

Circles of Support and Accountability

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Circles of Support and Accountability (COSA) are groups of volunteers with professional supervision to support sex offenders as they reintegrate into society after their release from incarceration. Evaluations of COSA indicate that that participation in a COSA can result in statistically significant reductions in repeat sexual offenses in 70% of cases, relative to what would be predicted by risk assessment or matched comparison subjects. COSA projects exist throughout Canada, the United Kingdom, and some regions of the United States.

Description

Circles of Support and Accountability are based on restorative justice principles. Each circle involves 4-6 trained volunteers from the community, forming the circle around an ex-offender (the "core member"). That circle receives support and training from professionals, who form the outer circle. The inner circle meets regularly to facilitate the core member's practical needs (i.e., access to medical services, social assistance, attainment of employment/affordable housing, etc.), to provide emotional support, to develop constructive and pro-social strategies to address everyday problems, and to challenge the behaviours and attitudes of the core member that may be associated with his offending cycle.

History

The COSA model of reintegration began in Canada in 1994. According Susan Love, Ottawa Program Director for Circles of Support and Accountability, COSA was started by Mennonite Pastor Harry Nigh, who befriended a mentally delayed, repeat sex offender--a man who had been in and out of institutions his entire life. Nigh and some of his parishioners formed a support group and obtained funding from the Mennonite Central Committee of Ontario and CSC to keep the group going. It was effective; the man did not re-offend."

Currently, projects are established nationally throughout Canada and the United Kingdom. COSA projects have also begun in several American jurisdictions. Interest continues to grow in other nations, including The Netherlands, New Zealand, Latvia, and France. The COSA model has provided hope that communities can assist in risk management, the end results being greater safety for potential victims and increased accountability for released offenders.

Validation

Two Canadian studies have focused on the relative rates of reoffending between COSA Core Members and matched comparison subjects who were not afforded participation in a Circle. In the first study, a group of 60 high risk sexual offenders involved in COSA (Core Members from the original pilot project in South-Central Ontario) were matched to 60 high risk sexual offenders who

did not become involved in COSA (matched comparison subjects). Offenders were matched on risk, length of time in the community, and prior involvement in sexual offender specific treatment. The average follow-up time was 4.5 years. Results showed that the COSA Core Members had significantly lower rates of any type of reoffending than did the matched comparison subjects. Specifically, the Core Members had a 70% reduction in sexual recidivism in contrast to the matched comparison group, a 57% reduction in all types of violent recidivism (including sexual), and an overall reduction of 35% in all types of recidivism (including violent and sexual).

The second study consisted of a Canadian national replication of the study from the pilot project. The same basic methodology was used -- comparing COSA Core Members to matched comparison subjects. Participants for this study were drawn from COSA projects across Canada, but not including members of the pilot project. In total, the reoffending of 44 Core Members was evaluated against 44 matched comparison subjects, with an average follow-up time of approximately three years. Similar to the first study, dramatic reductions in rates of reoffending were observed in the group of COSA Core Members. Specifically, there was an 83% reduction in sexual recidivism, a 73% reduction in all types of violent recidivism (including sexual), and an overall reduction of 71% in all types of recidivism (including sexual and violent) in comparison to the matched offenders.

Research on the effectiveness of COSA programs is on-going.