



TO: Joint Committee on Corrections Oversight
FROM: Stuart Recicar, Burlington Community Justice Center
Date: July 22, 2014
Re: Re-entry policy- COSA

Thanks for allowing me the opportunity to speak with all of you today. I'm Stuart Recicar from the Burlington Community Justice Center, which is a part of the City of Burlington's Community and Economic Development Office. We are a member of the Community Justice Network of VT and one of the programs we run is working with offenders who are returning to their communities after incarceration.

I am the Offender Reentry Program Specialist at the Burlington Community Justice Center and have held this job since 2011. Our funding for this program comes through the VT Department of Corrections. For the past 10 years, DOC has received a grant, the Second Chance Act, from the federal government.

Vermont's Circles of Support and Accountability (COSA) program is one way in which the VT DOC and local CJC's have developed to work with high risk offenders returning to their communities. The COSA program promotes the principle of no more victims. By establishing and enforcing clear expectations of its participants for positive community behavior, restorative reentry interrupts the cycle of criminal offending.

The COSA program has an amazing, and I'd say the cog that drives the program, group of people in each local community that volunteer their time to accompany a high risk offender as they return to their community. These volunteers go through many hours of training including the VT DOC volunteer training and a state COSA volunteer training before actually joining a circle.

Once a circle is formed the volunteers, a staff member from the Community Justice Center, and the offender(core member) make a commitment to be involved as a group over a period of 1 year. In that year, the volunteers offer support and are available to listen. The core members have many professionals involved with their lives, such as their PO, their therapist, mandatory groups, but feel that the COSA group really listens to them. There is a comfort to be able to talk with folks outside of the professional setting. I can't speak for everyone but I don't speak to my doctor, or even my boss, in the same manner, or even subject matter, that I do with my close friends and families. The COSA volunteers become almost like family for core members.

The volunteers and the entire circle listen, work to support the offender in many ways including rides, talking through tough situations, and even playing pool and fishing. Support is important but has to have a balance of accountability. With a COSA team that accountability is accompanying the offender in their journey to not reoffend, to them accountable to do the things they identified they needed to do in order to not reoffend...such things as employment and working through how to deal with conflict, attending treatment, using the tools and knowledge they gain from treatment in their daily lives, being aware of risk factors, and so much more.

I had the wonderful experience to have a front row seat in watching one core member with no family and few friends in Burlington not only create opportunities for his success but take advantage of those opportunities. He talked with the circle when faced with tough choices and when weighing these opportunities. In one interview his feedback about his COSA team was that “ it was nothing my family wouldn’t do, they just weren’t here”

Vermont’s COSA program is recognized as one of the best in the country. I just attended the UVM Restorative Justice conference and participants came from all over the world. Many of the speakers mentioned the good work that we are doing here in VT.

I would be happy to answer any questions that you might have about our program.