

How to Build Community Support for Restorative Justice

Editor's note: This article is adopted from a paper delivered by the author in Montpelier, Vermont in September 1995.

A restorative response to crime is a community-building response. It is necessary to build a broad base of support for restorative justice principles and practices. Because restorative justice is grounded in community involvement it is not possible to implement a comprehensive restorative system without Community ownership and support. A comprehensive restorative response to crime engages the community as a resource for reconciliation of victims and offenders and as a resource for monitoring and enforcing community standards of behavior. The restorative justice framework calls for the inclusion of all stakeholders, especially victims and community members, in designing and implementing local justice practices. It is an empowerment model that must clearly be grounded in grass-roots commitment at the local level.

Seek Broad-Based Decision Making

Corrections agencies are not typically oriented toward grass-roots participation and are generally very hierarchical organizations. Restorative justice, on the other hand, is based upon highly participatory decision making, from individual cases to system design. Thus the corrections agency promoting changes toward the restorative justice model is challenged to provide leadership while not usurping the power of other participants. Any agency promoting change must model the values of restorative justice in its process by providing vision and encouragement to all stakeholders while avoiding specific directives. There is an inherent tension between the desire of traditional stakeholders for details of implementation in order to understand the functional

framework, and the need for the leading agency to leave the details of implementation to the participatory process.

At early stages of discussion, participants may become impatient with philosophy and just want to be told what to do. The question of "how to" can be turned back to the participants: ask them to apply the principles and identify practices which fit the principles. Over a period of time the responses from participants can become the basis for providing multiple examples of restorative practice to bring life to the concepts. However, at all times the leading agency should resist the urge to develop detailed plans unilaterally because that might supplant the development of plans based on the participation of all the stakeholders.

Avoid Top-Down Mandates

Restorative justice should not be mandated in a top-down authoritarian process. The work of implementing the principles of restorative justice must be done at the local level and must involve all stakeholders. There is no single road map or blueprint for building a restorative system; nor do we have answers to all the questions raised by the principles of restorative justice. The process of searching for answers should involve dialogue with all who have an interest in the question. The appropriate role of state, national, or regional leadership is to articulate the vision, disseminate information, and provide support and technical assistance to jurisdictions attempting to evolve to a more restorative approach. State and national agencies can also carry out pilot programs to demonstrate application of the principles. State and national governments are responsible for monitoring outcomes to insure fairness, equity, and effectiveness of processes designed at the local level.

A clear understanding by practitioners and stakeholders, including the community of the philosophical underpinnings is essential to ensure that changes are substantive and not merely cosmetic.

Program implementation without an explicit understanding of underlying values often leads to undesirable results.

Look Beyond the Criminal Justice Arena

The process of implementing restorative approaches must model the principles themselves--e.g., victims must have a voice, the community must be involved. In fact, every citizen should be given opportunities to contribute to the community's vision of restorative justice. The community contains natural allies in fields outside criminal justice who can bring depth and credibility to the advocacy of a restorative approach. The work of promoting and supporting the use of restorative practices in criminal justice must be carried out across multiple organizational systems and levels. In particular, since the lead agency in change efforts will have direct authority over only a small percentage of those who shape criminal justice practice, progress toward a restorative approach requires engaging voluntary participation and interest.

Efforts to promote restorative justice should involve all levels of state, county, and city government and multiple sectors of the community, such as schools, social services, civic organizations, and faith communities, in addition to the traditional players, such as corrections, police, judges, prosecutors, and defense lawyers. Moreover, besides those community entities whose missions and interests are logically part of, or related to, the justice process, it is also essential to involve a diverse variety of other organizations from all cultural perspectives, with the objective of achieving proportional representation from cultural subgroups and ethnic communities.

Don't Minimize Problems to Be Faced

Though the restorative justice movement has recently experienced

remarkable growth of awareness and interest, there are very serious problems ahead. Even where there is a high level of support for the restorative philosophy in the criminal justice system or community, the broader public policy trend around the nation is in the opposite direction. Prison populations are growing rapidly and the cost of that expansion threatens the availability of resources to work with victims and offenders in the

community. Increasing dependence on incarceration may further paralyze the system, making change much more difficult. Practitioners are frequently so overloaded that it is very difficult for them to think about questions of underlying values or philosophy.

There is also great risk that the existing system, with its overwhelming orientation to offenders, will be unable to shift to a truly, victim-centered approach to resolving crime. The habits of the system are strong. Even in jurisdictions committed to shifting to restorative justice, corrections practitioners frequently forget to involve victim representatives in their planning at the beginning. It will take great vigilance to insure that victims' issues are given proper consideration.

Facilitate the Process

The greatest risks identified by most critics involve implementation which fails to be true to the values underlying restorative justice. It is crucial that the values be clearly understood and frequently articulated to guard against the dangers of straying from them in practice. Research is needed to identify ways for the community to be more involved both in system decision making and working with victims and offenders. Engagement of the community in affirming and maintaining community standards is central to the success of a more restorative approach within the criminal justice system. Greater community involvement in a restorative justice process is a powerful way both to break the cycles of crime and violence and to

increase the connections among community members. The more connected with each other community members are, the more likely they will be to restrain impulses which would be disapproved by the community.

Professionals within the system can facilitate the process of engaging the community to become a primary resource in responding to crime in a restorative framework. Expanded community involvement and opportunities for constructive collective action will result in less fear and isolation and a stronger sense of community. Building community support includes gaining community approval of new approaches within the criminal justice system and engaging the community as a key actor in the process of responding to crime. The success of a restorative approach is dependent upon community support and involvement and requires specific attention and resources allocated to those efforts.

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**Kay Pranis is the Restorative Justice Planner for the Minnesota Department of Corrections and can be reached at 1450 Energy Park Drive, St. Paul MN55108; e-mail: kpranis@co.doc.state.mn.us*