

# Probation Officers Looking For Change

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By David Reynolds



**Andrew Mayles (left), a probation officer in District 39, meets with a parolee on Friday.**

Photo by Michael Reilly

HARRISONBURG — Life as a probation officer is a mixed bag. It's a mix of counseling and law enforcement. It includes the excitement of helping someone overcome an addiction — and the frustration of watching them repeat the same mistakes.

"We're out here to make sure the community is safe," said Andrew Mayles, one of 16 probation officers at the District 39 Probation and Parole Office in Harrisonburg. "But also, hopefully, to effect positive behavioral change with the offender."

The office's P.O.s juggle between 80 and 100 offenders each, meeting with them regularly, setting up a program to keep them out of trouble and making sure they stick with it, they say.

Mayles says he meets with his probationers at least once a month, more if necessary, and discusses their lives. Also, he checks to see that they're working, staying away from drugs or alcohol and avoiding the pitfalls that have gotten them in trouble in the past.

Probation officers counsel ex-offenders at the District 39 office on the corner of Elizabeth and Broad streets. They refer probationers to drug treatment, education programs and employment agencies. But they also spend much of their time out of the office.

They visit their probationers at home or at work and also talk to their friends and family to get a different perspective.

Ideally, Mayles says, they build trusting relationships, know their probationers' pitfalls and help them avoid them.

But some days are spent in court, reviewing an offender's criminal history or explaining where they got off track.

Martha Sorensen, a P.O. who works primarily with ex-offenders released from the Gemeinschaft Home, a drug treatment facility for non-violent offenders being released from prison, says she tries to steer her probationers clear of trouble however she can.

"It's so refreshing when it [works]," Sorensen said. "There are people who come out and do well."

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