

What is Sentencing Circles

"Restorative justice is a broad term which encompasses a growing social movement to institutionalize peaceful approaches to harm, problem-solving and violations of legal and human rights. These range from international peacemaking tribunals such as the South Africa Truth and Reconciliation Commission to innovations within the criminal and juvenile justice systems, schools, social services and communities. Rather than privileging the law, professionals and the state, restorative resolutions engage those who are harmed, wrongdoers and their affected communities in search of solutions that promote repair, reconciliation and the rebuilding of relationships. Restorative justice seeks to build partnerships to reestablish mutual responsibility for constructive responses to wrongdoing within our communities. Restorative approaches seek a balanced approach to the needs of the victim, wrongdoer and community through processes that preserve the safety and dignity of all"

Restorative Circles

In Hawaii, Restorative Circles are provided for individual imprisoned people who meet with their families and friends in a group process to address their needs for a successful transition back into the community. One of the needs addressed is the need for reconciliation. A Modified Restorative Circle has also been developed and used in Hawaii for individual incarcerated people whose loved ones are unable or unwilling to attend full Restorative Circles. Instead other imprisoned friends sit in the Circle and are supporters in developing a transition plan that includes how the incarcerated individual having the Circle may reconcile with those harmed by the crime and/or imprisonment.

Circles of Support and Accountability

Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA) originated as a project of the "Welcome In," a Mennonite church in Hamilton, Ontario. This thoroughly Canadian innovation is now an internationally regarded, evidence-based practice with a demonstrable capacity to enhance the safe integration of otherwise high-risk sex offenders with their community. In Canada, some sex offenders are released to the community after serving all of their sentence. They have been judged too dangerous to be released on any form of conditional release (e.g. a parole certificate), and have therefore been "detained." Upon further reconviction (and therefore, further victimization), many of these offenders would likely be designated as a "Dangerous Offender," under current Canadian law. Prior to 1994 many of these offenders were released without any form of meaningful community-based support or accountability network apart from police surveillance. Since 1994, CoSA has assisted with the integration of well over 120 such offenders by offering them support

while holding them accountable. Research now indicates that surrounding a 'core member' with between 5 and 7 carefully selected and trained volunteer circle members significantly reduces sexual re-offence by upwards of 50%. Further, a significant "harm reduction" effect has also been noted in those cases where sexual re-offence has occurred. Offences were less invasive and less brutal in nature than previous offences. CoSA projects now exist in every Canadian province and every major urban centre. CoSA projects are also operational in several U.S. states (California, Minnesota, Oregon, Ohio, Colorado, Vermont) as well as in the Thames Valley region of the United Kingdom.

Sentencing Circles

Sentencing circles (sometimes called peacemaking circles) use traditional circle ritual and structure to involve the victim, victim supporters, the offender, offender supporters, judge and court personnel, prosecutor, defense counsel, police, and all interested community members. Within the circle, people can speak from the heart in a shared search for understanding of the event, and together identify the steps necessary to assist in healing all affected parties and prevent future crimes.

Sentencing circles typically involve a multi-step procedure that includes:

- (1) application by the offender to participate in the circle process;
- (2) a healing circle for the victim;
- (3) a healing circle for the offender;
- (4) a sentencing circle to develop consensus on the elements of a sentencing plan; and
- (5) follow-up circles to monitor the progress of the offender.

Source: www.wikipedia.org