

REPORT OF FIELD ORGANIZER.

In submitting the following report on the formation of the Voluntary Probation Committee system of the Dominion for the year ended 31st March, 1928, three factors suggest themselves as of special importance.

The first is the dependence of the whole scheme on the calibre of voluntary assistance available. The ultimate success of the probationer largely depends on the committeeman directly concerned, for it is mainly through his enthusiasm and co-operation with the Probation Officer that the reformation of the probationer is most surely accomplished.

The second is the attitude that those who can give employment adopt towards a probationer seeking a position and the chance to prove himself. The satisfaction that comes from being instrumental in giving this chance and in assisting the effort made, coupled with ultimate successful accomplishment, is an experience that can be recommended to all employers.

The third factor is the extent to which religious and social organizations appreciate their responsibility to the young men and women dealt with by this Department. Some of these organizations are already making invaluable contributions towards the fundamental rehabilitation of probationers.

The effectiveness of the work of any individual committeeman depends in no small degree on the intensity of his interest in the case allotted to him, and on the extent to which that interest withstands the discouragements that are inevitable when such a complex problem as readjusting human behaviour is being dealt with.

The objective of this movement is well expressed in the words of a Probation Officer in a recent statement to his Voluntary Probation Committee:—

“Despite the dearth of employment of which unfortunately at the present time we have all too abundant evidence, it will be pleasing indeed for members to know that approximately 96 per cent. of our probationers are in work. While there is cause for much congratulation in this satisfactory statement regarding employment, there is, however, a further stage in which to a great extent the ultimate success or failure of the probationer depends. I refer to the real object of our work in stressing the need for after-care, or, in other words, a befriending process which tends to uplift the probationer and combat the anti-social influences into which his folly has allowed him to drift.”

At the present time twenty-two of these Voluntary Probation Committees have been established—four in the four centres and eighteen in the main secondary towns of the Dominion. As the necessity arises additional committees will be formed. Committees have already arranged for associates in the surrounding country districts, who will assist in securing employment and in supervising the after-care of probationers.

One of the most pleasing experiences in the organizing of this movement has been the co-operation of the Magistrates, who without exception have undertaken the Chairmanship of the various committees and are assisting their Probation Officers to make probation a constructive agency in the reformation of offenders.

The whole-hearted response of the 140 Voluntary Probation Committeemen throughout the Dominion and the assistance so readily given by the religious and social organizations have considerably lightened the heavy responsibility involved in launching the movement.

Personal Work.—In many cases it is only the incessant and painstaking efforts of our Probation Officers, backed by the members of Voluntary Probation Committees, who fully appreciate the privilege of being given this opportunity of acting as counsellor and friend to the probationer, can save the individual for the community. The Probation Officer must feel assured that this co-operation is spontaneous and enthusiastic. The number of cases under his charge, particularly in the four centres, and the many details for which he is responsible preclude him from being more than a passing agent in the life of the probationer. It is, however, a striking fact that there are many instances of a definite friendship being continued long after the probationary period has expired; this is proof of the valuable contact that the Probation Officer so often establishes with his charges. In the smaller towns, where the probationers are, fortunately, few in number, valuable work has been done by committeemen in finding employment for short-sentence prisoners on their discharge, and also in assisting in cases where the Magistrate had remanded men on the condition that if work could be found for them they could be released. On a number of committees medical men are serving—their assistance and advice is much appreciated by the Probation Officers, especially as the physical and mental health of the probationer is often the reason of his delinquency.

Confidence of the Court.—It must be realized in considering the cases of those probationers who have been again brought before the Court for failing to comply with the conditions of their probationary licenses that in many instances the Courts place such confidence in their Probation Officers that they entrust them with increasingly difficult cases and thus lower the percentage of successes. Another aspect of what might otherwise be considered as evidence of failure is that in many cases a warning or extension of the probationary period is sufficient to make the probationer realize his responsibilities. The Probation Officer, from his knowledge of the cases under his charge, uses his discretion as to which individual probationer shall be linked with committeemen for assistance and after-care. In many cases where relations and friends can be relied upon to help and not to hinder, it is advisable to encourage their co-operation.

Police Probation Officers.—Many of the police officers in charge of the secondary towns and country districts are acting as Probation Officers. The experience throughout the Dominion during the year under review has proved that the majority of these police officers, notwithstanding their many other duties, make time to assist and advise the probationers under their charge. This helpful co-operation is much appreciated.