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Restorative Justice Summit shows why concept is on rise



Leonard Inskip

Visitors from Illinois, Iowa and northern Wisconsin joined a Minnesota audience last week to learn more about "restorative justice," a growing activity in which Minnesota is a national leader.

Suburban Twin Cities police, Minnesota corrections officials, South St. Paul school workers, inner-city activists from Minneapolis and St. Paul, Mille Lacs Indians, a Brown County employee from New Ulm and other speakers described restorative justice successes. But as the two-day conference at William Mitchell College of Law ended, it was also clear that most other Minnesotans - like the out-of-state visitors - have much to learn.

The evidence: too little financial support by both public and private sources including foundations and the Legislature; too many police departments that "don't have a clue"; too few schools using successful techniques; the desirability of more victim involvement in justice outcomes; inadequate expertise and training in restorative justice processes, and so on.

Restorative justice, still mostly new, is a term used only occasionally in

newspapers and other media. It refers to bringing together victims, offenders, families, community members, law people and others into a voluntary process that can help both victims and offenders. Participants talk about the harm an offender has done and what amends would help. Offenders may realize how they have hurt individuals, families and communities. When the process works, it's crime prevention in action by making offenders less likely to repeat.

It also can be community development in action, by bringing people together to strengthen community fabric. Support and healing for victims is important. But as Kay Pranis of the Corrections Department noted, it's also important to support offender healing that includes acknowledging a wrong, understanding its harm, action to repair harm and steps to change one's life.

The conference, titled Restorative Justice Summit, reflected restorative justice momentum in recent years. Sponsors expected perhaps 100 or so attendees; instead, 360 signed up.

The instigator was Doug Hall, described in the program only as "poverty lawyer." Now retired from the Legal Rights Center in Minneapolis, and living near Wabasha, Minn., Hall was a giant in promoting legal rights for the poor and minorities. Frustrated by the legal system, Hall learned about restorative justice only a few years ago and quickly became a champion.

Restorative justice processes have various forms and names: victim offender mediation, restitution, community service, group conferencing, sentencing or peacemaking circles. Conferencing and circles are the newest organized forms, although circles have roots in ancient Native American justice. In a circle process, participants align themselves that way, pass a small object and speak only when the object reaches them. Mille Lacs Indians have a circle group. But the approach also is used in South St. Paul schools to address student disruption and discord. It can even be used for family sessions or office staff meetings.

Two judges described promising circles in St. Paul. The Summit-University-Frogtown Community Circle, not yet two years old, works with African-American male offenders 18 to

35. Judge Edward Wilson, a founder, described it as a community and justice system partnership. It attempts to meld the views of victims, offenders, prosecutors and local community and reach a sentence. One outcome of a drug case included community service in a program for crack babies.

Another goal, said Wilson, an African-American himself, is to build bridges between the black community and the justice system. As percentages of their respective racial populations, blacks are 23 times more likely than whites to go prison. Because that disparity is the biggest in the country it suggests Minnesota has a criminal-justice problem.

A second judge, former Mayor Lawrence Cohen, described the growth of St. Paul's Hmong community and problems of adjusting almost overnight to American culture. There are family discord and youth crime. Cohen is working to establish a Hmong circle and to provide training this spring for 30 participants from different segments of Hmong life.

When the process works, it's crime prevention in action by making offenders less likely to repeat. It also can be community development in action.

Speakers from four suburban police departments gave restorative justice their strong endorsement as a tool for youth problems. Inspired by programs in

England and Scotland, Anoka police began "accountability conferencing" in the mid-1990s. It since has held 480 conferencing sessions, mostly involving kids and shoplifting, vandalism and simple assault, said Sgt. Denny Reihe. In all, 700 kids have participated, but only 16 reoffended.

A particularly dramatic example involved several youths - "basically good kids" - who printed \$20 bills from a computer and then tried passing them. In the accountability conference, a Secret Service official warned that a counterfeit bill was worth 15 years; that the government could seize the computer, the vehicle to get to a store, and even the house where the bills were produced.

The youths escaped such serious consequences, but presumably the message had a lasting effect.

Norm Prusinski, Chaska police, described similar conferencing involving a fifth-grade boy who threatened to kill two female classmates. Participants included parents and school people. The parents explained why they kept their daughters home. The boy recognized the seriousness of his threat, and the meeting ended positively with the girls' parents OK'ing a return to school. A similar conference occurs this week involving two sixth-grade boys who defecated in school sinks. School custodians will participate.

Woodbury's David Hines said restorative justice "has become a way of doing business in our department," starting with officers on the street. With Woodbury a restorative justice leader, Hines has trained 1,500 people, including in other Minnesota communities and elsewhere.

When asked whether cops aren't too busy for restorative justice, White Bear Lake Chief Todd Miller responded: "We don't have time not to do it" - a reference to preventing future crime. David Metzen, newly retired South St. Paul school superintendent, agreed: "Restorative justice is time-consuming up front but will pay huge dividends at the end."

Time-consuming, yes. But, judging by the strong endorsements by diverse proponents, it's time well spent. Time that more Minnesotans should spend.

- Leonard Inskip is a Star Tribune columnist and editorial writer.