Serve the community
or serve time in jail

By JOHN SEMIEN
Advocate staff writer

They scrape old paint from the USS Kidd or play piano for elderly residents at the East Baton Rouge Council on Aging.

They also do research at the library or pick up paper with a litter detail.

But they are not members of a community action group.

They are people who have been convicted of driving while intoxicated and assigned to community service by the City Court Probation and Rehabilitation Department.

The program, which is about a year old, offers an alternative to incarceration for DWI offenders and persons convicted of other minor crimes.

It includes persons from all walks of life, all drawn together by the combination of drinking and driving.

“I’ve had a man to come through here that had felony convictions with a DWI, and I’ve had a Ph.D.,” said Robert Menck, a probation officer. “We’ve had an attorney, and we’ve even had a state representative. We are a drinking, mobile society, and that makes us all susceptible to DWI.”

Menck has been a probation officer since 1975. Citations and diplomas from various alcohol and drug counseling programs attest to his dedication.

Most DWI offenders share a common reaction to being convicted of DWI, he said.

“When they first come from court, they’re very hostile,” Menck said. “A lot of them feel like the police gave them a bad rap. They don’t think they were drunk when they were arrested.”

“The common cliche is, ‘Man I only had two beers,’” he said.

But most people are more relaxed in

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Convicted

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subsequent meetings with probation officers, he said.

And in the community service program, probation officials try to match a person’s skills to jobs in public agencies, he said.

“If we have a professional person, we’re not going to make him go out and be a laborer,” he said. “We try to keep them in their vocation.”

“We try to work it into the individual’s work schedule,” he said.

Some community service work is done after working hours during week days and on weekends, while agencies like Earl K. Long Memorial Hospital provide 24-hour work slots, he said.

While some offenders make a return trip through the program, most never come back, Menck said.

And some come to think of community service as a rewarding experience, he said.

“I had professionals who were very bitter... and later they said it was the best thing to happen to them,” Minck said.

“Some say, ‘Man if this would have happened to me the first time I had a DWI, I wouldn’t have had a second one.”

Last year, 1,438 DWI offenders did community service for the probation department, according to Mary M. Millsap, chief probation officer.

So far this year, 298 people have taken part in the program, she said.

“We have about 90 people doing community service a month,” she said.

Ms. Millsap said the program provides needed manpower for some agencies and a rewarding experience for the DWI offender.

“I think they have accepted it very well. It shows they can do something responsible in the community they live in,” she said.

Some persons who began working with local agencies through the program have even found permanent jobs at the agencies they worked for, she said.

“It’s not designed for that but sometimes it works out that way,” she said.