Aria felt that community service could benefit CSWs in other ways, but not through preventing future crime. Amelia agreed:

> I honestly don't see where it does any good. When a kid is given 40 hours of community service work, they have to do it. They know they have to do it. It has nothing whatsoever to do with the offense. I have never been a fan of court-ordered community service work. In some cases, it's servitude that's not even useful.

These comments illustrated that the managers viewed a disconnect between CSWs' community service work and their crimes. They did not believe service would deter CSWs from committing future crimes because it was not addressing the underlying motivating problems.

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Some managers doubted whether community service met broader policy goals because individuals would return for more court-ordered service after repeating the same offense. When asked about the policy's potential, Noah commented, "I don't know, but I do see multiple offenses and repeat offenders, so …," implying that the presence of repeat offenders was evidence that this policy tool was not deterring crime and thus not reducing recidivism. These situations contribute to the managers' views that community service does not have a larger impact on society.

4.4 Managers' Perspectives on Community Service as a Policy Tool

The managers also commented on the desirability of community service as a policy tool. Several managers believed that community service was a better alternative than putting people in jail, especially for relatively minor infractions. Asher explained: "I think it's also a much better alternative than sitting in a jail or prison for X amount of months, weeks, however long. It keeps them involved in the community and able to keep their job, able to stay with their family, things like that."

Emma agreed, pointing out the wisdom of using community service to give people a "second chance" before incarcerating them. She said:

> There are repeat offenders, but after so many offenses those people go to jail. So, when those people go to jail, you know those people have had second chance after second chance. Whereas if you sent them to jail right away, you might not know that. You give them the opportunity to get back on their feet.

Managers also pointed out how grateful CSWs were that they could pay off their fines through service. They felt that this added a layer of mercy and understanding for individuals in a difficult position.

However, the managers were also quick to point out the challenges and barriers that CSWs face when completing community service, and they indicated that those challenges could dampen any potential policy success. Olivia, for example, believed that the system sets CSWs up to fail by requiring them to juggle their jobs, families, and community service. This implicitly suggests that community service fails to benefit the community, since people who are unable to complete their probation sentence become a burden on the courts. She shared:

> We had one lady doing community service [who] did every hour possible. She works; she comes here and does her community service. She went back to court, and they wanted her to do jail time. Well,

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> where does that leave her job? If she loses her job, she can't pay her probation or her fine … She was doing all she could do. So, it just sets them up to fail.

While the managers were often grateful for the work that CSWs did in their organizations and believed the organization benefited from their service, they were also aware that community service is not a good one-size-fits-all policy choice due to home and family situations and other barriers to completing the service. This corroborates the CSWs' own perspectives – that community service might not make sense in all situations.

4.5 The Restorative Potential of Court-Ordered Community Service: Benefit to the Community

We have sought to understand CSWs' and managers' perspectives about community benefit. Their responses focused mostly on community service as restitution to the community, but they also touched on broader conceptualizations of community benefit, such as recidivism and connection to the community. While our respondents were fairly positive about the ability of community service to benefit community organizations and CSWs, they were much more jaded about community service's potential to change a CSW's relationship with their community or to benefit the community more broadly.

CSWs had mixed views, heavily influenced by the nature of the original offense and the types of tasks involved, on whether community service provides restitution to their communities. Many CSWs felt that they had not harmed their community and that it was not reasonable to ask them to make reparation. They resented being forced to do community service, and prior research supports this finding (McDonald, 1986). Other CSWs pointed out that merely doing manual labor did not make them feel that they were actually helping anyone or doing anything beneficial for their community, consistent with previous studies (McIvor, 1992). In our earlier work, we found that CSWs – just like volunteers – prefer meaningful tasks and interactions with beneficiaries (Nesbit et al., 2025). Preventing these interactions reinforces the message that CSWs are separate from their community and that their contributions are unwanted – a message that is inconsistent with a restitution goal.

Interestingly, when asked about benefits to the community, several CSWs and managers commented on the potential of community service work to decrease recidivism, which would indirectly benefit the community. While some CSWs and managers felt that doing community service

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can change a person, they also pointed out that community service does not address the root causes of crime and is thus unlikely to deter future crime. The managers commented on seeing several "repeat offenders" coming back to do more community service after a new infraction. While these anecdotal accounts cannot be used to assess whether community service influences recidivism, it is interesting that our participants expressed mixed opinions on this point. In some ways, their opinions are consistent with the mixed empirical literature: some research suggests that community service results in lower recidivism rates than other sanctions (e.g., Wermink et al., 2010), while other studies find no effect of community service on recidivism (e.g., Killias et al., 2000). Notably, the former studies compare court-ordered community service to a jail sentence, which, given the disruption and stigma of incarceration, yields an unsurprising result. A more appropriate comparison would be between community service and a non-incarcerative sentence, especially since most of those sentenced to community service in the U.S. are convicted for a crime unlikely to result in a jail sentence. Nonetheless, it is interesting that the lack of scholarly consensus about the effects of community service on recidivism is echoed among managers and CSWs.

Beyond issues related to restitution and recidivism, it is difficult to identify any strong causal argument in the policy discourse for why and how community service will provide broader benefits to the community, or what the nature of those benefits would be. Beyond that, even if the legal system's assertions about community benefit were clearer, quantitatively identifying and measuring any broader benefits would be incredibly difficult and costly, and it has been attempted by very few scholars. As we noted, some early studies sought to estimate the economic impact of community service hours by putting a dollar value on CSW time spent in service (McDonald, 1986) and assessing client satisfaction with the services that CSWs provided (McIvor, 1993b). While these studies found that CSW programs produced positive community outcomes, considerably more research is needed to determine whether the effects of community service justify their expense.

In essence, arguments supportive of community service's potential for community benefit rest upon an assumption that the organizations working with CSWs are positively influencing or changing their communities. However, this assumption is tenuous given the significant challenges many nonprofits face, such as limited resources, declining donations, and workforce shortages that hinder their ability to fulfill their missions (Independent Sector, 2024). Because of this, many

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nonprofits lack the capacity to invest in good management structures to support CSWs (Hager, 2004; Hager & Brudney, 2004).

Beyond resource constraints, it is inherently difficult to engage in good program evaluation or outcome/effectiveness metrics. Nonprofit organizations often struggle to conduct rigorous program evaluations due to their complex governance structures, multidimensional goals, and the socially constructed nature of their achievements, making effectiveness a relative and comparative measure rather than an absolute one (Forbes, 1998; Herman & Renz, 2008). Benjamin and colleagues (2023) highlight the challenges in assessing the extent to which nonprofits contribute to social impact, emphasizing the limitations of existing evaluation frameworks. Given these constraints, we cannot assume that all CSWs will complete their community service in an effective, well-managed organization that has a large, positive impact on its community. Without robust data on nonprofit effectiveness, the assumption that court-ordered community service reliably benefits communities remains unsubstantiated.

Despite all this, our findings indicate that both CSWs and managers find community service to be a more humane and reasonable alternative to incarceration, though they worry about its net-widening role. These concerns are justified, since most people sentenced to community service are convicted of crimes that do not typically result in a jail sentence. Thus, community service is not a true incarceration "alternative," which was its original purpose (Pease, 1985). Instead, the imposition of community service provides another avenue for probation failure, which can result in jail time. Our participant responses reflect this issue, noting that CSWs, particularly those who are trying to work and/or care for family, face many barriers to successful completion of their service. These burdens are often compounded by additional probation sanctions on top of community service, making CSWs' situations even more difficult. We discuss these potential impacts on CSWs in the next section.

5 The Impact of Community Service on Community Service Workers

This study, beyond examining how community service may affect organizations working with CSWs, seeks to understand whether CSWs' experiences reflect policies and procedures that could logically facilitate rehabilitation and reintegration. In order for community service to reduce recidivism and help offenders reintegrate into the community, it must have a positive effect on CSWs' lives, by, for example, improving CSWs' perceptions of themselves and their community. The assumption is that

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as CSWs change and feel more connected to their community, crime will decrease and the community will be better off.

We commence by discussing the barriers to completing community service, as the related stress can have a negative impact on CSWs. We then report CSWs' opinions on the ways their community service has affected them, followed by the managers' perspectives on that topic.

5.1 Barriers to Completing Community Service

We asked CSWs several questions assessing their motivation to complete their community service work and to overcome the obstacles facing them. Table 5 summarizes responses to several closed-ended questions, which we use primarily to orient the reader rather than to assess prevalence or magnitude.

CSWs consistently expressed a strong desire to complete their required hours. Most CSWs said completing their community service is an important priority to them and emphasized their motivation to get their community service hours within the required timeframe. While these results indicate that CSWs are committed to satisfying this requirement, uncommitted CSWs might not have responded to our interview request. As a result, our results are likely biased toward committed CSWs. However, these responses underscore a central finding of our study: even highly motivated CSWs encounter substantial obstacles to completing their service.

When asked about the ease of community service hour completion, many CSWs described that they often miss other commitments so they can get their community service hours done. These results suggest that, for at least a notable portion of CSWs, balancing community service with other aspects of life is challenging. This is noteworthy given our sample of relatively committed CSWs; those who are less committed might be more easily overwhelmed by barriers to service.

CSWs expounded on these barriers in their interviews. The primary challenges, discussed in turn below, included work commitments and scheduling challenges, family obligations, transportation issues, and community service fatigue.

5.1.1 Work Commitments and Scheduling Challenges

Work commitments were the primary barrier to completing community service hours. Many CSWs described difficulty balancing paid employment with mandated community service, particularly when service

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Table 5 Community Service Worker Perspectives on Motivations to Complete Service Hours

No.	Item	Strongly agreed	Somewhat agreed	Neutral	Somewhat disagreed	Strongly disagreed	Not answered	Average/Total
1	Completing my court-ordered community service hours is an important priority for me. (Q13.A)	25 (74%)	5 (15%)	2 (6%)	1 (3%)	1 (3%)	0	4.53 (out of 34)
2	I feel highly motivated to get my community service hours done quickly. (Q13.C)	21 (64%)	7 (21%)	3 (9%)	2 (6%)	0 (0%)	1	4.42 (out of 33)
3	I am committed to getting my community service hours done within three years. (Q13.E)	32 (97%)	0 (0%)	1 (3%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1	4.94 (out of 33)
4	I often miss other commitments so that I can get my community service hours done. (Q13.B)	5 (15%)	7 (21%)	6 (18%)	6 (18%)	9 (27%)	1	2.79 (out of 33)
5	I easily overcome any obstacles to getting my community service hours done. (Q13.D)	11 (33%)	9 (27%)	11 (33%)	2 (6%)	0 (0%)	1	3.88 (out of 33)

opportunities were limited to standard weekday hours. Gabriel stated unequivocally: "It was difficult for me when I had a job." Having a job and putting a substantial amount of time into work meant that CSWs had less time in the week to devote to community service. Just as the managers reported that scheduling mismatches were a headache for them, scheduling was likewise problematic for CSWs. Due to their work schedules, many CSWs desired to do their community service hours in the evenings or on weekends but found few opportunities to do so. Hazel said: "[My organization] is only open four days a week and on two of those days, they close as early as 3:00 pm, so it's just hard to get over there during the day and morning hours … so that's been difficult to navigate."

Working full-time while trying to complete a significant number of community service hours compounded the challenge of the lack of service opportunities during CSWs' off-work hours.

5.1.2 Family Obligations

Family obligations further constrained CSWs' ability to complete their service hours. Many CSWs described caregiving obligations, such as childcare and a sick or elderly family member care, as a significant challenge. Violet, a single mother with an eighty-hour community service requirement, reports:

> I'm a single mother with two kids. I have to find a babysitter to do the community service and work a full-time job. It is very difficult. Especially when you only get one or two days off a week, and you have to spend those doing nine hours of community service. People don't want to watch kids seven days a week.

Clearly, family obligations, especially when CSWs have younger children at home, can be another obstacle to completing community service. Childcare costs further compound this burden.

5.1.3 Transportation Issues

Transportation barriers also shaped CSWs' experiences, particularly for those without access to a personal vehicle or with suspended licenses. For these individuals, simply reaching their community service locations required careful planning and additional time. Luca reported: "They had just taken my license. I had to choose very strategically [where] I could serve my community service because I would either have to bike or walk … it's not as easy to get to." Chloe had a similar experience: "I have to walk there or take the bus. Sometimes, the bus is unreliable, and it

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takes about 40 minutes to walk. So, I have to really plan my day around it." While Luca and Chloe were able to circumvent the problem of not having their own transportation, their solutions involved transportation options that lengthened their commute to their community service site, increasing the time burden. Transportation issues were particularly acute in the area of the Azalea Office, which served multiple, more rural counties and featured longer travel distances to community service locations.

5.1.4 Community Service Fatigue

In general, these committed CSWs were motivated to fulfill their service hours due to the fear of additional penalties, including imprisonment and fines. Nevertheless, CSWs also expressed their fatigue and disinterest in completing their assignments within the stipulated period. Gabriel lamented: "I'm not going to lie. Sometimes I wake up just really tired, and I'm like really don't care about community service today." When CSWs have a lot of community service hours to get in – especially when they face one or more of the compounding challenges discussed above – the experience can be draining, particularly when they are relegated to manual labor on top of their paid jobs.

5.2 Community Service Workers' Perspectives about How Community Service Impacts Them

We asked CSWs a small number of closed-ended questions about ways that community service might benefit them. Their responses are shown in Table 6. Many CSWs indicated that the experience led them to learn something about themselves, while assessments of whether community service helped them to get ahead in life were far more ambivalent.

CSWs further reflected on the ways that community service can benefit them, and they provided a range of responses. For some CSWs, community service offered no advantage to them, considering it merely a punitive task rather than a beneficial experience. Ezra described it this way:

> I think people on probation are just doing this stuff to meet a requirement … so I don't know if anyone gets anything out of it. I don't think so. A lot of people are just pissed off that they're gonna be punished for a year or two years or whatever, and … they just wanna get it done.

However, CSWs also acknowledged potential benefits of community service, even if they acknowledged that benefits might be conditional on the situation. The three primary benefits were: deterring future crime, gaining a new perspective, and experiencing personal growth.

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Table 6 Community Service Worker Perspectives on Effect of Service on Themselves

No.	Item	Strongly agreed	Somewhat agreed	Neutral	Somewhat disagreed	Strongly disagreed	Not answered	Average/Total
1	Completing my community service helped me to learn something about myself. (Q14.L)	16 (50%)	8 (25%)	6 (19%)	1 (3%)	1 (3%)	2	4.16 (out of 32)
2	Completing my community service has helped me to get ahead in my life (Q14.M)	8 (25%)	7 (22%)	8 (25%)	5 (16%)	4 (13%)	2	3.31 (out of 32)

5.2.1 Deterring Future Crime

While the interviews did not delve deeply into the subject of rehabilitation, CSWs indicated that community service (in conjunction with their other punishments) discouraged them from committing another crime. Violet said, "It helps me realize that I don't want to do it again." Camila agreed: "Just the whole experience has made me learn my lesson. I'm never going to do anything like that again." Mason added that he believed community service could provide an opportunity for people to alter the direction of their lives. He said, "Some people just really want to change their lives and be a part of society … it will help them to." A few CSWs felt that community service would serve as a deterrent against committing a future crime. We note, however, the possibility of social desirability bias in these responses. Given the nature of the study, CSWs might have overemphasized the rehabilitative benefits of community service to please the interviewers, and even their honest opinions about rehabilitation are not necessarily predictive of actual future offenses. Nonetheless, clearly, some CSWs believed that their community service might alter their future behaviors. However, probation without the inclusion of community service might also generate this perception.

5.2.2 Gaining a New Perspective

Community service altered some CSWs' views about their community and volunteering. CSWs reflected that the experience had broadened their outlook ("It opened my perspective up," said Sebastian) and led to self-discovery ("It helped me to find out about myself," said Mason). These CSWs came to recognize the needs within their community and learned to appreciate the community organizations that tried to meet them. Some, like Layla, discovered new avenues for contributing to their community: "I saw what I could do in the community. I had no idea there were that many organizations out there where I could help the community." Community service brought these individuals into contact with nonprofits and public organizations offering unique services in the community, thus raising their awareness.

Through community service, CSWs were introduced to new situations, leading to fresh ideas about service. Ezra shared:

> Because I was actually doing something for the community for free—not getting paid—and that's just different for me. Basically, I'm all about pay me and I'll do something, but then it's like, wow … if more people did this kind of thing in society, we'd be better off as a society, so it kind of changed my view on volunteer work.

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Ezra's comment shows that community service can be a potential gateway into volunteering – a subject we will return to in Section 6. In these cases, CSWs learned to see themselves as someone who could contribute something to the community, particularly through giving their time to a community organization.

5.2.3 Experiencing Personal Growth

Another potential benefit was experiencing some type of personal growth through community service. CSWs felt that it helped them to develop their character. Aden described: "I think it helps build integrity, I think it helps build punctuality, I think it helps build responsibility [and] accountability, and it also helps the individual give back to the community in a small way, but in … a way that's positive and not negative."

CSWs also shared how community service influenced their moral growth, allowing them to focus on others and not just themselves. Avery said, "It's helped with my mindset to be a more selfless person." CSWs could use this new experience to evolve as a person and to become more self-aware.

Furthermore, other CSWs acknowledged the role of community service in fostering greater interpersonal growth. For example, Hazel shared how it enabled her to interact more comfortably with individuals from diverse backgrounds:

> It's definitely helped me become a little more outgoing. I tend to be a little shy at first, and [at my organization], I would say, the majority of the staff and also the clientele are of other races besides Caucasian; there's a lot of African American people there … being at [this organization] has really helped me develop relationships with people of diversity and [those] of different backgrounds than me … I've definitely diversified my friendships and learned how to navigate communicating with different people in a positive and effective way, so, that's been great.

Part of the growth that can come from community service is being exposed to new situations and new people.

5.2.4 Moderating Factors

Many CSWs pointed out that these benefits did not automatically accrue to everyone. Instead, it depended on several important contextual factors, including family and work situations, organizational placements and the tasks performed, and the person's attitude.

First, CSWs speculated that personal, family, and work situations significantly influence the extent to which individuals benefit from community

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service. Those who struggled to fit community service around their work and family obligations were least likely to see benefits from the experience. For instance, Violet mentioned that she couldn't spend enough time with her kids due to her community service commitments, which added to her feelings of stress as a parent. Layla had to fulfill her community service hours while she was sick. On the other hand, Jackson found it easier to complete his community service hours; he did not have a job at the time, allowing him to focus on his service without the added pressure of balancing work commitments. This contrast highlights how family and work situations act as a critical moderating factor, shaping whether community service becomes a positive experience or an additional burden.

CSWs contended that the potential benefits of service largely depended on finding the right organizational fit. This was encapsulated in Ethan's statement, "Well, it depends on their placement. Yes, it helps if they get the right placement." He highlighted the lack of guidance and support in the placement process, noting that people are often given outdated lists of organizations and little support to select a suitable community service location. In our prior work (Nesbit et al., 2025), we found that many community organizations are not well-prepared to accommodate CSWs, often lacking helpful onboarding procedures or supportive, integrational organizational policies and procedures. CSWs' experiences were also conditioned by the type of work they performed (Nesbit et al., 2025). Thus, it seems that the quality of the community service experience is not just about fulfilling a requirement, but about finding an organizational environment that matches the individual's abilities and preferences.

Importantly, personal attitudes were also highlighted as a pivotal determinant in the perceived benefits of community service. Alexander opined that those individuals who understand the underlying purpose of community service, which encompasses giving back to the community and instilling a sense of responsibility, tend to gain the most from the experience:

> Some people … are just gonna do it just to get it over with it and go on. And some people are going to realize the purpose behind it. They did it just to give back, to give you a sense of responsibility and things like that. If you can realize that, it is a good thing and there is a purpose behind it. And if you don't, you just going to get it over with, so there is no understanding for it.

Alexander reveals a dichotomy, wherein some perceive community service merely as a compulsory task, while others see it as something that is good for them, even if they don't really want to do it. These diverse

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perspectives illuminate the complex network of factors shaping the impact of community service on CSWs; potential benefits are not guaranteed.

5.2.5 Negative Impacts on CSWs

Indeed, in some cases, community service could actually be detrimental to CSWs and set them back. The most prevalent issue was the financial opportunity costs associated with their community service obligations. CSWs had to take time off work to fulfill their service commitment, resulting in diminished earnings. Several others mentioned how community service interfered with their work schedule or made it difficult for them to work. In the most severe cases, Gabriel and Carter lost their jobs because they could not manage the demands of employment alongside their community service obligations.

Additionally, community service reduced the amount of time CSWs had for their personal lives, including time to spend with family. Said Aden: "It's set me back financially. It's hurt me as far as taking away from my personal life and responsibilities that I need to do on a daily basis … It occupies unnecessary stress and time that could be given to my family, my home, and my personal life."

Like Aden, other CSWs, including Luca, Layla, Sebastian, and Benjamin, reported that it was burdensome to balance their service hours with their other life responsibilities, which made community service stressful and unpleasant.

Finally, CSWs reported negative experiences during their service, which contributed to the adverse impacts. These events include interpersonal conflict with staff and difficulties with the work and work environment (see Nesbit et al., 2025). Clearly, while community service has the potential to benefit CSWs, it can also be a detriment, depending on their personal situation and organizational placement.

5.3 Managers' Perspectives on How Community Service Impacts Community Service Workers

The managers also shared their beliefs about the ways that community service affects CSWs. Their responses indicated two primary patterns – community service was a positive benefit for the CSW most of the time or it is beneficial only in some cases. Managers gave a wide range of responses on how they believe community service affects the CSW, across three main categories – personal and workforce development, learning about community needs and resources, and the psychological rewards of

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service. The sections below discuss each of these impacts and the moderating factors that influence whether CSWs experience them.

5.3.1 Personal and Workforce Development

The managers believed that community service builds CSWs' self-confidence and supports their personal discipline and responsibility. Liam said, "So, I try to build their self-confidence, and when it actually works, they're the ones who turn into the good workers." These managers believed that community service can help someone prepare to enter the workforce or improve their job situation by building their resume and teaching them specific skills (some quite basic) and professional standards. Mateo lamented that some CSWs at his organization didn't even have basic cleaning skills. "Yeah, they get experience here," he said. "I can't tell you how many times I've seen someone sweep for the first time; it blows my mind. So they learn general housekeeping skills here: dusting, sweeping, and mopping." In some cases, the managers believed that community service could also help CSWs get interested in and learn more about different careers.

5.3.2 Learn about Community Needs and Resources

The managers also believed that community service helped CSWs learn more about their community's needs and the services and resources offered by their assigned organization. They pointed out that CSWs with more middle-class backgrounds were sometimes shocked to learn firsthand about the challenges faced by those in poverty. "It can be eye-opening for someone," said Luna. For those CSWs, community service work exposed them to a group of people in the community with whom they had little or no prior contact and experience. Emma explained:

> I think working in the store with a very diverse set of employees, a very diverse customer base and getting to see and experience that … I think that opens their eyes … A lot of our workers are really young, and I think sometimes, especially the students, they don't realize what all is out here in [this city], so being able to experience and see all that is out there, the people that are there, and the needs that are there … to see that some people can only afford t-shirts that cost $1 and nothing more. I think that's really important. And hopefully, getting to work and help that mission, and also learn discipline and responsibility, I hope that really helps them. I think they can find value in that.

In essence, the managers felt that community service connected CSWs to the community in new ways, allowing them to see more of the need and interact with people from diverse backgrounds.

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Managers also shared experiences where CSWs learned more about their organization's mission and programs. Nova commented:

> I think it can help for someone to kind of give back to the community and learn about different community resources, especially in the work that we do. It makes them more aware of our nonprofit and the services that we offer … It has been beneficial for that individual just to learn about all of the resources. Sometimes we had CSWs who then would reach out for services later on. It could help them in a variety of ways.

In some cases, CSWs returned to the organization as clients so they could take advantage of the services offered, by, for example, shopping at a thrift store, taking classes from the organization, seeking refuge at a domestic violence shelter, or rescuing an animal.

Aria provided a prime example of a CSW returning to receive services. She was assigned community service at her organization after a citation for driving without a license. During her time there, she learned that they offered GED classes in Spanish. Although she spoke some English, she lacked confidence in her language skills and had not previously considered pursuing her GED. When she realized she had the opportunity, she asked, "I can get my GED?" The staff encouraged her to enroll in the program after completing her community service hours. After discussing it with her husband, she decided to budget for the classes, committing to earning her GED within a year. She followed through and successfully completed the program.

These stories highlight how community service can serve as more than just a mandated requirement – it can introduce CSWs to valuable community resources and even inspire personal growth. For some, their service experience not only connected them to the needs of others but also helped them recognize opportunities for their own self-improvement and development.

5.3.3 Psychological Rewards of Service

Finally, managers believed that CSWs might benefit through reaping the psychological rewards of performing service and learning how to give back to the community. Lucas said:

> I think it's a way to get them to realize what they've done wrong and … [that] the right thing can be beneficial to them and those around them, especially the community service work … It shows them how they can give back to society in a productive way, rather than in a destructive way.

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The managers felt that community service can help CSWs develop gratitude for what they have by seeing individuals who have less than they do. As Luna put it, "It's a good core human value to volunteer and to give back to the community. So for those who may not have had that opportunity before, I am so grateful that they have that here." For Luna, community service allowed CSWs to live and express this "core human value" of volunteering – something that they might not have experienced before.

5.3.4 Moderating Factors: Impact on Community Service Workers

Like the CSWs, the managers also believed that the benefits of community service were conditional rather than guaranteed. The three most influential factors were relationships with the manager/staff, meaningful work, and the CSWs' own attitudes. To begin, managers who were very positive about the impact of community service emphasized their own management style as an important factor; they believed in their CSWs and really sought to help them. These managers indicated that a positive connection to either themselves or another staff person could make a difference for the CSWs. Evelyn explained: "I've seen some of the success cases where people do come back. We've had people come back and say, 'So and so was supervising when I was doing community service, and they really changed my life.'" Other managers echoed this sentiment by emphasizing that positive benefits result from being "treated respectfully" (Aurora) and "good leadership" (Levi). Appropriate managerial and staff support for the CSWs was considered necessary to produce a positive, beneficial experience.

The second moderating factor was the nature of the work itself. Levi said: "It is based on the quality of work they're actually in and again, being able to choose where they want to do [their service]. I'd much rather people be assigned to work with organization and groups and be able to do something … that takes more skill than just picking up trash."

Mateo also commented on the importance of the nature of the work and the experiences CSWs have within their host organizations.

> We try to make it friendly and fun as possible. We've had people who have said 'Oh, I've done stuff two or three hours somewhere else, and coming here I felt like I was actually doing something or being a part of the community.' At the courthouse, they just clean toilets all day for [the county], and as fun as that is and as punishing as that is, they're not learning anything. Here they can kind of see what we do for the

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> community as well, and I think that sometimes, depending on the person, can spark interest into doing more for their community. So, I think it can be good if you've got the right person.

Several managers emphasized this point, reporting positive benefits when a CSW found their task meaningful and saw how it helped the organization or other people. Ella summarized it this way: "I think if the task you have to give someone is meaningful and if they see what they're doing is benefiting the organization, it is good for them." When CSWs had meaningful work that helped others, they were more likely to benefit from their community service hours.

The managers did concede that even if the organizational environment is positive, some CSWs will still not benefit from community service. Leo indicated that it "depends on the person's attitude." Even perfect organizational conditions can't create benefits for an unwilling individual. However, for willing CSWs, good leadership, positive interactions, and meaningful work create supportive conditions for personal growth.

5.4 The Rehabilitative Potential of Court-Ordered Community Service: Perceptions of Effects on Community Service Workers

These findings suggest that, when the right conditions are met, community service can potentially benefit at least a subset of CSWs, establishing a foundation for achieving court-ordered community service goals. Interestingly, the CSWs and managers highlighted different – albeit overlapping – potential benefits of community service work. The CSWs pointed to their role of deterring future crime, providing a new perspective, and experiencing personal growth. The managers' list of benefits also included adding personal and workforce development, learning about community needs and resources, and the psychological rewards of service. These results are generally consistent with prior research that found that a majority of CSWs believed that they benefited from the experience in some way, by, for example, learning new skills, gaining work experience, learning more about themselves, and getting a better understanding of other people (Allen & Treger, 1990, p. 69). The potential benefits listed by the CSWs and managers in our sample included all the benefits mentioned in previous research and added some interesting new ones, such as the ability for CSWs to learn more about the services offered by nonprofit organizations in their community.

However, these benefits are by no means guaranteed. Many CSWs and managers believed certain conditions needed to be met for CSWs to

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benefit from their service. Strikingly, the groups identified many of the same moderating factors, including personal and family situations, the work environment, and relationships with organization staff, the nature of the work, and individuals' personal attitudes, as important precursors of beneficial service. Our prior research supports this, indicating that a good management infrastructure, supportive policies, positive work environment, healthy relationships with staff, and meaningful work were important success factors for organizations working with CSWs (Nesbit et al., 2025). In that work, we discussed several important strategies that community organizations could take to improve their ability to work with CSWs (Nesbit et al., 2025). One focuses on providing CSWs with meaningful work – tasks that CSWs consider to have value and to benefit another person. When CSWs feel that the work they have done has created value for themselves and the beneficiaries, their service is more likely to change their attitudes (Gelsthorpe & Rex, 2004; McIvor, 1992, 2016; Rex & Gelsthorpe, 2002). While those with a strictly punitive view of community service might balk at this idea, McIvor (1993a) points out that CSWs still view community service as a punishment even if they do enjoyable or interesting work.

Despite the potential for CSWs to benefit through service (under the right conditions), community service can also harm CSWs. This can occur through wages (or even jobs) lost while trying to complete community service hours. One study found that people sentenced to community service were less likely to report income years later than those sentenced to jail (Killias et al., 2010). This may suggest that community service impedes employment goals, which is an important part of rehabilitation. A community service sentence may particularly affect single parents, who might have to arrange (and pay for) childcare and sacrifice time with their children to complete their community service hours. Relatedly, many CSWs face real barriers to successful completion of their community service hours, such as navigating work schedules, family obligations, and limited transportation. These practical challenges can be very difficult to surmount, especially for individuals with low incomes or weak support networks. Additional burdens and barriers may set these individuals up to fail at their community service – and possibly even probation in general. This also raises a larger policy question. Supporters of the punitive view of community service will view costs and barriers as a natural part of CSWs' punishment for their crimes, not a problem to be fixed. Proponents of community service as rehabilitation or restitution will likely view these costs as an impediment to policy success.

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In terms of benefits for the CSW, community service as a policy tool is falling short, especially as it is currently designed and implemented. We agree with other scholars who have argued that "more carefully conceived community service interventions could be tailored to meet rehabilitative and reparative objectives which previously brought support and enthusiasm for these sanctions" (Bazemore & Maloney, 1994, p. 2). Some of the necessary adjustments would be to encourage and support community organizations to provide CSWs with meaningful work and interaction with beneficiaries rather than menial manual labor. It would also entail more support and screening from probation offices to ensure that CSWs get a good service fit. Other policy recommendations would be to provide more training and support for both probation offices and community organizations, to help them design systems that would allow for the fulfillment of rehabilitative and reparative objectives.

6 The Role of Community Service in Shaping Future Volunteer Intentions

One interesting question about court-ordered community service is how it might impact CSWs' willingness to volunteer in their communities in the future. Is community service a springboard into regular volunteering, illustrating how CSWs can give back to their community? Or might community service, with its unpleasant association of conscripted labor, dampen CSWs' interest in future community involvement? This potential benefit reflects the goals of community restitution and offender rehabilitation, as having stronger social bonds and community ties is generally associated with lower rates of criminal activity (Sampson & Groves, 1989). Of course, intentions do not equate to behavior. Nonetheless, the stated intention to volunteer in the future is an important precursor to actual volunteering.

We commence by reporting CSWs' willingness to volunteer for their host organization and their rationale for their responses, and their willingness to volunteer for other organizations. From there, we identify and discuss four major factors that shape CSWs' willingness to volunteer in the future – the organization's mission, interpersonal relationships, recognition and appreciation, and prior volunteering experience.

6.1 Intention to Volunteer at Host Organization

Several CSWs indicated a willingness to volunteer at their host organization after completing their community service obligation. CSWs provided several reasons for wanting to continue. First, they highlighted the fact

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that they enjoyed doing service and helping other people. "I always like helping," said Elena. Some believed that service would benefit themselves or their family in some way. Mason stated, "I know it will help me. And that is another way of giving back to the people [who are] coming in after me." Some would return because either a specific person (e.g., their manager) or the organization as a whole created a good experience for them, thereby increasing their desire to give back. A final reason for returning as a volunteer was related to a sense of fulfillment or satisfaction with the work done. Luca performed his community service at two organizations but was only willing to continue as a volunteer at one of them. He justified this by saying, "I got more of a sense of fulfillment and more of a sense of pride and community … by doing that job, more than the [other organization's] job." Positive experiences with community service hours made the idea of volunteering sound positive to these CSWs.

However, others had less positive experiences with community service work and dismissed the idea of returning. Sebastian stated, "I may find other opportunities for volunteering, but not the organization where I worked [as a CSW]." Some CSWs cited the lack of time to volunteer or the opportunity costs of doing so. "Just, with me doing the community service, it took away from my time spending with my kids," said Willow. However, several other CSWs said that they would not return because their community service was unpleasant and they did not enjoy the tasks they were doing. "Yeah, it just wasn't a good experience," Jack lamented. Benjamin didn't feel connected to the host organization or its mission. He said, "I'm just not interested in what they do. Maybe at animal shelters or something, I might want to do that." A final reason for not volunteering at the host organization pertained to the stigma CSWs felt as community service workers. "It would be nice to be able to contribute back for them and hopefully not be a hassle or be viewed differently because I am a community service worker," said Luca. Negative experiences dampened CSWs' willingness to consider volunteering for their host organization.

6.2 Intention to Volunteer at Other Organizations

CSWs also indicated a willingness to consider volunteering at another community organization. Paisley expressed a positive attitude toward volunteering in general, "because it's helping other people and people need help." Interestingly, several CSWs reported that their intention to volunteer stemmed directly from what they learned or how they grew through their community service. For example, Lily said, "I've learned that volunteering is a really good thing, so it may be an option … I'll definitely think about

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[changing] my outlook from not doing volunteering to maybe doing it seriously." Kai agreed, saying, "It gave me a sense to go out – actually go out – to the community to help somebody in need … These people are actually in need. It helps me to see that." Notably, neither Lily nor Kai had prior volunteering experience, indicating that community service broadened their perspectives and reshaped their views on volunteering as a meaningful and viable activity. Clearly, some CSWs were positively inclined toward volunteering, even if they did not want to return to the organization where they performed their community service hours.

Despite this, a group of CSWs had no desire or willingness to volunteer in the future. While a few CSWs cited work and family demands as a barrier, others indicated that their community service hours, as Sebastian said, "deterred [them] from volunteering." Aden indicated that he felt that he did not owe his community anything, "Because I went ahead and did my time, and what was ordered from the courts, I have no further obligation to my community or the justice system. And I've paid my debt to society." Penelope added, "Because I don't wanna go work for free." CSWs such as Penelope, Aden, and Sebastian viewed community service as merely a punishment to get through, and their experience doing community service did not change their minds about that. They were not interested in doing anything more.

6.3 Key Factors Influencing Future Intentions to Volunteer

We view a lack of desire to continue volunteering as a lost opportunity for community organizations, many of which want more volunteers or seek to expand their connections in the community. CSWs' unwillingness to volunteer in the future may also suggest that reintegration goals are not being met. Presumably, if positive experiences make CSWs want to volunteer when their sentences are done, it is a win–win situation for CSWs, community organizations, and the wider community. As such, we wanted to understand which aspects of community service were associated with an expressed intention to volunteer. A deeper dive into our data identified four factors related to future volunteering intentions: connection to the organization's mission, interpersonal relationships, recognition and appreciation, and prior volunteering experience.

6.3.1 Organization's Mission

When queried about their preferred volunteering destinations after completing community service, CSWs predominantly selected nonprofit

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organizations. CSWs who had served in public entities, including local state parks, probation offices, and public libraries, expressed a disinclination to continue volunteering in the public sector. Their preference hinged on their belief that volunteering in nonprofits could significantly benefit those in need. For example, Gabriel and Carter, who had chosen to serve their hours in a local state park, both stated that they would prefer volunteering for other nonprofits post-community service. CSWs indicated a greater affinity for nonprofits, attributing this to the nonprofits' embeddedness in the community and their visible contributions to residents' welfare. For example, Gabriel wanted to give back to a community that had previously served him. Carter said:

> Maybe not [that state park] … because I [would] probably still help them cutting trees … I plan on going to [a specific nonprofit] … because I know they serve a lot of civilians and pedestrians in town. … This is a group of people who care about the community quite big.

Carter wanted to put his time into supporting nonprofits working within his community of residence. When thinking about future volunteering, CSWs were more attracted to organizations that they could see directly benefitting their immediate community. For some reason, it was easier for CSWs to perceive nonprofits as benefitting their community compared to public organizations.

CSWs also seemed drawn to nonprofits because they represent a diversity of missions, making it easier for them to find an organization that aligned with their interests. Willow, Benjamin, Avery, and Alexander all fell into this group. Alexander said: "I plan to volunteer for another organization … We have to think of helping others … I went to Red Cross [and] there was so much stuff there … I really enjoy doing that, more than just cleaning up."

Clearly, the organization's mission was an important factor in the decision. CSWs were more interested in organizations that they saw as aligned with their personal interests and that offered them meaningful tasks.

6.3.2 Interpersonal Relationships

CSWs who developed positive relationships at their host organizations are more likely to express a desire to volunteer in the future. While CSWs might develop good rapport with other CSWs, volunteers, or even clients of the organization, they mostly discussed their relationship with their direct manager or other staff members. Within our sample, CSWs who reported a positive relationship with their manager were more likely to

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express interest in continuing as volunteers – either at their host organization or another community organization. The choice of a different organization was not due to dissatisfaction with their host organization, but rather to find opportunities that better align with their interests or to engage with more community-based organizations. Ethan explicitly stated this connection: "I stayed there … because of the relationship I had with the manager. The manager got to be so good … I actually stayed and volunteered there after my community service was over. I was actually there for a year to volunteer."

Ezra had a similar experience. While he didn't have a formal plan to continue volunteering at the host organization, he indicated a willingness to help his manager if asked. He said:

> I met supervisors who were kind of exploiting you there. I also met the other supervisor who showed his compassion. The supervisor who was compassionate became my friend. He empathized with me and my situation by sharing his personal story, like his son with probation experiences … I don't plan to volunteer in the [host] organization because my life is pretty packed … However, I would go back and help him if he needed me to.

As Ethan's and Ezra's comments indicate, CSWs who receive warmth and understanding from their managers tend to feel more positively inclined toward volunteering for their host organization in the future.

Conversely, Jackson felt isolated due to his role as a young CSW. Jackson's experiences with people in the host organization made him feel like a community outsider. He said: "They were definitely scared of me. They knew I didn't really fit in, and I was only there for community service hours … But they were never like rude to me or anything … I always felt like an outsider. I don't feel like I could get my way into that community."

Subsequently, when Jackson was asked whether community service made him want to continue volunteering after his service hours were completed, he replied, "The exact opposite." CSWs who did not develop any sense of camaraderie with others at the organization had no desire to continue giving their time there. Ethan, Ezra, and Jackson's experiences illustrate the connections between positive interpersonal relationships, CSWs' current experiences, and their future willingness to volunteer.

6.3.3 Recognition and Appreciation

CSWs who reported that they were thanked or appreciated for their community service work were also more satisfied with their experience

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and more likely to express an intention to volunteer. Hudson specifically noted that he would return to his host organization to volunteer because of the welcoming organizational climate and appreciation of his work. He said, "That's because of [my host organization, not] because of the court … they've been very welcoming and very appreciative of my work, so I most definitely [will] probably help them out at least once or twice after I'm done."

Clearly, the feeling of being appreciated made CSWs feel optimistic that volunteering would be a positive experience.

On the other hand, when staff are rude and/or overly strict with CSWs, they not only turn them off toward future volunteering, but sometimes lose them before they complete their community service hours. Olivia, one of the managers, discussed this:

> The people who were here before complained they couldn't get any CSWs. Then I had CSWs come in and talk about how rude they were. Well naturally, they wouldn't want to come here and do community service. We just try to treat them fair and treat them like us. I don't know anything different we can do.

Just like volunteers, CSWs want to feel valued and appreciated rather than exploited and mistreated.

6.3.4 Prior Volunteering Experience

Having volunteered previously was positively associated with CSWs' intentions to volunteer in the future. Those CSWs who volunteered previously were much more likely to express an interest in continuing as a volunteer relative to those who had no prior experience. This desire came not from their community service experience but from their personal commitment to volunteering. Paisley, Alexander, and Eleanor all volunteered before being assigned community service, and they emphasized that their plans to continue volunteering were an extension of their habitual volunteering and not associated with mandatory community service. Other CSWs who had volunteered previously indicated that their mandatory community service, due to negative experiences at their host organization, decreased their interest in volunteering again. Similarly, Jack, a volunteer since the sixth grade, selected a youth-serving nonprofit for his community service. Regrettably, his thirty-hour service experience was rather unpleasant, leading to a loss of interest in volunteering for the host organization and skepticism about volunteering anywhere else. He said: "It wasn't a good experience … I understand what the court is trying to do, and give back

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to the community, but I don't think it was very effective, where you just don't come in and get separated, and you're isolated, and get told what to do."

While mandatory community service has the potential to increase the desire to volunteer, it can also discourage CSWs from volunteering – even among those who volunteered previously.

6.4 The Rehabilitative Potential of Court-Ordered Community Service: Effect on Future Volunteering

It is important to consider the impact of community service on CSWs' intentions to volunteer because it connects to the underlying policy goals. In particular, volunteering may be a means of reintegrating CSWs into their community through unpaid work for community organizations (McIvor, 2016) and can help to foster an identity as a responsible citizen (Visher & Travis, 2003). Volunteering can decrease antisocial behavior (Santinello et al., 2012) and is associated with other prosocial and civic behaviors (Putnam, 2000; Verba & Nie, 1987; Verba et al., 1995). In essence, volunteering represents good citizenship, so implementing community service in such a way that it sparks a desire to volunteer improves a CSW's chances of continuing as a positively contributing citizen of the community. Volunteering is associated with numerous personal benefits, such as improved mental health and overall well-being, better physical health, feelings of confidence and self-efficacy, and expanded social networks (Jenkinson et al., 2013; Musick & Wilson, 2003, 2007; Piliavin & Siegl, 2007; Thoits & Hewitt, 2001). Future volunteering can thus benefit CSWs directly, providing a stronger platform on which to build stable and productive lives, thus enabling a greater likelihood of satisfying policy goals.

Much of a CSW's experience falls within an organization's control. In our prior work on CSWs, we identified several management strategies for improving experiences for both CSWs and their host organizations, including crafting reasonable policies and procedures, providing a helpful and thorough onboarding process, creating a supportive environment, and recognizing and appreciating CSWs' efforts (Nesbit et al., 2025). Many of the reasons that CSWs provided for not wishing to continue to volunteer, such as unpleasant experiences or tasks, feeling unconnected to the organization, and being stigmatized, are resolvable through these good management practices. Our work also highlighted the importance of providing CSWs with meaningful work and appropriate opportunities to interact with the organization's beneficiaries (Nesbit et al., 2025). This

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aligns with prior research showing that CSWs who are better integrated within the organization and who have opportunities to interact with the direct recipients of their work were more likely to continue as volunteers (McIvor, 2016). Clerkin and colleagues (2025, p. 12) also highlight the importance of these issues:

> Rhetorically, the inclusion of [CSWs] with other volunteers is intended to be a form of restorative justice, helping them to better integrate into society and reduce their recidivism. In practice though, the extent to which nonprofit organizations use [CSWs] for sweat tasks and segregate them from other volunteers may work at cross-purposes with this ideal. If [CSWs] view their community service as punishment or as just repaying their debt to society, their experience may just be reinforcing the dominant retributive justice logic of the American criminal justice system.

If community organizations adopt more of these best practices when working with CSWs, and if probation offices provide sufficient support, then CSWs' experiences might be more beneficial, leading to a heightened desire to volunteer and better connections between CSWs and their communities.

7 Does Court-Ordered Community Service Work?

Policymakers have three major goals for using community service in the U.S. criminal legal system – cost savings, restitution/benefits to the community, and rehabilitation/benefits to the individual performing community service work. In this section, we discuss how our findings speak to the success or failure of these three policy objectives. Our goal is not to evaluate whether the policy goals are being met. Instead, we examine whether court-ordered community service in the two areas under study is operating in a way that is consistent with the successful attainment of policy goals. This is reflected in the experiences of the CSWs and their managers, which we interpret considering the broader research literature on probation and court-ordered community service. If these experiences are out of sync with program goals, then goal attainment is unlikely.

7.1 Cost Savings

One of the primary policy objectives of community service is to provide cost savings to the criminal legal system, given the high costs associated with incarceration (Brown, 1977; Harland, 1980; McDonald, 1986, 1988). These savings are realized, though, only when mandated community

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service is used as a direct substitute for incarceration rather than as an add-on to a probation sentence. In the U.S., however, community service work is often assigned to those whose sentence would not otherwise have included incarceration, resulting in net-widening (Austin & Krisberg, 1982; Caputo, 1999). For example, a recent study of court-mandated community service in Los Angeles found that 46% of community service orders were issued by traffic court, with speeding as the most common charge (Herrera et al., 2019). Most of the CSWs in our study were also convicted of offenses that typically do not yield a jail sentence, including underage drinking, DUI, and drug possession.

Even when community service replaces a short jail term, the cost savings may be exaggerated. Research in Scotland found that the average cost of court-ordered community service work was approximately the same as the cost of six weeks of confinement, making it cost-effective only if the community service work is assigned in lieu of a custodial sentence that exceeds six weeks (Knapp et al., 1992). Finally, failure to complete community service hours within a specified time period is considered a probation violation, punishable with jail time in many jurisdictions (Herrera et al., 2019; Klingele, 2013; Phelps, 2020). Thus, though strictly speaking it costs the criminal legal system less to assign community service to a given individual than to incarcerate them, it may well be that the availability of court-mandated community service results in increased costs for the criminal legal system overall.

The prevailing arguments for cost savings and the accompanying empirical research, though, focus solely on cost savings for the criminal legal system, particularly state and local government. One of the major implications of our research is that community service imposes real costs on nonprofits and public agencies that work with CSWs. Our findings clearly show that the supervision costs of working with CSWs are high; it takes time and administrative capacity to direct and manage CSWs effectively – more than it does to manage volunteers.

The effort required to work with probation offices further exacerbates the costs imposed on community organizations. Our findings are consistent with the limited research on community agency-probation office interactions, in which agencies report that probation offices should provide better training for CSWs, improve reporting procedures, and communicate more effectively with community service agencies (Allen & Treger, 1990). Managers reported limited training and communication from probation offices and believed that officers could better prepare CSWs, particularly by setting expectations and providing follow-up. These gaps suggest that,

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rather than absorbing supervision costs, probation offices shift them onto community organizations through inadequate preparation and oversight. Our study focused on government-operated probation agencies, though these challenges may be more pronounced in private probation agencies (Phelps, 2020). While more research is needed to assess the scope of these issues, our findings indicate that when probation offices do not effectively manage community service, CSWs impose significant time and administrative burdens on host organizations. In this way, CSW programs shift costs onto the very agencies intended to benefit from their labor. More broadly, our findings complement existing research by suggesting that court-ordered community service often operates in ways that undermine its intended goals. For example, work evaluating the cost-saving goal of court-ordered community service largely focuses on the criminal legal system side, examining net-widening (e.g., Phelps, 2013; Tonry & Lynch, 1996) and the relative financial costs associated with community service versus jail terms (Knapp et al., 1992); this strongly suggests that court-ordered community service is falling short on its goal to save money. Our finding that agency costs are not always offset by CSW labor suggests that court-ordered community service may not meet its cost-savings goal.

Thus, we suggest that the costs currently borne by community organizations could, in theory, be absorbed by probation offices through improved training, closer monitoring, and more consistent follow-up with CSWs. Such changes could enhance program functioning by better aligning CSW placements with organizational needs and reducing administrative burdens on host organizations, to the extent that improved probation performance may increase the likelihood that community service contributes to its intended goals.

However, reallocating these costs to probation offices would not necessarily improve overall efficiency or produce net cost savings for the criminal legal system. Meaningful improvements in probation performance would require additional staff time, training, and administrative resources, increasing public expenditures rather than reducing them. In this sense, shifting costs upward may enhance effectiveness and program alignment, but it undermines claims that court-ordered community service is a low-cost alternative to incarceration. This reveals a fundamental trade-off in the policy: efforts to improve implementation and restorative potential may come at the expense of cost savings.

In sum, we challenge the claim that community service is a lower-cost policy alternative for the criminal justice system. Its overall cost-savings for the legal system are debatable, and its implementation creates costs

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for other organizations – costs that are not readily acknowledged. This is potentially problematic, given that nonprofits tend to be under-resourced and lack administrative and supervisory capacity (Light, 2004). Because many of these organizations lack a full-time, dedicated volunteer manager and volunteer management capacity, it is difficult for them to realize the benefits of CSW labor. Even when supervision costs are pushed back up to the probation offices, doing so does not necessarily make the system more efficient, nor does it automatically lead to other benefits, such as those described in the subsequent sections. The misalignment between policy goals and operational realities extends beyond cost savings to the broader objectives of restitution and rehabilitation.

7.2 Reconciliation/Benefit to Community

The second major policy objective for community service is to provide benefits to the community by helping local community organizations. In this way, it is designed to serve as a form of restitution between the probationer and the larger community (McDonald, 1988; Umbreit, 1981). This view of community service is consistent with the restorative justice approach to corrections that emerged in the U.S. in the 1970s, when court-ordered community service first took hold (Zehr, 1990). The restorative justice movement advanced sentencing policies that centered the community in the correctional process and required the offender to earn back their place there (Braithwaite, 1999). Providing labor that benefits a community organization is seen as one way to accomplish this. The logic of court-ordered community service as restitution to the community, though, is predicated on several assumptions.

First, it assumes that the benefit to community organizations translates into a benefit to their communities. This is only true, though, if the community organizations, themselves, are effective. As mentioned earlier, many nonprofits lack administrative and management capacity, including evaluation capacity (Carman & Fredericks, 2009; Light, 2004). A large body of literature addresses the challenges of measuring performance in the complicated work that many nonprofits undertake (Bach-Mortensen & Montgomery, 2018; Carnochan et al., 2013; Stone & Cutcher-Gershenfeld, 2002). This raises the question: do benefits to individual community organizations necessarily translate into broader community benefits? Such a translation depends on organizational capacity and effectiveness. When capacity is weak, then the use of community service as a form of restitution and, by extension, as a justification for the sanction, becomes far less certain.

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Given that, our findings indicate that the managers believe that their organizations do realize some benefits of working with CSWs, enough to make it worth the costs of working with them. Echoing other studies, we find that organizations are generally satisfied with working with CSWs (Caputo, 1999; Karp, Bazemore, & Chesire, 2004; Leibrich, Galaway, & Underhill, 1986). It is probably safe to assume that those organizations that considered the costs of working with CSWs to outweigh the benefits have stopped participating and, therefore, are absent from our sample. This means that our findings could reflect higher levels of agency benefit than is typical and must be interpreted in light of this fact.

What is particularly attractive to organizations that report benefits to CSW labor is the fact that they can use CSWs as quasi-staff members – individuals who will show up (sometimes) on a regular schedule and do work for the organization. CSWs provide the benefit of consistent labor, which may be missing from regular volunteers. Trends in volunteerism have led to a loss of long-term volunteers – individuals who are willing to provide consistent labor for an organization over a long period of time; today's volunteers prefer short-term assignments and episodic volunteer commitments (Cnaan et al., 2022; Macduff, 2005). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 shifted volunteering patterns, such as decreasing the number of volunteers (Faulk et al., 2021) or shifting their roles and contributions within organizations (Walshe et al., 2022), in ways that are still affecting nonprofits today. These shifts may influence organizations' willingness and desire to work with a more consistent CSW population. Utilization of CSWs represents an adaptation to the realities of working with today's volunteers, particularly for organizations such as thrift stores, parks, and animal shelters that need consistent manual labor as part of their organizational activities.

Several managers also reported having a CSW who either continued to volunteer after their sentence was completed or came on as a staff person, consistent with reports from community organizations in Scotland (McIvor, 1993a). When CSWs form a long-term relationship with the agency, there is a direct and unanticipated benefit for community organizations. However, our results indicate that these outcomes might depend on a match with the organization's mission, interpersonal relationships, and appreciation. Further research is needed to better understand the circumstances and mechanisms that lead to this outcome.

In addition, CSWs brought new connections, donations, and other resources to the organization. These additional benefits were often the result of special skills, knowledge, or networks that the CSW possessed,

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which were useful to the agency and made the CSW feel a strong connection to the organization. Though for CSWs this often depended on a lucky coincidence, it highlights the need for careful matching of CSWs to agencies in order to maximize benefit: agencies benefit most from volunteer labor when the abilities of the volunteers fit well with agency needs (Hager & Brudney, 2004; Park, 2024).

At the same time, our findings show real organizational barriers to working effectively with CSWs, reducing the potential benefits to agencies. As mentioned earlier, our sample of organizations had low volunteer management capacity; most had not invested a great deal in volunteer management infrastructure. This is not unique, as many nonprofit organizations under-invest in volunteer management capacity, which can lead to challenges in recruiting and retaining volunteers (Hager, 2004; Hager & Brudney, 2004). The top reasons traditional volunteers give for leaving their volunteer positions, aside from changes in an individual's personal situation, are poor management and unsatisfactory volunteerism experiences (Brodie et al., 2011; Ganzevoort & Van Den Born, 2023). Similarly, our CSWs were most likely to report that their labor was not providing benefits when they perceived poor management at the agency.

While our findings, in concert with the limited research on the impact of court-ordered community service on communities and community organizations, suggest that CSW programs are providing some community benefit, it is unclear whether the benefit offsets the costs. Previous research focuses on citizen satisfaction with CSW services (McIvor, 1993b; Caputo, 1999) and evaluation of the value of CSW labor (e.g., McDonald, 1986) but does not consider the costs associated with that labor. Many of the managers we interviewed reported that it took considerably more of their time to manage CSWs than it did to manage regular volunteers, which reduces the benefit to the organization and, by extension, the restorative benefit to the community. The CSWs were mixed on their assessment of how much their labor was benefiting the community, further suggesting that CSW programs may not be meeting this intended goal.

7.3 Rehabilitation/Benefits to the Community Service Workers

The third major policy goal is to benefit CSWs through rehabilitation, and, relatedly, increased connection to the community (Bouffard & Muftic, 2006, 2007). Yet the academic literature has highlighted a dilemma related to the rehabilitative goal of court-mandated community service. As Bazemore and Maloney stated over thirty years ago (1994, pp. 24–25), "a major problem with community service today is that it is

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ordered and implemented in a vacuum with reference neither to sentencing objectives nor to a theory of intervention with offenders." There is little to suggest that anything has changed. Thus, community organizations remain unsure about the rehabilitative objectives, making it difficult to meet the goals of rehabilitation.

We saw this playing out in the community organizations in our study. While they use CSWs to help complete the work of their organization, they seem unclear about whether they are supposed to be punishing offenders or rehabilitating them. We saw a mix of management strategies and approaches within the organizations interviewed. Some managers were very hands-off and seemed to merely tolerate CSWs, while others went out of their way to coach and help them (Nesbit et al., 2025). Similarly, while CSWs are often grateful to avoid jail time or use community service to pay off a fine, they don't always recognize how or why community service can benefit them, probably because no one has ever explained it. There is often a mismatch between CSWs' expectations for community service, policy goals, and expectations of the participating community organizations. The system is not designed to benefit the CSW or to provide transformative experiences for them.

Our findings also indicate that many CSWs face substantial hurdles in completing their community service hours, significantly reducing any potential benefit. First, few community organizations work with CSWs, limiting their options for completion, especially during weekends and evenings. Transportation was also an issue for CSWs, particularly those with DUIs and suspended driver's licenses. Childcare presented another hurdle. Additionally, some CSWs have mental or physical disabilities that make community service even more challenging, especially when community organizations may not be able to accommodate various disabilities. Judges and courts do not seem to take these barriers into account.

Finally, a key way in which CSWs are meant to benefit is through experiencing personal growth and connection to the community, leading to a reduced likelihood of future criminal activity. This is most likely to occur, though, if the CSW feels positively about their experience and about the organization. As research on restorative justice programs shows, stigmatizing punishment experiences are less likely to lead to positive outcomes (e.g., Braithwaite, 1999). As we reported in earlier work (Nesbit et al., 2025), some probation offices engage in stigmatizing practices, including requiring that CSWs wear a vest indicating their status as a probationer while working at a community agency, though not all agencies enforce this rule.

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This policy is similar to the scarlet-letter type probation conditions that were imposed by courts in the 1970s and 1980s, such as requiring shoplifters to wear metal tap shoes, drunken drivers to place identifying bumper stickers on their cars, and child molesters to post warning signs (Brilliant, 1989). Claiming that these conditions were too restrictive and cumbersome, Brilliant argued that they may not conform to probation's rehabilitative goal and could also seriously violate the Constitution. While the stated goal of the CSW identification policy is to safeguard organization clients and volunteers, it is unclear whether this identification is necessary for all organizations, especially those that conduct extensive background checks. Based on our prior work, however, it is clear that open identification can make CSWs feel singled out and reduce their ability to connect to the agency and its mission (Nesbit et al., 2025).

Rehabilitation is perhaps the most important goal of court-ordered community service. This goal is also the most difficult to evaluate, as it requires a careful experimental design, followed by rigorous assessment of recidivism over time. We are aware of no CSW program evaluation studies in the U.S. that meet these criteria. The handful of such studies conducted in Europe yield mixed findings (Bol & Overwater, 1986; Killias et al., 2010; Spaans, 1998) and are not easily translated to the U.S. context, given differences in the criminal justice system and the social safety net. While our U.S. study does not attempt to measure recidivism, we contribute to research in this area by exploring how court-ordered community service affected CSWs' connection to the community, a primary mechanism through which community service is expected to affect recidivism. While most CSWs did not report feeling a stronger connection to the community as a result of working in their assigned agency, there were a few who did indicate that the experience gave them a new appreciation for community needs and helped them develop a desire to give back. Further, the difficulties that many CSWs faced in completing their community service due to issues with transportation, conflicts with work and family responsibilities, and lack of available night/weekend opportunities did little to engender the CSWs to the agency and, by extension, to the community. This suggests that goals of reducing recidivism are unlikely to be met.

7.4 Implications for Research on Volunteer Management

Our study contributes to three areas within volunteer management research. First, we contribute to the literature on third-party volunteering (e.g., the government, educational institutions, and corporations

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that support and facilitate volunteering) (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2010) by moving beyond studies of organizational partnerships, such as corporate volunteering programs or student service-learning. We instead examine how a multi-organizational system – comprising courts, probation offices, and community organizations – shaped by a specific policy context structures the flow and allocation of volunteers. We show how this system influences who participates, where they are placed, and under what conditions. We then examine how these system-level dynamics influence important volunteer-related outcomes, such as administrative costs and volunteer retention, that are often treated as determined solely at the organization level (Hager & Brudney, 2004, 2008). Our results suggest that these outcomes are not determined by host organizations alone – as is often assumed – but by the alignment (or misalignment) across the broader organizational system.

Second, we build on prior work on volunteer management capacity (Hager & Brudney, 2004, 2008), which highlights the resources required to manage volunteers, by showing how the costs of volunteer involvement are distributed across organizational and policy actors rather than borne solely within nonprofits. Our findings highlight that these costs vary depending on the nature of the volunteer, including their motivation (intrinsic vs. extrinsic), their fit with the work and organization, and the length of their commitment. More broadly, we find that some of these costs are not simply organizational but are produced by the policy system and relationships among organizations within the system. Policy systems can shift administrative and supervisory burdens onto community organizations.

Third, we expand the literature on volunteer retention, which typically focuses on intrinsically motivated volunteers, by examining how sustained engagement emerges for volunteers who enter with external or limited initial motivation (e.g., CSWs, service-learning students). Consistent with prior research on volunteer retention (Cuskelly et al., 2006; Hyde et al., 2016; Jamison, 2003), we find that quality supervision, a good match between the individual and the work, effective onboarding, and recognition are important for sustained engagement. At the same time, our findings show that the broader policy system can constrain or even override these organizational factors – an influence that is largely absent from prior retention research – and lead to disengagement. In this way, retention is shaped not only by what organizations do but also by the system in which they operate. More broadly, our results suggest that when organizations seek to engage extrinsically motivated or short-term

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volunteers over a longer period of time, meaningful experiences, such as supportive relationships and opportunities to contribute in visible and impactful ways, are especially important.

7.5 Study Limitations

As one of the few studies of court-ordered community service in the U.S., our research highlights several issues that may limit the success of CSW programs. However, it is exploratory. We collected data from CSWs and managers in two judicial circuits within a single district in one state, which limits the generalizability of our findings. One circuit includes a college town with organizations accustomed to managing an itinerant volunteer population. The other circuit, by contrast, is largely rural and lacks a college. Additional data from more jurisdictions are needed to better understand how community context shapes the operation and success of CSW programs.

A related limitation is the potential for selection effects. We interviewed only managers from organizations currently working with CSWs, meaning our sample likely reflects more positive experiences than those of organizations that discontinued participation. Similarly, because recruitment occurred through probation offices, the CSWs we interviewed were actively engaged in completing their service. Our findings may have differed had we included individuals who failed to complete or abandoned their service. Finally, the timing of data collection (2017–2018) is a limitation, as cultural shifts, declining engagement, and the COVID-19 pandemic may have altered the landscape of court-ordered community service in ways not captured here, underscoring the need for additional research.

7.6 Future Research

Because the results of this case study cannot be generalized to other jurisdictions, it is important to expand the study of court-ordered community service to other judicial districts and states in both urban and rural areas. Future research should also sample from a larger number of CSWs to improve representation. It is also important to expand research to community agencies that do not accept CSWs to learn why they have made that decision and whether it is based on an a priori cost-benefit analysis that incorporates factors that we did not uncover in our sample. As we noted, there is an inherent selection bias in interviewing only managers in agencies that currently work with CSWs, since their experiences will

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almost certainly be more positive than those of managers in agencies that no longer work with CSWs.

In addition, our research suggests several specific questions about CSW programs worth addressing. First, research should ascertain the actual financial costs of managing CSWs, especially relative to supervising volunteers, and the overall net benefits to the organization so that community agencies can make better decisions about involvement in court-mandated community service programs. This would provide a more complete picture of the true costs associated with CSW programs, which speaks to a key goal of court-ordered community service.

Second, if community service programs are intended to benefit the community, more research is needed on their impact on recipient organizations and the work they do. One of our most intriguing findings is that some CSWs continue with their assigned agency after completing their service, either as volunteers or staff, suggesting the importance of understanding the organizational practices that lead to this outcome. Future research could examine whether community service, combined with a direct invitation, can increase volunteering, particularly among under-represented groups. More broadly, research is needed on the organizational and individual characteristics (i.e., being a young, first-time offender) that shape CSW success and how these factors interact to influence program outcomes.

Future research should also incorporate the perspectives of probation officers and their supervisors on the conditions under which community service meets its intended goals. Probation officers occupy a key position within the system, linking the criminal legal system, CSWs, and community organizations. In enforcing court orders, they must also guide CSWs and organizations in overcoming barriers and capacity constraints that may undermine program success. Their insights could help identify where breakdowns occur and what supports are most effective.

Furthermore, given the increasing use of private probation (Phelps, 2020), it is also important to understand whether private probation agencies manage CSWs differently than government-operated offices. Because of their profit motivation, private agencies may shift more costs onto community organizations and have incentives to prolong supervision in order to increase fees (Huebner & Shannon, 2022). Thus, it is not in their financial interest for CSWs to complete their service obligation in a timely manner. These dynamics may reduce the likelihood that CSWs complete their service in a timely manner and could undermine program effectiveness, though more research is needed to assess these differences.

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7.7 Conclusion

Our findings suggest that the goals of CSW programs are not being met. Though some of these deficiencies may be idiosyncratic to the two districts studied, our research highlights several issues that apply to CSW programs more broadly. For example, community agencies generally lack personnel resources, making it difficult for them to manage CSWs effectively and reducing the benefit that CSWs provide to the organization, impacting the goal of restitution. This also relates to the cost-savings goal, as the costs associated with CSW programs are effectively shifted to the agencies, already under-resourced. Our findings regarding rehabilitation highlight the variability in rehabilitative potential across CSWs and agencies. On the basis of these findings, the next section suggests a number of improvements in CSW programs. We focus on needed changes within the criminal legal system, which forms the foundation of court-ordered community service, setting policies that community agencies must follow.

8 Redesigning Community Service for Greater Impact

Our research suggests specific points of implementation where community service may break down (at least within this case study) and diminish its effectiveness. Given that community service remains a common policy tool, it is important to consider how CSW programs might be improved, even if some jurisdictions do not experience these challenges or have already adopted more effective practices. For jurisdictions that face similar implementation conditions to our case, our findings suggest areas where the design and administration of community service could be adjusted to better realize its intended benefits while being more respectful of both participants and the community organizations that work with them. Such adjustments may also improve CSWs' experiences and strengthen their relationships with community organizations, including interest in volunteering.

In our prior work (Nesbit et al., 2025), we offered recommendations for community organizations grounded in the volunteer management literature. We do not revisit those recommendations here. Instead, building on insights from this case study and established best practices from volunteer management and related fields, this section offers pragmatic recommendations for court systems, probation offices, and CSWs.

8.1 Recommendations for Courts/Judges/Lawyers

- **Clarify the purpose of community service**. Courts should state whether community service is intended to repair harm, punish, or rehabilitate

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the CSW, because that goal shapes organizational expectations and definitions of success. When the purpose is unclear, probation offices and community organizations send mixed signals that undermine outcomes.

- **Refrain from using community service as a default sentence without assessing fit**. Judges should be thoughtful and intentional when assigning community service, recognizing that it is not appropriate or effective in all cases and should not be treated as a one-size-fits-all punishment. Judges should be mindful of net-widening and of adding community service on top of other punishments.
- **Acknowledge that community service places real demands on community organizations**. Courts should understand that CSW placements create administrative, supervisory, and resource burdens for community agencies, especially in under-resourced areas.
- **Consider the significant barriers many CSWs face in completing service**. Judges should account for barriers such as childcare responsibilities, revoked licenses, transportation limitations, inflexible work schedules, disabilities, and rural geography, all of which can make completing community service extremely difficult.
  - Community service should not be assigned to individuals with multiple barriers unless appropriate accommodations are provided.
  - Judges should assign a realistic number of hours within a feasible timeframe, recognizing the limited availability of evening and weekend service, particularly for those with work or caregiving obligations.
- **Strengthen pre-sentencing screening to assess CSW suitability**. Community service should be reserved for individuals who are likely to succeed in such placements without overburdening receiving organizations. Allowing individuals to opt into community service rather than mandating it may increase the likelihood of a mutually beneficial placement.
  - Screening should exclude individuals at high risk of noncompliance, volatility, or hostility to protect community organizations.
  - At the same time, screening processes must guard against racial, socioeconomic, and mental-health–related bias by relying on clear criteria, transparency, and periodic audits.
- **Recognize that not all organizations can accept all offenders**. For liability and safety reasons, many nonprofits do not take individuals with violent offenses, reducing placement options; in such cases, judges should reconsider whether community service is viable.

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8.2 Recommendations for Probation Offices

- **Reframe community service as an opportunity for growth, not just punishment**. Probation offices should adopt language and attitudes that position community service as a chance for CSWs to invest in themselves and their communities.
  - Encourage partner organizations to assign CSWs meaningful tasks that foster a sense of contribution and human connection.
- **Build and maintain strong, supportive partnerships with community organizations**. Probation offices must treat community organizations as essential collaborators by fostering mutual trust, providing tools for success, and maintaining consistent lines of communication.
  - Offer training and clear guidance to organizations on how to engage CSWs effectively.
  - Share standardized policies, procedures, and practical tools (including contact information and photos of CSWs) to streamline onboarding.
  - Establish routine check-ins to track CSW progress, resolve issues, and share updates, such as rearrests or service completion.
  - Consider funding background checks when required.
- **Invest directly in CSWs' success through preparation, support, and encouragement**. Equip CSWs with the tools and understanding they need to succeed, and structure their service in ways that reduce failure and build pride in their contributions.
  - Offer CSWs a range of placement options aligned with their skills and interests.
  - Deliver a formal orientation covering the purpose of community service, expected conduct, and logistics.
  - Train CSWs in soft workplace skills such as punctuality, communication, and professionalism.
  - Break service into clear, time-bound milestones – such as weekly check-ins or progress reports – to support steady progress.
  - Recognize and celebrate the completion of service with a certificate or other form of positive acknowledgment.
- **Modernize how service hours are tracked and verified**. Shift from outdated paper-based systems to secure, automated reporting tools that strengthen accountability and reduce errors.
  - Ensure that hours are submitted directly by the community organization liaison to reduce opportunities for misreporting.

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8.3 Recommendations for Community Service Workers

- **Find a good fit**. Community service opportunities vary widely in work, location, and scheduling. CSWs should learn about available options and choose placements that fit their constraints – and, when possible, their interests.
- **Treat community service like a job**. CSWs are doing unpaid work for an organization and should expect onboarding and training. Planning ahead is essential; procrastination creates frustration for both CSWs and managers. Managers value reliability, punctuality, and respect for boundaries.
- **Communicate clearly and early**. Probation officers and community organizations want CSWs to succeed. CSWs should raise concerns, flag barriers, and solve problems proactively. Managers need advance notice when shifts must be missed or rescheduled.
- **Take responsibility for the experience**. Community service can feel punitive, but CSWs who build relationships, develop skills, and approach the work with intention have more positive outcomes. Attitude and demeanor matter and can meaningfully shape the experience.

8.4 Conclusion

Ultimately, this research reveals that while court-ordered community service carries potential to fulfill its tripartite policy aims – cost savings, community restitution, and individual rehabilitation – its success is highly contingent on the alignment between policy design and on-the-ground realities. Our findings indicate that although some community organizations derive labor and staffing benefits from CSWs, many also experience supervision burdens, capacity constraints, and inadequate support from probation offices. Meanwhile, CSWs' experiences range from personally transformative to physically and emotionally draining, shaped by barriers such as work and family commitments, transportation challenges, and the drudgery of their assigned tasks. Both the rehabilitative and restorative dimensions of community service hinge upon the intentional design of placements, the quality of relationships with organizational staff, and whether CSWs are treated as contributors or as conscripted labor. Importantly, the role of probation offices, courts, and community organizations in setting realistic expectations and providing supportive infrastructure is critical to ensuring that community service becomes an opportunity for growth and integration rather

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than marginalization. Without careful consideration of these dynamics, community service risks becoming a hollow formality – burdensome to organizations, punitive for workers, and symbolically rather than substantively beneficial to the community. To truly realize its restorative promise, court-ordered community service must be reframed and restructured with attention to ethical labor practices, support systems, and a commitment to creating value for all involved.

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