
Citizens, Victims, & Offenders
Restoring Justice Project
Minnesota Correctional Facility
For Women at Shakopee

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Minnesota Correctional Facility in Shakopee, Minnesota is the only correctional facility in the state designed to house adult women felons. Long considered an innovative leader in prison programming, MCF-Shakopee was selected as the site for this pilot project. The Citizens, Victims and Offenders Restoring Justice Project was designed to bring crime victims, offenders and community members together to address the causes and consequences of crime in a very personal way. For nine weeks, victim and offender participants told their stories and shared the anger, pain and grief that resulted from criminal acts in their lives. Victim participants impressed on inmates that healing from violent crime is a long and painful process, complicated by involvement with the criminal justice system, and that their healing may never be complete. They were firm advocates for truth-in-sentencing and victims' rights. Offenders, in turn, were able to express their deep remorse for harm done to innocent victims and a firm resolve to do whatever possible to right the wrongs committed. Facilitators employed a circle process in conducting the sessions. Their role was to provide a flexible structure for each meeting, ensure that each participant had the opportunity to tell their story, and help group members make sense of their experience. The emphasis was on creating a safe supportive environment in which to address the painful issues that would arise. Participants completed surveys before and after joining the project. These, along with observer notes and recorded quotes, provide insight into the impact the project had on participants. Significant observations include signs of increased group integration; creation of a safe, supportive environment; offender accountability; positive changes in participants' feelings toward one another, and a greater willingness to consider and engage in restorative responses to crime. The overwhelming response to the project was a positive one from the perspective of victims and offenders alike. Meetings ended with high hopes for future restorative justice projects at the Shakopee facility.

Introduction

The MCF-Shakopee Citizens, Victims & Offenders Restoring Justice Project was a pilot program based on the work of Helfgott and her colleagues at the Seattle University Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice (1998). Surveys completed by participants of the Shakopee project were condensed from those used in Seattle, and a similar process of group facilitation employed. Over a period of nine weeks, participants in the Shakopee project met weekly for three hours. Meetings were held in a circle format with two facilitators present to guide discussions. Those present included four crime victims, a community member (a woman who had been a victim of violent crime in her youth), six female inmates, two facilitators, a neutral advocate, and an observer. The advocate was available for anyone who needed support, and the observer took notes on the process.

Victim and inmate participants were asked to sign up for the night they wanted to tell their story. Meetings consisted of an initial check-in with input from each participant, a review of the previous week with questions or comments, and time for one or two participants to tell their stories, with a brief closing exercise at the end. In addition, facilitators would incorporate exercises as needed to aid participants in making sense of their experience. This might mean leading a discussion on concepts of justice or a guided visualization to explore emotions around harm and healing.

Victim and inmate participants were also asked to complete surveys composed of 44 statements and 6 open-ended questions. Survey items were selected to measure desired outcomes as described in the Shakopee project goals. These goals were summarized into eight points:

1. Provide offenders an opportunity to express empathy and remorse.
2. Give offenders tools to become accountable and accept responsibility for their crime.
3. Facilitate constructive communication.
4. Create safe, supportive environment.
5. Learn causes and results of crime.
6. Enhance understanding of restorative justice principles and the centrality of harm to persons.
7. Foster hope for a balanced criminal justice response.
8. Healing from harm caused by crime.

Two versions of the survey were used, one for victim participants and one for inmates. Responses to the statements were recorded on a four-point Likert Scale that offered the following optional responses: Strongly Disagree, Somewhat Disagree, Somewhat Agree and Strongly Agree. In addition, each survey included open-ended questions that allowed the participants to express themselves in their own words. These questions addressed issues such as concepts of justice, expectations for the project, hopes and fears, and safety. Surveys were administered prior to and just after completion of participation in the project.

Five victim participants and six inmates completed the surveys. For the purposes of this study, the one community member was included in the 'victim' category and received surveys designed to measure victim attitudes. While this simplified the process of drawing conclusions from the data, it was recognized that community members were underrepresented in this study and future projects would do well to improve on these numbers.

Initial Survey Responses

Victims' open-ended responses on pre-project surveys reflect their priorities of truth-in-sentencing, victim rights, the importance of offering support for other victims, and the hope that their stories might have a positive impact on offenders. Asked what could be done to make justice more meaningful, one victim wrote, "Make a life sentence mean life in prison. Spend as much time, money, and effort to help and heal victims as is spent on criminals." Another victim, asked about his hopes and fears for the project, responded, "I have apprehensions regarding the outcome of the meetings, but if there is a chance to turn someone in the right direction, and my participation helped, I would feel more than justified in the meetings." Also noteworthy is the unanimous "NO" given in response to the question "Do you think it will be possible for you to resolve any of the conflicts/issues you have with the offender in your case by speaking with offenders unrelated to your case?" This expectation is born out in the post-project survey results, as well.

Offenders' responses to the pre-project survey reflect concern for the needs of victims, willingness to hear their stories and offer support, openness to learning from the

experience, and hope for healing. Some were concerned about feeling judged, expressed remorse for their actions, and hoped for an opportunity to show how their lives had changed since their incarceration. Asked about her hopes and fears, one inmate wrote, “My fear is that I’ll be judged for who I was, not whom I’ve become.” Another offered this response, “My hopes in this program are to be able to get a better understanding of just how much an impact our behaviors have on others, to possibly give back to the community an understanding of the consequences of my behaviors and alcohol [use]. I would [like to] let them know all I’ve done to better myself.”

Pre- and Post-Project Surveys Compared

Positive Changes in Attitude

Victim survey responses indicate a notable change of attitude in a number of areas. Pre-project surveys show that victims suspected most offender participation was motivated by a desire to look good for their parole hearings. After meeting with the offenders for nine weeks, however, not one victim held this belief about the offenders involved in this project.

Table 1. OFFENDERS JUST WANT TO LOOK GOOD FOR PAROLE HEARING

VICTIMS N=4	AGREE	DISAGREE
BEFORE PROJECT	75%	25%
AFTER PROJECT	0%	100%

Prior to the project, victims were split on the question of whether incarceration should focus on training and equipping offenders for living in the community. Post-project surveys indicate a change of heart; victim response showed unanimous support for transition services.

Table 2. OFFENDERS SHOULD RECEIVE TRAINING FOR LIVING IN THE COMMUNITY

VICTIMS N=4	AGREE	DISAGREE
BEFORE PROJECT	50%	50%
AFTER PROJECT	100%	0%

Similarly, before this project, most victims disagreed with the statement that the wounds and healing of offenders should be seen as important in the justice process. Afterwards, the same statement received a positive response, indicating a greater willingness to consider restorative alternatives to crime.

Table 3. THE WOUNDS AND HEALING OF OFFENDERS ARE IMPORTANT

VICTIMS N=5	AGREE	DISAGREE
BEFORE PROJECT	20%	80%
AFTER PROJECT	100%	0%

Statements designed to measure perceptions of offender remorse and accountability were compared. Pre-project survey results show that, in the victims' experience, most offenders do not show remorse and are not held accountable for their actions. In post-project surveys, however, victims agree unanimously that these offender participants did indeed show remorse and accept responsibility for their crimes.

Table 4. OFFENDERS SEEM TO FEEL SORRY FOR WHAT THEY DID

VICTIMS N=5	AGREE	DISAGREE
BEFORE PROJECT	20%	80%
AFTER PROJECT	100%	0%

Positive Expectations Confirmed - Offenders

Although offender surveys show little change in attitude, their responses indicate a confirmation or strengthening of those views that were initially consistent with project goals. This was likely due to the fact that offender participants were selected from those who had successfully completed a facility class called “Making Things Right” which emphasizes offender accountability and helps prepare inmates for a face-to-face meeting with crime victims.¹

For example, before participating in the restorative justice project, all offenders *disagreed* with the statement “I do not expect much to come out of conversations with victims.” Post-project surveys confirm their expectations were justified. All six offenders strongly disagreed with the statement “I did not get much out of the conversations with the victims in the seminar.”

Table 5. CONVERSATIONS WITH VICTIMS WON’T ACCOMPLISH MUCH

OFFENDERS N=6	AGREE	DISAGREE
BEFORE PROJECT	0%	100%
AFTER PROJECT	0%	100%

In the same way, offenders were unanimous in their response to the statement “I have no interest in doing anything to help the victim(s) of my crime or his/her family.”

Both pre- and post-project surveys register offenders' strong disagreement with this statement.

Table 6. OFFENDERS DON'T WANT TO DO ANYTHING FOR THEIR VICTIMS

OFFENDERS N=6	AGREE	DISAGREE
BEFORE PROJECT	0%	100%
AFTER PROJECT	0%	100%

With one exception, every offender participated in the project with the hope of gaining a better understanding of what victims experience in the aftermath of crime. After the project, every offender agreed that the seminar helped her to do this.

Table 7. OFFENDERS NEED TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE AFTERMATH OF CRIME

OFFENDERS N=6	AGREE	DISAGREE
BEFORE PROJECT	83%	17%
AFTER PROJECT	100%	0%

Additionally, offenders indicated that doubts about positive outcomes for victim offender dialogues were lessened. They agreed that the project helped them to better understand how to take responsibility for their behavior. Offenders also noted that this experience helped them deal with their loss and the feelings they had regarding their crime.

Victim Expectations Met

Victim participants entered into the project motivated by a desire to educate offenders about the needs and interests of victims. Post-project surveys show this expectation was met for each respondent.

Table 8. VICTIMS WANT TO EDUCATE OFFENDERS ABOUT VICTIM NEEDS AND INTERESTS

VICTIMS N=4	AGREE	DISAGREE
BEFORE PROJECT	100%	0%
AFTER PROJECT	100%	0%

Similarly, results indicate that victims were interested in playing a greater role in the justice process and that the project made this possible. Whereas attitudes toward offenders involved in victims' own cases did not change, all agreed that the wounds and healing of victims should be considered important in the justice process. And although no one stated that this process had significantly affected their own healing, all agreed that this project was a positive experience.

Responses to Open-ended Questions

A few selections from victim responses to open-ended questions on the post-project surveys provide insights that speak for themselves. One wrote, "I did not expect to develop the rapport that evolved from these meetings. I care that they got something good and positive out of this and I think they all did." To the question, what concrete things might be done to further the principle of restorative justice, one wrote, "Helping other victims receive justice and healing." In response to a question about repairing harms resulting from serious violent crimes, another victim wrote this, "They can never bring the loved one back from the grave. They can never repair this."

Discussion

It became apparent early on that a large measure of the success of the project was due to prior preparation of the participants. The victims had spent several years involved in the support group Parents of Murdered Children and had shared their stories before. The offenders had participated in a group called "Making Things Right" that emphasized taking responsibility for choices and actions leading to their incarceration. Both groups had done a great deal of work coming to terms with their own very painful experiences before joining a project that brought them together.

Trends observed over the course of the project include: increased integration of group members as shown in seating arrangements and socialization patterns during breaks; creation of a safe, supportive environment as personal stories were shared; from offenders, signs of deep remorse and acceptance of responsibility for harm done; and for all participants, a growing appreciation for the process, the positive changes made, and hope for continued healing.

Integration. At the initial meetings, the voluntary seating arrangements were characterized by a clear segregation of victims and offenders, typically with facilitators seated between them. During breaks, victims chatted with facilitators or each other, and offenders talked among themselves. By the fifth meeting, victims were choosing seats next to offenders, and during breaks, informal clusters of victims and inmates engaged in friendly conversation. There was even some good-natured ribbing between group members. One victim participant stated, "The beauty of this group is having these kinds of interplays. I think this is a great group." At times, informal conversations led to an open discussion of subjects like victims' rights - for instance, the right to give an impact statement during trials. While this temporarily diverted the group from scheduled topics, it also revealed the growing ease in communication between participants. Facilitators wisely allowed room for these kinds of productive tangents.

Supportive Environment. When telling their stories, victims spoke of their convictions regarding truth-in-sentencing. "Life should be life," as one victim put it. Afterwards, inmates admitted that this was hard for them to hear because of their own hopes for a reprieve, but at no time did inmates challenge this, or respond with anything but support for victims' feelings on the subject. Offenders volunteered to write letters to

key officials in support of victim rights to offer impact statements at trial. Victims in turn offered support to inmates as they related their stories of painful abuse, praising their courage for surviving and deciding to make a positive change in their lives. Overall, participants developed a strong rapport. Near the end, victims and inmates alike said they looked forward to the meetings and were sorry they would soon be over. One victim gave his opinion that, "This has become a support group."

Accountability. A number of inmate comments indicate that they are coming to terms with the terrible cost of their crimes and accepting responsibility for their actions. "When you commit a crime," said one inmate, "your family does time with you." Another, when telling her story of the abusive, violent environment she was raised in, blamed only herself for her part in a homicide. "I hold myself wholly responsible," she said. Many offenders had difficulty telling their stories without pausing to cry, overwhelmed with painful emotion. Victims were visibly moved by offenders' genuine expression of remorse. "You're a very strong person to have come through all that," was said to an inmate after hearing her tale of abuse. "It's terrible that this is the safest place you've ever lived."

Changed Lives. Offenders made it clear that incarceration had given them a second chance and they were determined to use the opportunity to help others. This was something they had in common with the victims who, as part of their healing process, decided they would not let the terrible loss ruin their lives. The prospect of helping others motivated both victims and offenders to be part of the project. "I hope that in the process of us being here that your healing journey continues," said one victim to the offenders present. Another victim offered this comment, "I believe we have seen changes in the group, in all of us. I think we are all having an impact on one another. It's important to hear one another's stories, and if that's all we do, that's huge. I really think this works well." Looking back on his decision to join the project, one victim recalled he was "not exactly thrilled at the prospect. I was real apprehensive. On the first day, I saw fear and anger...but I see the anger and fear is dissipating. I see smiles, laughter. People are growing out of their hurt. I've grown quite a bit. It's working for me, and I think for the rest of you. Makes me feel good about it."

Conclusion

As is so often the case with this type of project or experience, it can be difficult to convey in words the many things that transpired, the feelings, the impressions, the general felt sense of progress and goodwill that developed out of these meetings. By all accounts, it was a success. A number of elements can be identified that made this so. Experienced and flexible facilitators, a group of victims and offenders who were well along the road in their healing process and came prepared to share their experience with others, supportive facility staff and administrators, all contributed to a positive outcome in this case.

Offenders, victims and facilitators agreed to a follow-up meeting and plans for a March session were discussed. Good-byes were tearful and the prospect of another, final gathering helped ease the pain of ending. Hopes were high at the prospect of on-going work in restorative justice. A few of the inmates look forward to mentoring the next group of women going through the “Making Things Right” course and sending graduates on to the next restorative justice project. Victim participants expressed their wish that inmates would continue the good work they had begun.

In a period of severe budget cuts for Corrections in Minnesota, it seems clear that this kind of pilot program - which offers tangible benefits for victims, offenders and the community - deserves a second look. Although it is difficult to remain neutral in a setting where intense emotion is expressed, every effort was made to draw up a summary that faithfully reflects what took place throughout the nine weeks of the project, utilizing surveys, observer notes, and participant input. This report is respectfully submitted in support of the MCF-Shakopee Citizens, Victims and Offenders Restoring Justice Project with the sincere hope that such work might continue.

NOTES

ⁱ A brief description of the selection process for the “Making Things Right” group is offered here to highlight the importance of preparation in any restorative justice work. “Making Things Right” is the name of the cognitively based curriculum developed by the EXCEL Program, Workforce Development Group of the Amherst H. Wilder Foundation in St. Paul, MN (2000). The application process for the group was fairly rigorous. Inmates first submitted an essay describing why they wished to participate in the group, what they felt they had to offer, what things they needed to make right, and their understanding of restorative justice. Applications were reviewed by group facilitators and interviews scheduled with those who successfully completed this step. Participants were chosen based on the content of their letters and their responses in the interviews. Once accepted into the program, offenders were asked to commit to attending the full ten weeks of the course. Ten participants were selected for the group. Only those who completed the program were eligible to participate in the Citizens, Victims and Offenders Restoring Justice Project. For more information on the content of the curriculum, contact Nina Swanson at the Wilder Foundation.

References

Helfgott, J., Lovell, M., & Laurence, C. (1998). Citizens, victims and offenders restoring justice: Final project report. Seattle, WA: Seattle University, Department of Sociology & Criminal Justice.

Swanson, N. (2000). Making things right: A program of accountability. St. Paul, MN: Amherst H. Wilder Foundation.