

**What is the West Virginia Association of Probation Officers?**

**History**

Prior to the ratification of the Judicial Reorganization Amendment in 1974, probation officers were employed by the county in which they worked. When this Amendment took effect in January of 1976, probation officers became state employees of the West Virginia Supreme Court of Appeals under the unified court system. Pursuant to West Virginia Code 62-12-5, the Circuit Court judges appoint probation officers subject to the approval of the Supreme Court. We, as Probation Officers, work for the judges in our respective circuits according to how those judges want us to perform our duties. As such, we have always looked at our Judges as our bosses; we work at the will and pleasure of the Circuit Court Judges. This has proven to be an efficient system that has worked well in West Virginia for over 40 years. Because of this system, probation officers are able to establish close working relationships with the judges we serve. We learn how they want things done, what their expectations are, and, in many instances, anticipate what a particular judge wants before being told.

After realigning probation officers as state employees, some probation officers discovered that the Supreme Court had no idea who these probation officers were or what their work entailed. Likewise, probation officers were equally unfamiliar with anyone involved at the Supreme Court. So in 1978, a small group of forward thinking probation officers decided to form an association so that they could educate the Supreme Court about probation officers, the type of work undertaken, and to begin to create a relationship with the Court. In 1979, that small group of officers, now referred to as the “founding fathers”, incorporated as the West Virginia Association of Probation Officers.

**The WVAPO in Action**

The first order of business for the new organization was to request that an educational conference be held annually to provide continuing education for probation officers and to legitimize the efforts of the Association. The Supreme Court agreed; the first conference was held at Oglebay Park in Wheeling in 1979. Those conferences continued annually until recently when, due to budget constraints, they were transitioned to every other year. In addition to the educational and training aspects of these conferences, they have also provided an opportunity to meet fellow officers from around the State and to get acquainted on a personal level.

Another big issue tackled by the Association in the early days was the establishment of education based pay raises. Previously, an officer’s chief judge would have to request a raise for their officer(s) or probation officers could receive a pay raise when a raise was provided to all other state employees, which was rare. The Association successfully worked with the Supreme Court to implement raises based on educational attainment and continued education. Standards for hiring new officers were enhanced to require a four-year college degree. Education benefits were approved in which the Court agreed to pay for probation officers to further their education through pursuing a master’s degree while employed, or continuing education past a master’s level degree. Additionally, a new pay scale was developed to incorporate years of service and step raises for advancement in education. More recently, the Supreme Court approved a proposal to pay for hours of education beyond a master’s degree up to an additional 45 credit hours with even more step raises built in along the way. This system remains in use today and is unique amongst West Virginia’s state employees.

The WVAPO successfully requested permission for probation officers to be afforded the ability to carry firearms in the execution of our duties. In 2002, a bill was passed permitting this action and the Association was granted the appropriate training and certification for this endeavor, which continues to require ongoing certification. The WVAPO has continued to support probation officers in other endeavors including taking legal action regarding the previous attempt to switch our pay periods to bi-weekly and most recently (and continuously), advocating on behalf of probation officers to receive pay raises that appropriately represent the services we provide to our communities, our clients and to the Court.

Clearly, the relationship between the Association and the Supreme Court has been crucial over the years in improving the nature of our work and our standing with the Court. Over the years we have had, and continue to cultivate, a fantastic relationship with various administrations and justices. Due to the generosity and support of the Court, the Administrative Office, and the Division of Probation Services, we have accomplished a great deal. Because of our training and education, we believe our officers stack up with anyone from any other state or agency.

**How to Become a Member**

Membership dues are $50.00[[1]](#footnote-1) and are generally collected at our bi-annual education conferences. However, new members are always welcome any time of year! Membership dues now cover a two-year period ending at the next education conference, now scheduled for 2024. You can enroll for membership at conference by visiting the WVAPO website at [www.wvapo.org](http://www.wvapo.org). We hope to add you as a member and look forward to hearing your ideas!

**Getting Involved**

This Association is a living, breathing entity. In order to be successful, we need probation officers from across the State to become involved. This Association is very dear to many of us and we desire your involvement and support. This Association is not just for the “old timers”; it is for the betterment of every probation officer. It is our hope that you will consider becoming a member, that after becoming a member you will become involved in a committee, and that you will eventually become a board member and help steer the Association. All organizations need fresh ideas and perspectives, and we hope you will consider sharing yours with your fellow probation officers.

Each conference year, we hold a business meeting and all members are encouraged to attend. Often, action that requires membership-wide consideration is handled at this meeting. Additionally, a new board of fifteen people is selected at each business meeting. From those fifteen elected board members, an executive board is elected, including a President, Vice-President, Secretary and Treasurer. The fifteen members Board meets several times per year and various committees are created to address ongoing areas of interest. As a member, you can volunteer to serve on one of our many committees whether you are on the board or not. Our committees include: legislative, education, public relations, ethics/personnel, safety, salary and others. There are plenty of opportunities to get involved and help shape the future of our profession. We look forward to working with you!

~Sean Bryner, Chief Probation Officer, WVAPO Member and former WVAPO President (edits to reflect recent changes provided by Danielle Hofe, Probation Officer, WVAPO Member and Treasurer)

1. Pursuant to a motion during the December 2022 Board meeting, effective 1/1/2023 dues increased from $35 bi-annually to that of $50 bi-annually. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)