

Justice and Empowerment: A Narrative of Public Servant Interviews

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Studying a picture from different angles often produces different interpretations, but the subject remains unchanged. In much the same way, core service values may be approached differently across organizations, but they are ultimately the same. The public service values of accountability, effectiveness, and efficiency are three such examples as demonstrated in interviews with two experienced public servants: one, a district attorney; and the other, a former non-profit director.

Mrs. Julia Slater unseated her incumbent competitor and was elected as the District Attorney (DA) for the Chattahoochee Judicial Circuit of Georgia in 2008. She was then re-elected in 2012. The Chattahoochee Judicial Circuit includes the counties of Chattahoochee, Harris, Marion, Muscogee, Talbot, and Taylor counties and is centered around the Columbus metropolitan area in Muscogee county. Its mission is to adjudicate the cases that are brought before it.

After leaving the Georgia Lung Association in 1980, Mrs. Vicky Partin founded the faith-based charity, Chattahoochee Valley Episcopal Ministry, or CVEM, whose mission is to “show God’s love through direct assistance, empowerment and advocacy for those marginalized in the community.” She was inspired by her work in her church’s Outreach Committee and by the prompting of a close friend. The Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta chartered CVEM to serve the Chattahoochee Valley Convocation, an area that includes much of east-central Georgia. CVEM is partnered with eight area Episcopal churches as well as several local organizations whose purpose is to help those in need within the local community (Gierer). Retiring in 2014, Mrs. Partin received the Small Business Council of America’s Congressional Award for her work at CVEM and still participates in the organization.

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Mrs. Slater grew up in Columbus, earned a bachelor's degree in musical theater from Stephens College in 1988 and her law degree from Washington and Lee University in 1993. After spending a year as a law clerk for the Chattahoochee Circuit, she became an Assistant District Attorney (ADA), which she served as for nearly ten years. After a few years in private practice, she decided to run for the DA's office (Mustian, Chitwood).

Mrs. Vicky Partin was raised in Tennessee where she grew up on her family's farm. She began her professional career as a high school English teacher after graduating from Peabody College for Teachers (what would later become Vanderbilt University). She entered non-profit work with the Georgia Lung Association where she pioneered efforts to reduce smoking in public buildings and restaurants.

Both Mrs. Slater and Mrs. Partin brought experience from their service backgrounds into their new positions. They also exhibited a commitment to public service in their individual pursuits for justice: socially in the case of Mrs. Partin, and judicially in the case of Mrs. Slater. Their backgrounds share a commitment to improve the equitable distribution of services to those around them. It also shows varied progressions into their positions, not arriving there via a single organizational path or directly from secondary education.

Their interviews were conducted in October of 2015 after both were contacted. Figure 1 details the course of events for the interview project.

[Figure 1 About Here]

For their interviews, both were asked several questions about how their offices perceived the public values of accountability, effectiveness, and efficiency. They were also both asked specific questions about their backgrounds and organizations. Figure 2 lists the questions they were asked.

[Figure 2 About Here]

### ***Accountability***

Accountability was a key consideration for them both. They both identified several entities that they felt accountable to, each with a different set of expectations. However, as Mrs. Slater noted, there is often conflict between these whenever their interests contradict one another. In her office's case, sometimes victims wish to not prosecute offenders although the DA's office is obliged to. Perhaps, also, an apprehension lacks evidence needed to take to trial. Mrs. Partin also highlighted how her organization's mission of empowerment was sometimes counter to what recipients wanted.

As a faith-based charity, CVEM felt accountable to *God* for faithful ministry, to *those served* for meaningful charity and empowerment, *donors* for the responsible use of donations, and *volunteers* for meaningful opportunities for service. The DA's office felt accountable to *citizens* for fulfilling the judicial function, to *victims and their families* for seeking justice, to *law enforcement* for prosecuting the criminals apprehended, and to *judges* for adhering to and preserving due process.

### *Effectiveness*

Effectiveness carried with it a balance of multiple requirements for both organizations. Measures were in place, in varying degrees of formality, for each as well. Interestingly, CVEM pointed out that tracking measurable effects was less of a priority in order to focus the organization's work on those it served, rather than quantifying results.

Mrs. Slater defined Effectiveness as "the fair and consistent processing of the cases given." Her office measures it by feedback provided by the public from a variety of sources that include discussions with victims and/or their families, public speaking, and simply being accessible to the people. Mrs. Partin defined it as "providing necessary assistance, either as a single instance or by developing self-sufficiency." The career choices of young adults who were involved with CVEM as children were one way to judge how its programs have influenced youth.

### *Efficiency*

Efficiency varied in formality. Like effectiveness, it consisted of a balance of requirements: not excelling in one aspect at the expense of another. Neither organization based efficiency on the same quality, however they were both quantifiable. The DA's office used time and number of cases completed while CVEM managed the numbers of volunteers and community needs.

Mrs. Partin defined CVEM's need-based efficiency as matching the available volunteer base with the needed amount of service needed within the convocation. Mrs. Slater's time-based definition focused on the movement of cases through the judicial process quickly, while maintaining the cases' integrity. Her office used a web-based tracking system to clearly show

how this was being accomplished. That system also enabled significantly better communication and inter-office coordination.

### *Legacy*

When asked about accomplishments they were most proud of, both highlighted experiences that impacted the community as a whole. Mrs. Slater's ability to devote ADA support to each county in the circuit as well as her prioritization of trying cold-cases to deliver long awaited justice was described. The hard work of her staff and her office's improved transparency resonated, also. Mrs. Partin detailed her work with the Beallwood neighborhood, which CVEM partnered with the city of Columbus to develop the leadership within the neighborhood to improve its safety and economic opportunity. Additionally, eleven other neighborhood and educational organizations have been founded though the work of CVEM in order to carry on specific missions around the community.

Both women described how pinpointed systematic change was needed in order to improve how public services were delivered. The DA's office changed how its ADA's covered the counties in the circuit to improve the delivery of justice as well as how it communicated to plan cases. CVEM often inspired change in two ways: one as an advocate for specific municipal changes, and another by changing the mentality of those it helped by showing them they could help themselves.

In final thoughts, they summed up their organizational experiences well. All public servants are valued, however, the individuals who are committed to serving the public and who understand its value sustain an organization. Quite often, service is more than simply providing a need. It is empowering those who are in need.

***Attachments***

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1. Figure 1: Interview Protocol
2. Figure 2: Interview Script
3. Table: Public Service Comparison of a District Attorney and a Charity Director
4. Consolidated notes taken during interviews

***Works Cited***

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1. Chattahoochee Valley Episcopal Ministry website, <http://www.cvemjubilee.org>
2. Larry Gierer, "Vicky Partin Retiring as Chattahoochee Valley Episcopal Ministry Director," Ledger-Enquirer, November 22, 2014, <http://www.ledger-enquirer.com/news/local/article29362096.html>
3. Jim Mustian and Tim Chitwood, "District Attorney Julia Slater takes center stage," Ledger-Enquirer, May 15, 2011, <http://www.ledger-enquirer.com/incoming/article29185081.html>