

## **Restorative Justice in Prison MCF-Shakopee**

At the only state facility for female felons, restorative justice is more than just a buzz word or a single project; it is the way of doing business. The vision for the Minnesota Correctional Facility-Shakopee is *"to create an atmosphere where individual differences are recognized and respected and each of us is challenged to work toward a commitment to restorative justice."* Employees at the facility developed this vision and identified five restorative justice principles that could be applied in an institution setting. These principles and sample practices are outlined below:

### **Developing offender awareness of injury to victims**

- Inmates receive twenty hours of victim impact programming in their orientation to the facility. The goal is for the inmate to begin to understand the impact of her crime, accept responsibility, learn how to bond with positive people and to give back to her community.
- Chemical dependency and sex offender treatment programs, property offender and behavior management programs have incorporated victim impact into their curriculum.
- Staff use group conferencing techniques to mediate situations ranging from personality conflicts between two inmates, to major violations which threaten prison security and disrupt programming for living units. This process uses role modeling and experiential activities to demonstrate an alternative way to solve problems while increasing empathy for others.

### **Involving the offender in repairing the harm**

- The facility established a partnership with Canine Companions for Independence, a national, non-profit agency that uses volunteers to teach puppies to provide service to people with disabilities other than blindness. Two inmates are currently raising puppies that go to work, school, programs and meals at the prison to develop socialization skills. The first three puppies raised by inmates were placed with new masters/mistresses.
- West Central Academy public grade school in the Minneapolis area was adopted by the facility. Inmates repaired the students' school uniforms and building play equipment; created a school banner; sewed costumes for a school play and winter headbands for the students; and provided minimum-security inmates to clean up the school grounds.
- Inmates in the institution's construction trades classes built storage sheds, chairs, tables and planters for a battered women's shelter, a youth program, flood victims and children's programs in the community.
- During the floods of 1997, inmates sandbagged for the community and cleaned up damage caused by the flood. Inmates raised and donated money through doughnut sales for tornado victims in 1998.
- Inmates have sewn quilts for shelters, knitted mittens for the homeless; sewed clothing and dolls for a children's home; made safety vests for a school; made ribbon pins for breast cancer awareness and comfort caps for cancer victims.

- One inmate became certified as a brailist and has completed many transcriptions for the Society for the Blind.
- Inmates donated non-perishable food items they purchased within the prison to a local food bank. Inmates also organized a telethon fundraiser for the March of Dimes.
- Institution community work crews completed hundreds of projects for state and local government in conjunction with the state's Sentencing to Service program.
- Restitution is paid to victims from the inmates' wages.
- Minimum custody inmates painted houses for elderly homeowners in the community.

#### **Involving the Community in Holding the Offender Accountable**

- Representatives from community agencies provide one-to-one or group contact with inmates and maintain this connection after their release. Examples include: Parenting with Pride; Walks-Tall; La Oportunidad; Amicus Sister-to-Sister; Excel and Project Hope pre-release planning; Alcoholics Anonymous/Narcotics Anonymous; and Transitional Conferencing by the BVM Restorative Justice Ministry.
- Twenty community employers participated in an on-site job fair to provide feedback on their interviewing skills and assistance in answering commonly-asked questions about their crime.

#### **Increasing Offender Competency**

- Twenty hours of cognitive restructuring is part of each inmate's orientation. Inmates identify errors in their thinking, belief systems and attitudes and to be aware of those errors as they occur in daily living situations.
- Critical thinking skills training teaches problem solving, assertiveness, negotiating, handling relationships and managing emotions.
- Inmates have access to classes in adult basic education; vocational training in horticulture, desk top publishing, building trades; parenting; pre-vocational work skill training; anger management; as well as specialty classes in HIV education and prevention; overcoming lifestyles of violence, prostitution and gambling.
- Alternatives to Violence Project has conducted numerous weekend seminars for inmates.
- Training and jobs are available in textiles, market research and rubber corrections industries.

#### **Increasing offender connections to conventional community members**

- Religious volunteers conduct various on-site services and groups for inmates of all faiths. Weekend spiritual retreats for the inmates are regular events.
- Custody trained volunteers take inmates off grounds to speak at schools and churches about their experiences. At-risk youth from the community are also brought to the prison to speak with younger inmates who volunteer for the "Straight Talk" program.
- Inmates in the last months of their incarceration work off grounds at pre-approved job sites.

- City volleyball and softball leagues are invited to compete in games against the inmates at the prison. Staff and inmate recreation competitions also occur.
- Amicus volunteers mentor and establish relationships with inmates.
- Prison Fellowship, Salvation Army and local church volunteers coordinate Christmas gift collections each year for inmates' children. These volunteers purchase gifts, deliver them to the prison, and help the inmates wrap and mail the gifts to their children.

### **Benefits**

Whether or not these restorative justice efforts reduce recidivism is not known at this time.

What is known is that many positive outcomes have been achieved:

- Inmates demonstrate a higher empathy level after participating in victim-impact classes.
- Victim coalition groups report a more positive view toward the correctional facility and its effort to focus on perpetuating positive behavior.
- Inmates report a sense of giving back to the community when participating in projects.
- Though not always successful, staff report that inmates are trying out their newly acquired cognitive skills, and their behavior while in prison is generally improved.
- There is an increased community interest in offenders and their potential for rejoining the community.

For more information about restorative justice practices at the Minnesota Correctional Facility - Shakopee, contact Connie Roehrich, Warden, at 612-496-4440.