

# CIRCLES OF SUPPORT & ACCOUNTABILITY

Final Report Prepared for the State of Vermont  
Department of Corrections

Kathryn J. Fox, Ph.D.  
University of Vermont  
Department of Sociology  
November 2013



## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The report author would like to thank Derek Miodownik and David Peebles from the Department of Corrections for envisioning the need for this kind of data analysis in a world that tends to undervalue the depth that qualitative analysis can bring. Salli Griggs, from the Department of Sociology at UVM, assisted with many administrative aspects of the project. Two professional transcribers were used for the project, Sandy Grabowski and April Henderson; both performed an essential function with professionalism and grace.

The author would also like to acknowledge the dedication and commitment of the volunteers who sign on for a year-long commitment to help released offenders make their way back into the community. Reentry coordinators played a vital role in facilitating the evaluation. And finally, the core members should be applauded for taking the brave step of trusting and allowing community volunteers to be their circles of support and accountability.

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## INTRODUCTION

In spring 2010, Professor Fox was contracted by the State of Vermont Agency of Human Services, Department of Corrections, to conduct a qualitative evaluation of their Circles of Support & Accountability (CoSA) program, specifically those funded by the federal Second Chance Act. CoSA will be explained in detail, but in short, CoSA is a community-based, non-professional model for assisting high-risk offenders returning to communities. Other jurisdictions that utilize CoSA confine their use to the management of high-risk sex offenders, but Vermont is unique in applying the model to other types of serious offending. The CoSA reentry program in Vermont was funded by the *Second Chance Act of 2007: Community Safety through Recidivism Prevention* (H.R. 1593/S. 1060), which has been funded by the U.S. Congress in increasing amounts over the past several years.<sup>1</sup> The initial funding supported 24 CoSAs in Vermont (described in detail below). Part of the grant narrative and budget allocated funds for an evaluation. Rather than a quantitative study about re-offense rates, which the Department of Corrections (Corrections) can calculate for itself and may not be significant in such a small sample, Corrections requested an in-depth qualitative analysis of *how* CoSA works. In particular, there is a small but solid body of literature out of Canada that measures the impact of CoSA in studies that compare quasi-experimental groups to control groups. These studies have found a significant reduction in recidivism for high-risk sexual offenders—at times as great as a 70% reduction in re-offending among those with a circle of support & accountability compared to those without one (Wilson, Cortoni, & McWhinnie, 2009; Wilson & Prinzo, 2001; Wilson, Picheca, & Prinzo, 2005).

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.bja.gov/ProgramDetails.aspx?Program\\_ID=90](https://www.bja.gov/ProgramDetails.aspx?Program_ID=90)

When the Second Chance Act was re-funded in 2011, Corrections rolled its existing grant into the new funds and committed to funding a total of 48 CoSAs from this funding source, inclusive of both grants. This evaluation project was extended with the intention to include 48 CoSAs; however, as setting up CoSAs takes time, and are implemented incrementally, not all 48 are yet functional, or have not been operational long enough to be evaluated appropriately. The new forthcoming funding stipulations disallow a continuation of the grant in the form of a no-cost extension, thus it was decided by Corrections that the evaluator should complete the report based on the existing CoSAs. All CoSAs that were presently functional or that had been completed were evaluated.<sup>2</sup> The number of CoSAs evaluated was 21, which includes 21 core members (released offenders), 59 volunteers, and 9 reentry coordinators. The evaluation includes a total of 89 participants.

### **Description of CoSAs**

In the 1990s, COSAs emerged out of a Canadian situation in which a high-risk sex offender who had served his maximum sentence was due to be released from prison but communities had concerns and Corrections had no jurisdiction over his whereabouts. A Mennonite pastor named Reverend Nigh agreed to create a circle around him with volunteers from his church, in order to protect and support the core member, and to contribute to community safety (Hannem, 2013; Hannem & Petrunik, 2007; Wilson, McWhinnie, Picheca, & Prinzo, 2007). The program as described advocates the use of non-professional supports to surround the core member, with a circle of professionals augmenting the volunteers on the outside of the circle. The circle of volunteers is distinct from professional agents, such as Corrections or police, but functions with the same community safety concerns in mind. Although

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<sup>2</sup> With the exception of one CoSA; the site coordinator thought I had been contacted and had interviewed participants of a CoSA but I had not, and the core member was returned to jail and was unavailable once we realized the error.

in Canada, Corrections had no jurisdiction over the released core member(s) who had served their maximum sentences, in Vermont, core members are virtually always released on conditional release status (i.e., furlough) which is an incarcerative condition within the community. Thus, the circles must operate in coordination with fairly strict correctional conditions.

Similar to the COSAs operating in Canada, the United Kingdom, and Minnesota, circles in Vermont have certain prescribed components:

- A Corrections-referred core member due for release, who is in need of support and is deemed moderately high risk to the community
- A team of three or four appropriately screened volunteers who commit to weekly, consistent meetings for a period of 12 months
- Corrections training and a signed “contract” of terms and conditions for all parties

### **CoSA Funding**

With the first federal attention to the reentry problem in the US in the form of the SVORI grant (Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative), states received first planning grants, and then larger grants to design better reentry services, which would focus on housing, employment, mental health/substance abuse treatment, and community involvement. Whereas most states used those funds to augment existing in-prison services, Vermont harnessed its already robust community capacity by funding Community Justice Centers (CJCs) to create locally-designed programs within certain parameters. Several models were implemented and tested, one of which was the CoSA program adapted from the model endorsed by the Canadian Correctional Service.

Later federal funding arrived in the form of the Second Chance Act, at which time Vermont Corrections settled on the CoSA model as it was evidence-based and had proven



success (Wilson, Cortoni, & McWhinnie 2009). While CoSA is well-established in Canada, the UK, and is being piloted in various other places, such as New Zealand, the US has been slow to adopt the model. Minnesota has a successful program and a few other states are implementing CoSA (see Duwe, 2013). Vermont is the only state to use the model for non-sex offending crimes in addition to sex offenders, utilizing it for others who may be similarly isolated and in need of community supports for a host of reasons.

### Current Data

Since 2006, the state of Vermont has run close to one hundred CoSAs, funded by a variety of sources; however, this report is based solely on those funded by Second Chance Act monies since 2010. Although the capacity to run more CoSAs is available, setting them up is time and labor intensive and often they are slow to become operational. This report is based upon 21 CoSAs:<sup>3</sup>

Table 1

City/Town	CoSAs	Active	Completed	Evaluated	Revocations	Charges
Barre	5	3	2	5	0	0
Brattleboro	5	3	2	3	1	0
Burlington	4	2	0	1	1	0
Hardwick	3	1	1	1	1	0
Hartford	2	1	1	1	0	0
Montpelier	4	3	1	3	0	0
Newport	2	1	0	0	1	0
Rutland	3	3	1	2	0	0
St. Albans	5	3	2	2	1	0
St. Johnsbury	4	2	2	3	1	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>1</b>

<sup>3</sup> Some CoSAs are not included in this evaluation because they may be too early in the process to evaluate or are funded by sources other than Second Chance Act funds, which this evaluation is confined to reviewing. In addition, for one CoSA I was only able to interview the team because the core member went back to prison. This CoSA is not listed here.

## **Does CoSA Work?**

*Although too small a sample to determine definitively, CoSA is very promising as a recidivism reduction tool.*

Only 1 out of 21 offenders (less than 5%) with a CoSA team received a charge for a new crime during the time period of the study from 2010-2013.<sup>4</sup> Once all 48 CoSAs have convened, the sample will be a bit larger to make a more definitive determination. In addition, overwhelmingly, the reentry coordinators, core members, and volunteers believed in the efficacy of the model. Although 37 cases is too small a sample to determine statistical significance, and many of the CoSAs are in the early stages, only one core member has faced new charges, which represents 2.7% of the total – a notably low rate of re-offense.

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<sup>4</sup> The small sample size, coupled with the fact that there is no control group, makes it difficult to determine definitively if CoSA has an effect. However, the number with a new charge is substantially smaller than would be predicted given the risk categorization of the group under evaluation and the general recidivism rate.

## **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

CoSAs are designed as a reentry support team for high-risk offenders to help released offenders navigate social life outside, learn how to develop mutual relationships, and be held accountable to their team, their victim(s), and the community. The model emanated out of Canada and is part of the Canadian Correctional Service. It has been implemented and evaluated in the United Kingdom (Nellis, 2009), and has been operational in a very few states in the US, namely Minnesota and Vermont (Duwe, 2013).

Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA) were introduced in Vermont in 2006. A few Community Justice Center (CJC) directors had learned of the program in Canada and began operating them after receiving training, when the first federal reentry funds came to Vermont through the Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative (SVORI). CJs received planning grants to develop locally appropriate reentry programs, and several developed CoSA. Because CoSA is an evidence-based practice (EBP) with documented success in Canada (Wilson & Prinzo, 2001; Wilson, Picheca, & Prinzo, 2007), and the fact that CoSA's restorative justice framework fit well with the mission of Vermont's Community Justice Network and Vermont Corrections' endorsement of restorative justice initiatives, CoSA was adopted as the sole model for CJC reentry programs for high-risk offenders with the Second Chance Act funding that arrived in 2009. Several other options are in place for improving reentry services, through other agencies in government, such as the Department of Labor, and the non-profit sector as well as Corrections' funding for better release planning in facilities.

With the Second Chance Act grant that Vermont Corrections received in 2009, money was allocated to conduct an external evaluation of the programs. Corrections commissioned a qualitative, descriptive study based on semi-structured, open-ended interviews with core

members (i.e., released offenders who are beneficiaries of Circles support) and their team members (i.e., community volunteers who provide support) and reentry coordinators that are employed through CJs. Vermont Corrections commissioned an evaluation that would analyze the nature of CoSA relationships and how the program works (rather than whether or not it works). Since Corrections can calculate recidivism rates, and research demonstrates that the programs are effective, the potential value of a qualitative study is to answer these questions:

- How do CoSAs work?
- What is the nature of the relationships formed within Circles?
- How do the relationships support desistance from crime? In other words, why do CoSAs work?

Although eventually, the Second Chance Act will support 48 CoSAs, by the time this contract period ended, 21 were underway or completed. This analysis is based upon interviews with 21 core members, and their teams of volunteers (59 in total), and 9 reentry coordinators, for a total of 89 interviewees.

### **Key Findings**

The CoSA program is having a profound impact on core members and volunteers. Overwhelmingly, the volunteers were positive about the effect and value of the CoSA program. Many had served on multiple teams because they were enthusiastic about the benefit for core members, the community and themselves. Core members were grateful for the support and enthusiastic about the program, saying they would recommend it to others. All but one core member was fully positive about the program; this particular member appreciated some aspects of the program but was largely motivated by housing assistance. In addition, and more significantly, core members expressed more positive senses of self as contributing members to

society, a commitment to pro-social relationships, a sense of mutual obligation toward and trust of circle members, and somewhat greater optimism for the future. The interesting information to emerge from the qualitative interviews is the explanation of the nature of the relationships and what CoSAs actually do to assist core members in the community. Knowing that CoSAs “work” does not articulate how the CoSAs create a mechanism for desistance from crime. This evaluation found that CoSAs fill the gap that exists between programming inside prison and compliance and supervision in the community by probation and parole. The gap for high-risk offenders exists because of one or more of these factors:

- lack of support from family or friends;
- institutionalized sense of self because of a long term of confinement;
- relationship and life skill deficits.

CoSA clearly provides a bridge over these gaps. Most core members offered that they would have been returned to jail without the help of the CoSA. Interestingly, many did not imagine they would commit a new crime, but rather would be returned for violating conditions, or just “giving up.” Thus, one key finding is that CoSAs help core members abide within their stringent release conditions—something that is particularly difficult for sex offenders who face more barriers to their freedom.

Although not specifically asked to answer the question of whether or not Vermont CoSAs “work” in reducing risk and recidivism, the data are striking.

### **How CoSA Works**

*The reentry coordinators serve a vital function as ad hoc trainers/supporters of CoSA teams, and quasi case workers for the core member.*

Reentry coordinators not only recruit and screen appropriate volunteers, and schedule and coordinate CoSA meetings, they also help to monitor the group, model an appropriate balance between emotional and practical support and accountability. In addition, the coordinator serves as a quasi-case worker, helping the core member to navigate various services and agencies within the community. Finally, the reentry coordinator provides ongoing advice and problem solving for the teams, and in a sense, offers ongoing ad hoc training and support for volunteers. Thus, the CJC infrastructure provides benefits. If CoSA were run by Corrections, the dynamics would be different and would likely be less effective. Essentially, the CJC structure allows the reentry coordinator to serve in a more service-oriented role, whereas a Corrections run program would likely default to a compliance function.

***Motivation matters, but only to an extent.***

A few core members were motivated by reasons that might be considered less than ideal; for example, the need for housing and the prospect of gaining assistance with housing were motivating factors for some. Those few whose primary motivation was housing, or who were deemed too risky to release without a CoSA in place, tended to engage less readily and earnestly than others who openly embraced the support offered. However, in some cases, over time, core members grew to see the other benefits that CoSA involvement could offer, and to appreciate the volunteers' help and generosity. In addition, most of those who were dubious about the value of CoSA initially came to view it as extremely beneficial. For most, having strangers in the community care enough to help them on a volunteer basis was sufficiently unusual to elicit some initial skepticism.

***CoSAs can be crucial in de-institutionalizing core members who have served long sentences.***

A few of the core members mentioned that they were “institutionalized,” a process which can occur as a result of a long sentence during which time prison life becomes normalized, and connections to the outside world become weaker. This was an unexpected finding: team members helped overwhelmed core members transition to life outside, including adjusting to mundane aspects of civilian life. Many long-servers expressed a sense that they would have been returned to prison without the CoSA. Not only does the deinstitutionalization help create cost savings for the state, it also leads to a higher quality of life and more productive life for released offenders.

***CoSAs help core members operate within their conditions of release.***

Because of Vermont’s strict rules for those released on furlough, such as restrictions on driving, CoSA team members make it more feasible for core members to stay within their conditions of release by providing rides to places, and accompanying them to places such as church or restaurants, where they may only be allowed if an approved person is along. By enabling core members to engage in activities they want, while remaining within their restrictions, CoSA teams demonstrate the value they add, while holding core members accountable to their conditions.

***Vermont CoSAs function as intended based on the descriptions of CoSAs from successful programs in Canada and the United Kingdom.***

The CoSA motto is: “*No one is disposable*” and “*No more victims*” (Hannem & Petrunik, 2007), which highlights the importance of both *support* in the former statement and *accountability* in the latter. Vermont CoSA teams understood the essentiality of both conditions and engaged in behaviors that simultaneously promoted both aspects of the model.

## **Why CoSA Works**

***CoSA works because of the role of unpaid, nonprofessional volunteers.***

Several core members mentioned in interviews that it mattered substantially that the people spending their time devoted to supporting them and holding them accountable were volunteers. It created a sense of mutual respect and obligation that could not be easily forged with professional staff. Paid staff might be appreciated, and they were, but might not elicit the same sense of obligation that the generosity of volunteers did.

***CoSA fills a gap between programming (rehabilitation) and community-based supervision.***

Within the correctional system's design, there is an unintentional space between the programming that a core member receives while incarcerated, and the supervision s/he can expect upon released. Specifically addressing certain reintegration, such as the intense need for support and companionship, cannot be met with control agents such as probation/parole staff or treatment providers. In addition, CoSA team members can monitor for subtle signs of movement toward risky behavior and discover them earlier than a probation officer might.

***CoSAs are generally more successful the deeper and more socially the team members engage with the offender.***

If the team members retain a significant social distance from the core member, the relationship may not become as strong or be as productive in creating the mutual obligations and other positive effects that emanate from a CoSA. The positive effects of deep involvement arise from the team's willingness to devote time to the core member, but it could also be because of the impact of pro-social role modeling, and the team's tacit communication to the core member that s/he is a person worth spending time with. The CoSAs that had the strongest relationships, and the greatest investment by the core member, were characterized by deep involvement on the



part of the volunteers. Although this is a problem in its labor intensity, the less successful CoSAs were characterized by a more shallow involvement, which often appeared heavier on accountability than support, thus the value of the team was less obvious to core members. Very few CoSAs fit into this latter category—most were successful in realizing the full potential of the model.

***The training that Corrections and the CJs provide was considered excellent preparation for the tasks of volunteers.***

Overwhelmingly volunteers and coordinators felt that the recently revised CoSA training was useful and effective. When asked if there were situations for which they felt unprepared, volunteers did not believe so. In addition, as situations arose, the reentry coordinators served as ad hoc trainers. However, volunteers wanted more information from probation officers about the reasons for certain conditions and for insight into particular risk factors for their core members.

***The team approach is beneficial in many ways.***

The team approach spreads the burden of time devoted to the core member among all members. In addition, more eyes on the core member lead to greater accountability and better risk management. Finally, the team approach reduces the risk of collusion with the core member, and allows all members to keep one another accountable regarding appropriate roles, obligations, and boundaries.

***CoSAs work because of the power of normative and normal relationships in facilitating desistance from crime.***

Triangulating data through the core members' perspectives, volunteers' perspectives, and reentry coordinators' perspectives, a central theme emerged suggesting that the reason CoSA works is because the normative expectations of the core member are communicated through a

trusting and honest relationship. The genuineness of the relationships both models positive relationships for the core member and legitimizes the intrusion of the volunteers in core members' lives. In other words, the team only has moral authority because of the caring and respectful relationships formed.

## METHODOLOGY

Some research exists which documents the effectiveness of CoSAs from Canadian projects (Wilson et al., 2005) and from programs in the United Kingdom (Nellis, 2009) and Minnesota (Duwe, 2013). The Vermont Department of Corrections was interested in *how* and *why* the CoSAs work, what makes good CoSA teams, how they are implemented, what impact they have, what the nature of the relationships are, etc. A CoSA is made up of a “core member” (the released offender subject to the support and accountability), and between three or four community volunteers (referred to as “team members”).<sup>5</sup>

Because the evaluation was intended to understand *how* CoSAs work, the best methodology for exploring this question was qualitative interviews. The design was open-ended, semi-structured interviews with core members individually, the CoSA team as a group, and individual interviews with reentry coordinators. The nature of the questions varied, for example, coordinators were asked about their roles, the challenges of arranging and running CoSAs, etc., whereas core members were asked about their reentry challenges, how they viewed the CoSA, what needs the CoSA helped with, etc. Volunteers were asked those questions about the core member but also asked about their own motivations for volunteering, the nature of team relationships and dynamics, and relationship to the core member’s probation officer, etc.

The project’s methods changed somewhat partway through the data collection process. These will be described as “original protocol” and “revised protocol.”

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<sup>5</sup> Often the CJC’s reentry coordinator served a dual function as the CoSA manager and as a team member. In these cases, they participated in the group interviews as a volunteer.

## **Original Protocol**

In conjunction with Derek Miodownik (Corrections grants manager), a list of questions emerged that were asked in interviews at two stages: in the early weeks of a CoSA team's meetings and after four to six months or so to determine how the CoSA was evolving, what had changed, what was working or not, etc. The sample questions are attached in Appendix A.

In the original protocol, the idea was to interview in person the CoSA in the early stages about reentry needs and about their expectations of and hopes for the CoSA experience. The phase 2 interviews were conducted by telephone in order to assess the development of the CoSA over time. However, the protocol changed midway through, upon mutual agreement by Corrections and myself, for two reasons: 1) it proved difficult to reach people by telephone for the follow-up interview; 2) we realized if there was going to be a single face-to-face interview, it would yield more informed, fruitful responses after the CoSA had been operational for some months, had perhaps changed or grown, and the team had more experience(s) with one another. Under the original protocol, I interviewed 8 core members, and 24 volunteers, as well as 3 of the reentry coordinators.

## **Revised Protocol**

With permission from Corrections, the protocol was revised in fall 2012 for new CoSAs being formed. The new protocol utilized reentry coordinators to administer a questionnaire to core members and volunteers at an early stage to assess pre-CoSA status in terms of core members' identity, relationship to CoSA, support systems, optimism, etc. (see Appendix B). After the CoSA had been meeting for approximately six to eight months, interviews were conducted in person and a post-questionnaire administered, which was identical to the first questionnaire, to measure change over time. The new protocol proved to be a more fruitful

design for a few reasons. 1) We began to collect data on relationship and identity change over the course of the CoSA. Although we cannot determine if the change is due to the CoSA, as we cannot control for other influences, we can measure progress within a CoSA. 2) Conducting interviews at a later point in person allows for a better interview experience because a) face-to-face interviews are more comfortable and engaging; b) the later point in time allows for some retrospective reflection on the evolution of the CoSA. Thirteen core members and their teams (approximately 39 volunteers) were included in the revised protocol, and five reentry coordinators.

This report analyzes the data from both the original and the revised protocol and includes only the interviews. The data collection using the questionnaires is ongoing, and will continue to be collected for future CoSAs. Because of the protocol change, there are too few completed questionnaires at this point to yield meaningful results. At the present time, only 10 CoSAs have completed both phases of questionnaires, and a larger sample size is needed to find statistical significance. A later report in the form of an addendum will be submitted after at least 30 CoSAs have completed both parts of the questionnaire.

Interviews were conducted in private with core members in order to allow them space and freedom to speak freely without fear of offending their CoSA teams. I determined this would yield more honest results. Where possible, which was most of the time, interviews with CoSA teams were conducted in groups (e.g., the whole team of three or four in a CoSA interviewed together) in order to facilitate a conversation among the team members about the roles they play and how they see the CoSA functioning. Many times teams expressed that the interview was a positive experience, as it was an opportunity for them to chat about important issues. Reentry coordinators were interviewed individually about the factors they consider in setting up teams,

how they select and screen for appropriate volunteers and core members, the challenges in setting up and running CoSAs, and so forth.

Interviews were professionally transcribed after being delivered electronically via a secure link. Transcripts were coded for conceptual themes and “saturation,” a condition in which key concepts emerge repeatedly and new information ceases to emerge. The subheadings here represent the themes that emerged repeatedly from interviews. Thus, the ideas presented reflect participants’ genuine sense of CoSAs and were not dictated from a pre-conceived set of evaluator-generated ideas. Interviews were conducted using a guide, which covered the basic questions, but ideas sometimes emerged through the course of an interview that would involve a probing, follow-up question or went in a distinct direction based on the experiences reported. Thus the guide was not used as a strict questionnaire.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

There are a small number of active debates about CoSAs and where they might fit on a “retributive justice-restorative justice continuum” (Hanvey, Philpot, & Wilson, 2011, p. 151). Hannem (2013) and McAlinden (2008, 2011) argue that CoSAs fit well within the risk management paradigm that Corrections departments embrace and operate within. Yet Hanvey et al. (2011) argue that the multiple benefits that CoSAs provide, beyond risk reduction, as demonstrated by Wilson, McWhinnie, Picheca, Prinzo & Cortoni (2007), fit into the Good Lives Model’s description of human needs and primary goods (see Ward & Brown, 2004).

The beauty and promise of CoSA is that the model can serve multiple agendas and satisfy different priorities. The weekly meetings and relationship building that occurs between the core member and the team allows for close monitoring of risky behaviors and intervention at an earlier stage than a probation officer would be likely to see. At the same time, by adding value in terms of rewards and positive reinforcement, the core member loses the incentive to recidivate and becomes committed to the team’s faith in him or her. Thus, the model serves both purposes. That said, volunteers with a solely retributive agenda would be unlikely to provide the necessary support required.

### **CoSAs**

The research on CoSAs is not vast yet. Some researchers out of Canada have studied the program in various ways. Robin Wilson is most famous among the researchers, as he first demonstrated the efficacy of the model by creating a comparison group of similar offenders without a CoSA as a control group and finding that re-offenses went down as much as 70% among those with a CoSA (Wilson et al., 2009; Wilson & Prinzo, 2001; Wilson et al., 2005). In addition, Wilson et al. (2007) have described the model as a series of concentric circles with the

core member at the center, a ring of nonprofessional volunteers around the core member, and a number of professional supports surrounding the team members. Hannem (2013) has argued that CoSA fits consistently within a risk management paradigm, as the focus is on devoting resources to higher risk offenders and monitoring them closely for compliance. Petrunik (2007) argue that the US has been slower to adopt CoSA than Canada because of our more punitive orientation; in addition, risk management has typically adopted an “exclusionary” orientation toward sex offenders in particular. According to Hannem:

Conversely, CoSA can be understood as a community risk-management strategy that prioritizes *inclusion* and that, while protecting the public from victimization, also works to reintegrate and “restore” the former sex offender to the community. (p. 274)

In fact, Hannem describes CoSA as “radically inclusive” (p. 279). Wilson et al. (2005) explain the many benefits that accrue from a CoSA among volunteers, and core members, about their own and others’ capacities among other things. Such benefits derive from the inclusivity of the model.

CoSAs have been evaluated in Minnesota; Duwe (2013) found that for every dollar spent on CoSA, a benefit of \$1.82 was achieved. In the UK, CoSAs have been operational for more than ten years. In the Ten Year Report of CoSA UK, the authors of Circles South East assert that, “Offenders who desist are more likely to maintain an offence-free life if communities acknowledge and reward the change through inclusion” (p. 43). The authors also assert that CoSAs are effective because they embody the principles of the Good Lives Model advanced by Ward and Stewart (2003), and desistance theories established by Laws and Ward (2011) and McNeill and Weaver (2010). The Good Lives Model asserts that true desistance is accomplished by an acknowledgement that offenders are more than the sum of their criminogenic needs; they



have ordinary human needs and goals for self-determination, which must be met. In these theories, desistance is possible with the convergence of three components:

- Willingness to change on the part of the core member
- Individualized treatment based on offender needs/risks
- Community support of rehabilitation/reintegration

Braithwaite (1989) distinguishes between reintegrative and stigmatizing shaming, advocating the former. In reintegrative shaming, the offender is held accountable for the wrong committed, but should not feel devalued as a human being. He refers to this as a “family model” which is similar to CoSA. In a family model, parents love their children even when they are angry about the offenses committed. CoSA embodies the family model, in its twin objectives of holding offenders accountable, while supporting their pathways to change. McNeill argues that CoSA as a model epitomizes what the research on desistance demonstrates, insofar as it is strengths-based and provides a map for moving forward in positive, desisting directions (Nellis, 2009).

## **Desistance**

Consistent with the literature on “desistance” (Bottoms, Shapland, Costello, Homes, & Muir, 2004; Maruna, 2001; Ward & Maruna, 2007), the findings will be divided up similar to the theory proposed by Bottoms et al., which declares that desistance is achieved through an interaction between:

- Programmed Potential (i.e., targeted risk factors)<sup>6</sup>
- Social Context
- Agency

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<sup>6</sup> Programmed potential refers to the extent to which risk factors are properly assessed and targeted for treatment, which is outside the scope of this report.

However, Bottoms et al. (2004) refer to social context and agency as interacting with programmed potential, and for this analysis, social context and agency are analyzed as post-prison factors that influence desistance.

### **Programmed Potential**

McNeill and Weaver (2010) argue that correctional practice tends to employ a paradigm that suggests correctional intervention (i.e., treatment) is what leads to desistance. The newly emergent desistance literature critiques the limitations of the risk-needs-responsivity view of treatment, not for being incorrect but for being incomplete (Maruna & Ward, 2007; Ward, Yates, & Willis, 2012). Desistance authors generally suggest that desistance from crime is a function of an interaction of processes and factors, and that stabilizing effects such as employment and family alone may not ensure desistance (Bottoms et al., 2004). Maruna (2001) suggests there is a difference between “primary” and “secondary” desistance. Primary refers to the more tentative desistance that occurs with structural stabilization from housing and employment and other concrete needs. But beyond “risk needs,” according to McNeill, Farrall, Lightowler, and Maruna (forthcoming), offenders have “desistance-related needs” which are more about *relationships*, *social supports*, and *social capital needs*. “Secondary” desistance is the more abiding desistance that flows from a changed sense of self, a subjective state as a non-offender. CoSAs help with both kinds of desistance, but the substantial value they add to offenders’ lives is in their contribution to a changed sense of self, enabling secondary desistance.

### **Social Context**

Bottoms et al. (2004) refer to social context as comprised of “structures” (meaning things like employment that engender or hinder desistance), “culture/habitus” (meaning the sorts of subcultural assumptions and ways of life that offenders may bring to bear), and “situational

context” (meaning other conditions that arise which enhance or inhibit likelihood of offending).

CoSAs contribute meaningfully to all aspects of social context:

- team members provide concrete supports around stabilizing effects such as housing and employment;
- they enable the habits and culture that support desistance through the development of and modeling of normal and normative relationships;
- they create a context which inhibits offending because of mutual obligations, monitoring risk in daily life, accountability to the community and reducing the incentive for crime because of creating a stake in conventional life.

## FINDINGS

This report is based upon interviews with core members, volunteers, and reentry coordinators. Although questions varied by group, and did not follow a strict script, all interviews centered on these key topics:

- The appeal of CoSA
- Nature of relationships between volunteers, between volunteers and core member, between CoSA team and probation officer
- Ways the group held the core member accountable
- Ways the group supported the core member
- The impact of CoSA on all participants
- Reentry needs initially and currently
- Other issues that arise in conversation

In a more general sense, the questions centered on these two questions:

- *How CoSA works*
- *Why CoSA works*

Key findings will be located within these two broad constructs.

### **How CoSA Works**

***KEY FINDING: Vermont CoSAs function as intended based on the descriptions of CoSA from successful programs in Canada and the United Kingdom.***

Out of the 21 CoSAs considered for this report, most stayed successfully out of prison. Only one committed a new crime; all the other returns to prison were for violations of release conditions. Furlough conditions in Vermont are stringent and difficult to maintain, according to

core members, and echoed by volunteers. The CoSAs began at different times, and by the end of data collection, most had passed or were near the one-year mark. Although three years is the typical benchmark for recidivism studies, one-year is significant. This report is not a recidivism study per se, but it is important to note the success of the CoSAs under study.

In trying to address why CoSAs work as well as they do, the first task is to describe the way that they function. Although CoSA was a model that was designed for a unique situation—high-risk sex offenders who had served their maximum sentence—Vermont has applied the model to other types of offenders as well. In fact, Vermont is the only place that has done so. When developed for high-risk sex offenders, the risk assessed was due, in part, to the fact that those offenders were isolated and lacking social supports (see also Willis & Grace, 2009). Willis and Grace found that the most significant risk factor for most sex offenders was a lack of a supportive network, and they advocate that non-professional supports would reduce risk among this population.

The Vermont findings demonstrate that the CoSA model can be applied successfully to any released prisoner who needs social support. A core member could self-identify as someone in need of support, or could be deemed higher risk based on an assessment tool that indicates the lack of support as a dynamic risk factor for re-offending.

***Reentry needs.*** In interviews, a question was asked about initial reentry needs (and remaining challenges) from the perspective of the core members and their volunteers. Most core members identified **social support** as their greatest need. They knew they were isolated, or had inappropriate support people, or needed help with basic transition skills. Many, especially sex offenders, needed housing assistance as well. One key discovery was that those who identified social support as their primary reentry need were most grateful for the CoSA. Although the

majority of core members expressed gratitude for the assistance provided by their CoSA team, those who indicated housing as their primary motivation for accessing CoSA were less enthusiastic and more ambivalent. It is important to note that this was a small number of core members. However, this finding is notable because it may be useful information in screening for the potential core members for whom a CoSA would be most beneficial.

In addition, in several cases, the core member expressed initial reservations about the level of involvement required to be part of a CoSA, and those who saw housing as their primary reentry need (rather than support), were more ambivalent. However, several core members in these situations came to see the value of CoSA over time, after a period of trust-building. Trust comes slowly for many core members, as they listed trusting others as one of their social deficits.

***KEY FINDING: Motivation matters, but only to an extent.***

***Deinstitutionalization help.*** One key function that CoSA teams serve that was unanticipated but emerged as an important theme is their assistance in de-institutionalizing long-serving prisoners. In addition to practical supports, such as assistance getting suitable housing and employment, the CoSA team served an important function which was a combination of practical and emotional support in reorienting core members to the “real world.” Prison itself can have unintended criminogenic effects because of the dis-acclimation process of being isolated from real-world experience, situations, and autonomy. To have the prison gate opened, as it were, suddenly, and even with some steps taken to ease the transition, the life outside is quite distinct from the life inside. Although freedom is welcome at some level, it is also disconcerting. As one core member said of the CoSA benefit:

*Because I was institutionalized and I didn't want to get out. Yeah, because I could have gotten out in 5 years but I prolonged it for another year, almost 2 to stay in because I didn't want to get out. So I would get into a fight or something to keep in.*

His caseworker had a sense that he would not succeed without some additional support. He went on to say that he was afraid to get out because “*the world changes*” and that his crime was high profile and he feared rejection in the community. According to this core member, the CoSA team “*worked very hard*” with him, to get him to open up about his feelings, and to give “*encouragement or they will also let you know, ‘no, you should be doing that,’ but they will tell you a way you should be going about it.*”

Several core members felt uncomfortable being back in society, and some felt that ordinary citizens would be looking at them, and judging them, based on their offenses. It was a frightening prospect without a team to offer encouragement and to help break down tasks into smaller steps. For example, core members sometimes expressed being overwhelmed in the grocery store, by the array of choices, and having someone to shop with them helped. Others felt that they had to be constantly looking over their shoulders—a habit hard to break from prison—and being with another person distracted and relaxed them. Although these may seem like trivial issues, or unnecessary supports, some core members asserted that these kinds of supports were instrumental to their reintegration, and, ultimately, to their success. As a core member described his experience upon release:

*Just shell shock. Three years isn't all that long for a lot of guys doing prison, but it was a way of life. You had adapted to that, so when you come out, just walking down Main Street with all the cars, it's just almost overwhelming. There's people everywhere....Just that shock of transition.*

Another core member mentioned “*sensory overload*” upon his release after a long sentence. He did not know how to use a cellphone, found the array of choices daunting in supermarkets, and was overwhelmed by the bright colors in places like grocery stores, after many years facing dull yellowish walls in prison. Having a team to talk and walk him through how life on the outside works, and to give encouragement about taking “baby steps” was important to feeling life would be manageable.

As a coordinator described:

*They have no family, no friends. Still, it's important for them to be able to connect with people that are outside of – whether it be a sex offender group, therapist or probation. So they've been able to connect with people that are not in the system, I think, that can show them what a normal life can look like without having to revert back to what they once did, whether it be sex offense, drugs or domestic violence.*

***KEY FINDING: CoSAs can be crucial in de-institutionalizing core members who have served long sentences.***

***Practical supports and assistance.*** In addition to aiding the deinstitutionalization process, core members benefit from a huge variety of practical supports that teams provide. The particular assistance depends upon the needs of the individual core member, but can range from help with creating and following a budget, assistance navigating social service agencies, such as signing up for food stamps, or accessing health care, to practicing interviewing skills, and making small talk. In several instances, team members were able to provide a mechanism by which the core member could get a fundamental human need met, while staying within their rigid conditions of release. For example, one core member wanted to visit an ailing relative that lived far away. He was only able to do so because a CoSA volunteer negotiated a safety plan and vouched to



supervise and drive the core member to the visit. In other cases, core members could attend church services, where children might be present, because a team member accompanied them. Beyond the assistance with practical needs, for clothing and housewares, and with social needs like basketball, fishing or hiking for recreation, the teams enabled the satisfaction of human needs within the confines of correctional restrictions.

***KEY FINDING: CoSAs help core members operate within their conditions of release.***

In addition, since many had not experienced “normal” relationships with women, or friends, they appreciated the ability to practice those skills in a controlled and safe manner. In addition CoSA teams would offer employment ideas, rides to interviews, encouragement, mock interviews, and vouching for core members as worthy of taking a chance on. As one core member explained:

*...it's hard to even get a job. Because the moment you tell them you have a sex offense, that pretty much gets filed. So that's a big thing. COSA – I mean they work really hard. I mean, [reentry coordinator], my caseworker and my COSA members worked very hard. Very hard. I mean [reentry coordinator] was on it consistently. So I have to give her thumbs up.*

***KEY FINDING: The reentry coordinators serve a vital function as ad hoc trainers/supporters of CoSA teams, and quasi case workers for the core member.***

***Identity change.*** One of the key functions that volunteers mentioned was the importance of assisting core members in constructing a “good life” (see also Ward & Brown, 2004). One way to do that is to demonstrate that the team sees the core member as more than the crime he or she committed. Volunteers mentioned this repeatedly in one form or another. As a volunteer explained:

*...[core members] get to see how other people – I mean none of us approve of what he did. But we can sit here and say, ‘okay, you did this. Now let’s work on who you really are...’*

As another cautioned, we should not judge people based on the worst thing they ever did.

In another example, a team member said:

*There are people who are going to not see him as who he was, but who are willing to help him manifest his best self, and are going to be dedicated to it and who are not going to abandon him.*

These examples are consistent with Maruna’s (2001) notion of *re-biographing* as a mechanism for aiding desistance. Although Maruna referred to the neutralizing process that offenders engage in to maintain a sense of themselves as essentially other than a criminal, in this case, CoSA promotes desistance by holding up a non-criminal mirror to the core member and showing the way to a good life. According to one core member:

*Yeah, I’m changed and I feel better about myself. I feel more confident that I can do what I need to do and achieve...It’s a lot because of the CoSA because before, I was like ‘I’m just a nobody, nobody really cares about me.’ You know, ‘forget it.’ ...but now I actually can truly see there’s people out there that do care for me and they care for me for who I am.*

As one coordinator described how core members respond to the care and concern of the CoSA team:

*They all were just like, ‘wow, I can’t believe you guys care.’ I mean that’s – I mean I’ve had two of them actually cry because why – they say to me, ‘why do you and these volunteers want to help me after what I have done?’ And the volunteers would come back*

*with 'yes, you may have done that but we see potential, that you can have a successful life without reoffending'.*

This example demonstrates that the deep casework assistance that the reentry coordinator provides, combined with the volunteers' efforts, validates to the core members their essential worth as fellow human beings, which in turn, motivates and inspires the identity change (Maruna, 2001).

### ***Community Service***

There was some variation in the way that different CJs approached community service for core members. At least one program provided some financial assistance toward housing, but required that the core member engage in a specified amount of approved community service. Other programs required community service, and sometimes the team participated in the community service project with the core member. Still other programs did not require community service, as the requirements under their conditions of release were sufficiently time-consuming and onerous. Bazemore and Boba (2007) suggest that community service can provide an opportunity for core members (in this case) to demonstrate new selves to the community, making their positive attributes more apparent. Through this process, released offenders may come to see themselves as contributing members to the community. In at least one case, a core member was resistant to engaging in community service, and perceived it to be a punishment. Over time, as various community members expressed appreciation for the work he was doing, he began to express pride in his work and ownership over the fate of the community property he was charged with keeping clean. CoSA activities, such as in this example, often serve a few functions at once, thereby solidifying the impact on community and core members.

### *Ideal Volunteer Qualities*

Interviewees felt strongly that although there were particular qualities that would be undesirable in volunteers, no particular qualifications were necessary, except training. However the qualities necessary mentioned most as important were:

- Nonjudgmental attitude
- Belief that people can change
- Good listener
- No agenda/expectations
- Good boundaries

Both core members and volunteers felt that being able to understand that people make mistakes and a belief that people can and do change were important. The groups of volunteers seemed to be self-selecting in this respect; anyone who was judgmental and did not believe that core members could change would be unlikely to sign on to be part of a CoSA team. However, the volunteer coordinator in the CJsCs screened for qualities that would be unhelpful in a CoSA, and the training instilled the attitude that volunteers needed to bring. As a volunteer explained:

*...[the training] was good to serve as a reminder that everybody makes mistakes, some bigger than others, and everyone has a story as to what happens in their lives. So that served as a reminder, just knowing that this guy committed a crime and it was pretty serious, but he had a story behind it, too. So that just—for me it was a reminder not to—it helped you not be judgmental.*

Volunteers were careful to point out that being nonjudgmental referred to being nonjudgmental about the *person* not the *acts* committed. Volunteers shared a strong sense that the criminal acts committed were not to be condoned or minimized, but that they should also not have a totalizing influence on how core members are perceived or treated. As one volunteer explained about fundamental attributes for an effective volunteer:

*A belief – and I would reiterate that – belief that supporting someone who has offended, who has done something wrong, is still worthy of human support.*

In addition, because much of the CoSA groups function as a “sounding board” for the core member, good listening skills are key. In addition, good listening was mentioned as important for ensuring accountability, to listen skillfully for subtle signs of risk in the form of rationalizing problematic behaviors. In other words, in all the attributes that make up an ideal volunteer, using the skills toward both support and accountability was deemed important. Volunteers understood the balancing act required.

### ***Ideal Volunteer Behaviors***

When asked about their attraction to being a CoSA volunteer, all the volunteers stated a variation on this theme:

*...ultimately they're going to be coming out; they're going to become members of our community. And do we want to have that 58% or so that keep cycling through the system year after year after year after year at \$55,000 a year, or do we want to try and break that cycle someplace and turn them into constructive, tax-paying members of society and people that we'd be proud to have for neighbors?*

Reentry coordinators were sensitive to the fact that volunteers would have different comfort levels in terms of the level of involvement they would have with core members. Beyond

the year-long commitment to the CoSA, which involved weekly meetings, some team members spent time with core members outside of the meetings, socially or in a helping capacity. One volunteer described the CoSA activities this way:

*I mean it could be something as simple as get together for a cup of coffee and a donut. It could be go for a walk in the park. Could be go fishing. Could be splitting wood. It's any number of things. It depends on what they like...It's a question of – there's other things in life besides just hanging around the house waiting for something to go wrong...We've gotten together and we've done community service projects.*

The level of personal investment on the part of the CoSA volunteers matters—time invested communicates to the core member that he or she is worthwhile and worthy of investment. It also communicates a sense of shared norms. In addition, the activities model “normal” relationships and activities that ordinary citizens engage in.

***KEY FINDING: CoSAs work better when volunteers invest energy in the core member.***

Hannem (2013) refers to the CoSA model as “radically inclusive” (p. 279), and to the extent that it works best, this is the principle by which team members operate. Thus, the more CoSA resembles a “board” that the core member meets with to check in, the less it is likely to be effective in making the core member feel some accountability to the group.

*It's a chance for them to build relationships with others that they wouldn't normally have. Again, that's that isolation thing. And to begin trusting, because they've been incarcerated for a long time and they know they can't really trust. They can't tell exactly how they're feeling. So it's building trust back and forth and I think it's also good because there's an emotional investment that they begin to have in this relationship they build with us.*

There were strictures in place to maintain personal boundaries, such as a restriction on loaning money to core members. But the fact that CoSAs function in a space between professional roles and social roles made the roles somewhat more flexible than purely professional roles would. However, there were operational mechanisms, beyond the rules-based restrictions, that helped maintain appropriate boundaries. These included the edict of “no secrets,” and the team approach, both of which were stressed in the highly regarded training.

***KEY FINDING: The training that Corrections and the CJs provide was considered excellent preparation for the tasks of volunteers.***

***No secrets & the team approach.*** A theme that emerged repeatedly was that the teams have no secrets from one another or from the core member’s probation officer—something that was emphasized in the Corrections’ CoSA training and the signed covenant among participants. In fact, it is a theme that is reinforced by the reentry coordinators. Out of 20 core members, only one expressed some resentment about the level of intrusion into and communication about his behavior. Also the teams reinforce regularly the “no secrets” policy, which mitigates any attempts to negate the accountability function of the group. For example, a core member understands that anything told to one team member would be shared with the others. And because efforts are made among the team to ensure they are “on the same page,” individual advocacy is unlikely. As a core member described:

*I think with that increased comfort [with CoSA team] comes the increased disclosures. If I had maxed out and did not need to come out on probation and have all these supports, I just went on my own, I really believe it would be just a matter of time...[before he would be reincarcerated].*

And this core member also said:

*...we have it set up with very open communication. The idea is, people in my family, friends—if my [relative] starts to see signs in me that something's going on, the whole concept with me now is that he can call [the probation officer] and say, 'I'm thinking this. Have you got any vibes on this?' She might call [the reentry coordinator]. There's this cross-communication, and it happens rightfully, more so than I thought it would.*

In addition, the core member and other core members expressed clear understanding that the communication would be free-flowing between all the peripheral professionals and also within the CoSA team. According to one volunteer:

*And I think that's something that we're all careful about is the sharing piece. All the core members know that there's no secrets and that we will share. And that includes, when necessary, with their probation officer...*

One important function of the “team” approach is that boundary issues do not tend to surface. Boundary issues can work in two ways:

- 1) potential volunteers may have “baggage” they bring about their own past experiences and these may be checked by other members<sup>7</sup>;
- 2) a team approach keeps collusion with offenders at bay.

For example, in an individual mentoring relationship, the core member may be more able to convince the mentor of the unfairness of a release condition, or assure the member that a certain activity is not risky, but the team approach reinforces the idea that their role is not to advocate with Corrections or to be adversarial with Corrections.

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<sup>7</sup> In at least one case, a volunteer was released from the CoSA group for having personal issues that were bearing on the group.



***KEY FINDING: The team approach helped avoid collusion and kept volunteers accountable. It also spread the work so that core members did not become dependent upon any one individual and volunteers did not become overwhelmed by the commitment.***

In addition, teams mentioned that they take on different roles in the context of discussions with core members. If one member is being somewhat harsh, the others might mitigate the discouraging tone with a more positive tone. Alternatively, at times when some team members fear a team member is moving toward a position of siding with the core member in a battle with Corrections over release conditions, the team can rein the team member back in and remind the others that this is not their role.

*...it was somebody that I can prove to that I can do good and that I will do good. And I mean like I wasn't rewarded for what I was doing but it was just – I don't know, it felt good seeing somebody else smile because I was doing the right thing. And they constantly – I don't know – I guess that's how they reward me with the 'good jobs' and the pats on the back and stuff, and it's nice.*

## **Why CoSA Works**

### ***Voluntary Nature***

Several core members mentioned how moved they were by the fact that the CoSA team was a group of unpaid professionals who voluntarily devoted their time to helping people reintegrate. As such, even if probation staff had the time and inclination to do more of the casework function that reentry coordinators and CoSA volunteers do, that arrangement might not work as well or in the same constructive way that the volunteer model works. As one core member explained:

*I can't stress the fact that they're not getting paid for this. You know what I'm saying? So they're just, out of the kindness of their heart. They didn't know who I was. And now even when I'm done with this, I've got their phone numbers and I can call them up any time, even if it's just to talk – at 10 o'clock at night if I'm having a rough time.*

This statement sums up a great deal of why CoSA works.

***KEY FINDING: CoSA works because of the role of unpaid, nonprofessional volunteers.***

In addition, it takes time to develop the necessary trust among all members. For instance, several core members reported coming from backgrounds which did not foster an easy willingness to trust the motives or commitment of others. Some volunteered having come from hard family situations, and that establishing trust with others was particularly challenging. Since we know that having stable relationships is a protective factor in aiding the desistance process, an added benefit is that core members might develop a *capacity* for trust that would extend into other parts of their lives, and lead to improved relationships overall. Trust is also an essential ingredient for a successful CoSA, As one core member described his relationship with his CoSA:

*It can be overwhelming. Because I've been alone for a very long time. So sometimes it feels crowded. And it's also very hard to get used to people...and it's hard to get used to people that actually sincerely want to do something for me without anything in return. So it's been a different experience for me.*

One factor that breeds success in a CoSA is that the core members are often genuinely moved by the generosity of their CoSA team. This creates a sense of mutual obligation that motivates core members to make the team proud, or not let them down.

***Reciprocity & Mutual Obligation***

The depth of involvement and commitment on the part of CoSA teams had profound impacts on core members. Several mentioned that they developed a sense of obligation in response to the generosity of their CoSA team. And in fact, some said they were motivated to desist and succeed in the community in part to make their support team proud, and also because they didn't want to "*let them down.*" The mutual obligation that is inherent in the CoSA model creates a blueprint for normal, healthy relationships characterized by investment in one another. As a volunteer described:

*Because you know, when you have friends, you feel that way. You don't really want to let them down even though you might not agree with it. So – and that sort of reaches out into the accountability piece...This is the first opportunity they may have had since childhood to develop relationships with others that are healthy.*

### ***Resistance of Core Member***

Initial resistance on the part of the core members is not an insurmountable obstacle. As mentioned above, building trust takes time. Unconditional support from the CoSA team helps establish trust. Therefore, the teams that seemed the most functional, based on reports by team members, and their core members, were ones in which the team was long on support initially and the press for accountability came with time and trust. In other words, to establish ***moral authority*** rather than some other kind of authority, the team has to invest in the core member. Demonstrating support and exhibiting faith in the core member helps to establish moral authority. Over time, core members' resistance is worn down. As one core member explained his resistance:

*Because I thought at that time, it was going to be just another one of DOC's ways to put more restrictions, more what I'd classify like a watchdog over my head.*

Many core members described their distrust of Corrections upon leaving the facility; being referred to CoSA via Corrections made them sometimes distrustful. In addition, even in the absence of distrust of Corrections, several core members were skeptical about the process of CoSA. This lengthy excerpt is instructive, as one core member described his hesitation:

*Yeah, well, it was presented to me as a group of volunteers that would help me in the community. That's how it was presented to me, but that's not how I looked at it. Not at that time... Well, now I totally agree that it's been a group of volunteers that have helped me in the community. I really appreciate the COSA team...I'm hoping to be able to continue it [beyond the one-year mark] because they've helped me in so many ways that I don't think I would have survived and stayed out without them. Because I've been able to always – the biggest thing that they've helped me with is – these are people I can talk to, people I can trust, people I can say, 'look, this is what I'm thinking – is my thinking wrong or am I thinking correctly?' And I always know I can trust the answer I get from each one of them. That's the way they've helped me the most.*

As this quote suggests, trust takes time to build, and trust is only possible if the team members demonstrate that they will stand by the core member no matter what happens. In fact, several volunteers continued to visit core members in prison once they were returned for violations. Core members often expressed that they had never experienced such unconditional support, and it motivated them to make their team proud.

***KEY FINDING: CoSA fills a gap between programming (rehabilitation) and community-based supervision.***

In addition, and perhaps more importantly, core members expressed the closeness of the relationships with their team, and some referred to it as their “family” or “like a family.” In some

of these cases, the team members were not convinced the core member felt as close as they were hoping. What was clear was that the standard of “closeness” was different for core members than for team members; many core members reported having come from dysfunctional families. In other words, the team had more profound impacts on the core member than the team was sometimes aware.

Deep involvement on the part of the team was a key factor in success. Generally speaking, the deeper the social involvement among CoSA members, the more successful the CoSA. On occasion, a CoSA team would meet weekly but not spend time with the core member outside of the weekly meeting. Reentry coordinators are flexible in their expectations beyond the weekly commitment, as they recognize that some volunteers may have more time to give or more inclination to spend social time with the core member. However, without the purely social dimension, CoSAs run the risk of appearing to be a monitoring board, even if an encouraging and supportive one. As Maruna (2001), described, creating *human capital* in the form of improved skills is not sufficient for desistance from crime; offenders need *social capital* in the form of social relationships that enable true reintegration. In addition, simply considering the word reintegration implies a side-by-side relationship between offenders and community members. One CoSA team shared evening meals regularly with their core member, and had integrated him into their family lives—this one was a deeply meaningful relationship for all parties. It is important to note that volunteers often benefitted nearly as much from the relationship as core members did, especially the deeper the involvement.

Core members and volunteers described their relationships in various ways: as a kind of parenting, mentoring, teacher, friend role, or peer advocate. Most saw the relationship as something between a mentor and a friend. In some cases, especially in which the core member

had little family influence, the team took on a more parental role. This was a more obvious permutation when the core member was young and the team somewhat older. Volunteers felt that the form a CoSA would take would be dependent upon the reentry needs of the core member, as well as the skills, attributes, or limitations the team members would bring to the CoSA. Many of the volunteers were older, retired citizens who had more time to devote to volunteer work. Because the core members were usually lacking in appropriate family support, older volunteers were able to fill their needs well. Ideally, a team would be made up depending upon the needs of the core member, and the reentry coordinators were remarkable in their abilities to do so with a limited pool of volunteers.

***KEY FINDING: CoSAs are generally more successful the deeper and more socially the team engages with the offender.***

***Support and accountability are not necessarily distinct.*** In some respects, support and accountability are distinct and when pressed, interviewees could name an instance of each. However, accountability happens within the context of a relationship formed, similar to a family member holding another accountable. John Braithwaite (1989) distinguishes “stigmatizing shame” from “reintegrative shame,” likening the latter to the “family model”—one in which unacceptable acts are sanctioned but the person remains in the fold. Pressing a core member to be accountable does not work outside the context of a supportive environment; similarly, support without accountability does not ensure community safety. As Hannem (2013) explains, “CoSA can be understood as a risk management structure that prioritizes inclusion” (p. 274). A core member explains how he came to understand the symbiosis of support and accountability:

*I wanted [a CoSA team] because I know that I need to be on a short leash, for a while, especially. I need to be accountable. That’s why I have a private therapist, and that’s why*

*I have various supports. At first, maybe a year before my release, I was seeing things as kind of punitive. Then I came around to the point that it was support, not punitive.*

Moreover, the desired accountability comes from the supportive relationships. For example, in a quote from a team member, he explains this dual support and accountability function:

*...if you validate someone's experience and feelings, you're going to be able to make a connection and develop a trust relationship, from which you can then work to gently or not so gently put on expectations around accountability...supporting him, trying to recognize 'we understand your frustration, you're not alone, but this is the reality upon which you must live.'*

The notion that support and accountability can and must be practiced in tandem and that they are not necessarily distinct actions was echoed repeatedly by team members.

Another core member summed up the benefit of CoSA this way:

*They give me positive feedback. Like when I'm doing good, they let me know that they see that I'm doing good. And when I'm doing bad or I do something or make a mistake, then they call me on it. They're not like, 'oh, you're bad you did that,' but they let me know like that's a mistake on your part. It's easier for me to take responsibility for my actions when they're pointing it out to me in a positive way rather than sending me back to jail for it or something.*

Another team member described the support and accountability marriage this way:

*I think one of the worst things that a member can do is to make excuses for them...I think we have to be – I think we have to show them a lot of caring and give them a lot of attention but let them know that we are really here to help hold the line and help them to*

*stay within the parameters of what's legal and what's right and what can help them to move forward.*

***KEY FINDING: CoSAs work because of the power of normative and normal relationships in facilitating desistance from crime.***



## IMPLICATIONS

CoSA as a model is an adaptation of restorative justice principles. But it also is the embodiment of the principles behind desistance theory and those of the Good Lives Model (Ward & Stewart, 2003), insofar as the model acknowledges the importance of self-determination of offenders and the pursuit of human, positive goals rather than simply avoidance of criminal behavior. Much of the recent, exciting criminological research shows that:

- Strengths-based approaches work
- Concern for the well-being & goals of the offender facilitate desistance
- Supervision and support do not have to be mutually exclusive
- Social capital formation is key

The greatest implications for correctional and community practice are that the investment in the CoSA program is worthwhile for recidivism reduction and for strengthening communities, and improving offenders' lives upon release. The long-term effects of such a program are unknown but in the short term the benefits are apparent.

In addition, the information from this qualitative report demonstrates quite starkly that released offenders need support and respond more positively to respectful and encouraging monitoring than negative and discouraging monitoring. The implication for correctional practice is that probation and parole, as well as facility-based caseworkers and correctional officers, could take the lessons learned from this report and apply it to their casework practice. Petersilia (2004) has summarized the kinds of reentry programs that work—"control-oriented programs" do not (p. 6). While recognizing that Corrections is responsible for community safety with regards to

released offenders, and that furlough is an incarcerative sanction, small acts that demonstrate faith in an offender's ability seem to go a long way toward desistance.

To conclude, a quote from a core member who said:

*I think I'd still be in prison if I didn't have this support, and I think that I know myself enough now where I know I need that support, so I'm very grateful it's there.*

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Some of the findings here have significant ramifications for correctional practice. For instance, while there are clear benefits to having a team approach, the CoSA process is labor-intensive and finding a sufficient number of willing and appropriate volunteers is an ongoing challenge. Several CoSA volunteers and a few reentry coordinators expressed concern about how sustainable the CoSA model could be because of the prospect of the demand for CoSA exceeding the supply.

### **Recommendation #1: Retain and Expand the Use of a CoSA-inspired Model**

Because of the enormous potential for CoSA as a model, the model might need to be adapted to require fewer volunteers (perhaps two people total), which may raise questions as to the ability to retain model integrity. Alternatively, Corrections and the Community Justice Network might consider ways to engage in public education to convince the public that serving on a CoSA is in the community's best interest. A version of CoSA-lite could be created which would be less labor and time intensive but offer similar support, perhaps for offenders who are less institutionalized, and somewhat less isolated but still in need of supportive community members to encourage them as they create new lives. In addition, a few respondents mentioned that there needs to be reimbursement available for meals out with core members, or for coffee, gasoline, etc.

In addition, virtually every respondent felt strongly that the CoSA program should be continued, expanded, and extended to more types of offenders. The consensus was that anyone could benefit from the support. However, given that volunteers are a precious resource, Corrections should continue to use that resource judiciously in cases for which social support is clearly lacking.

## **Recommendation #2: Corrections Needs to do More Work to Get “Buy-in” by Staff**

Respondents reported that there was inconsistent “buy-in” by Corrections probation and parole staff, and also by community-based treatment providers. Many of the probation and parole staff members view the CoSA as an asset, but the cultures of field staff offices seemed to vary in terms of the support for CoSA. Although probation staff were not interviewed for this evaluation, several volunteers and reentry coordinators mentioned this as a problem that needed attention. Most advocated education for field staff as to the benefits of CoSA, not only for core members, but for the community at large, and also to the staff members themselves.

Consistent with this finding, one strong recommendation that emerged from the evaluator’s experience was that success within a CoSA should have some influence on core members’ conditions. In other words, community-based supervision should incorporate more “carrots” to reward core members. Moreover, having a probation/parole officer plus a community-based team of volunteers should provide sufficient monitoring that some of the conditions of release could be relaxed. If Corrections intends to devolve some of its supervision to the community level, CoSAs need more authority. In addition, this will motivate core members to enlist a CoSA team. Without a reduction in the potential “sticks” at Correction’s disposal, the danger exists that CoSA will function to widen the net of social control for core members. At a minimum, probation officers could help identify the ways that CoSA could help facilitate some of the goal attainment that would satisfy core members’ human needs.

### **Recommendation #3: The Success of CoSA Provides a Roadmap for Correctional Practice**

#### **More Generally**

The lesson from CoSA in Vermont is that support and encouragement yield more positive results than control and discouragement. While recognizing that Corrections is responsible for community safety and thus is heavily oriented toward risk management, CoSA *is* an effective risk management tool insofar as support and accountability are synthesized into a model that organically builds social capital and a sense of community obligation among offenders. Social capital formation is what creates desistance. Compliance enforcement can be done within a supportive and reintegrative framework. Petersilia (2004) has found that reentry designs that are heavily control-focused are less effective than others. More sociologically-inspired models for reintegration acknowledge the limitations of purely psychological approaches that exist within the correctional treatment/programming models. Treatment cannot “fix” the host of reintegration challenges that offenders face upon release (Fox. 2013).

The lessons from CoSA should be extrapolated to correctional practice more generally. CoSA works because of the positive feedback that offenders receive from an engaged community. Within Corrections, the culture needs some rehabilitation to one that supports offenders, with incentives and rewards, in other words, more “carrots” and fewer “sticks.” Within the context of a larger culture that holds Corrections responsible for poor outcomes, changing to a more supportive culture may feel risky. But it works. The literature from desistance is consistent: stabilizers such as employment and housing are necessary but not sufficient. A cheerleading section is critical—ideally one made up of pro-social individuals, with back up encouragement and reward from probation officers, therapists, and case workers.

Maruna (2001) argues that identity shifts from criminal to non-criminal only occur through an integrative process with pro-social citizens, and important people who will validate the offenders' efforts to change. CoSA is the ideal prototype for how to achieve this in partnership with Corrections and the community.

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## APPENDIX A

### Original Protocol Question Guide<sup>8</sup>

#### Phase 1 Interviews

#### COSA TEAM MEMBERS:

1. How did you learn of CoSAs?
2. How did you become involved?
3. What were your expectations coming in?
4. How are your expectations being met or how are things different?
5. Why did you become involved? What were your motivations?
6. What kind of training did you receive? What kind of experience did you have?
7. What makes a good CoSA? What can CoSA members offer?
8. What do you see as the core benefit that CoSAs can offer?
9. Describe the relationship between group members and the roles that each member plays.
10. Describe the relationship between group members and the core member.
11. Describe the group's relationship with the core member's probation officer.
12. What works about your CoSA?
13. What do you feel needs work?
14. What are the reentry challenges you observe?
15. How well can CoSAs address those?
16. What would be your definition of success? What measures would you be looking for?
17. How do you see the role of the community in reentry?

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<sup>8</sup> When the protocol was revised in August 2012, the questions originally asked in phase 1 were asked after the CoSA team had been meeting for approximately six months.

## **CORE MEMBERS:**

1. How did you learn of CoSAs?
2. How did you become involved? Were you referred by case worker? Or did you refer yourself?
3. What were your expectations coming in? Why did you want to have a CoSA?
4. How are your expectations being met or how are things different?
5. What makes a good CoSA for you? What do you need from your CoSA?
6. Describe the relationship between yourself and the group members. What is their role? What is your role?
7. Describe the relationship with your probation officer.
8. What works about your CoSA?
9. What do you feel needs work?
10. What are the reentry challenges you experience?
11. How well can CoSAs address those?
12. Are there other needs that can't be met or aren't being met?
13. How will you measure your own success? What are your goals? And how will you measure the success of your CoSA?

## **COSA COORDINATORS:**

1. What are the ingredients for a successful CoSA?
2. What are the challenges for creating CoSAs?
3. What are some of the implementation challenges?
4. What are the difficulties inherent in the model itself?
5. What reentry problems do CoSAs address best?
6. What are the relationships like between CoSA members?
7. Describe an ideal CoSA volunteer.
8. How do you screen core member candidates?
9. What role do core members' families play?
10. What role does the probation officer play?

## **Phase 2 Phone Interviews**

## **COSA TEAM MEMBERS:**

1. How are things going in your CoSA group?

2. Has anything changed in your group?
3. What is the current dynamic in your CoSA? How have your roles evolved?
4. Has your perspective changed in any way since we last spoke?
5. What do you think makes a good CoSA now?
6. What do you see as the core benefit that CoSAs can offer?
7. What works about your CoSA?
8. What do you feel needs work?
9. Describe the relationship between group members and the roles that each member plays.  
How has that changed over time?
10. What are the reentry challenges that you observe now?
11. How well has your CoSA been able to address those?
12. What would be your definition of success now?
13. What do you know now that you did not know when you began this process?

### **CORE MEMBERS:**

1. How is your CoSA working for you?
14. What is the benefit, if any, to having a CoSA?
15. How has it met your expectations?
16. What makes a good CoSA for you? What do you need from your CoSA?
17. Describe the relationship between yourself and the group members. What are their roles?  
What is your role?
18. What works about your CoSA?
19. What do you feel needs work?
20. What are the reentry challenges you experience?
21. How has your CoSA helped your address those challenges?
22. Are there other needs that can't be met or aren't being met?
23. How will you measure your own success? What are your goals? And how will you  
measure the success of your CoSA?
24. What do you know now that you did not know when you began this process?

\*When the protocol was revised in August 2012, the questions originally asked in phase 1 were asked after the CoSA team had been meeting for approximately six months.

## APPENDIX B

### Pre-CoSA Questionnaire—core member

Please circle the number that best describes your life and situation. Your answers will not be shared with anyone.

This applies to me a lot

This applies to me some

I am not sure if this applies to me

This doesn't apply to me much

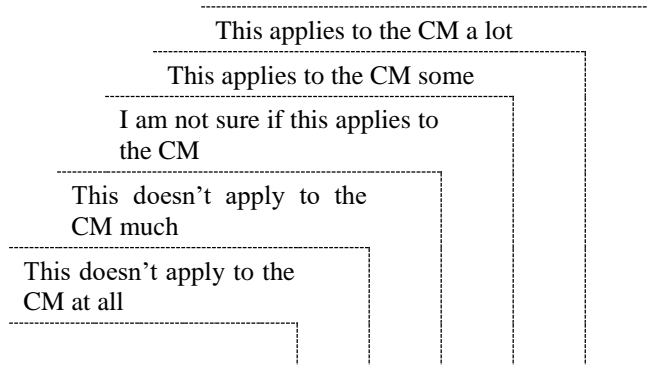
This doesn't apply to me at all

- |  |   |   |   |   |   |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. I try to imagine how the victim of my crime has been affected.      | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 2. People should obey the law even when they think the law is wrong.   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 3. I can interact with people and have fun in healthy ways.            | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 4. The CoSA team shows concern for me.                                 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 5. My family and friends support me.                                   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 6. The CoSA team is helping me become the person I was meant to be.    | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 7. I feel bad about the crimes I committed.                            | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 8. The people I care about believe that I have changed for the better. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 9. I see myself as a contributing member of the community.             | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

- |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 10. I feel hopeful about the future.                                  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 11. I have many friends who do not have a criminal record.            | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 12. I care about the people on my CoSA team.                          | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 13. I don't want to let my CoSA team down.                            | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 14. I see myself as a criminal mainly.                                | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 15. I enjoy spending time with my CoSA team.                          | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 16. I understand the importance of being open and honest with others. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 17. I am okay with people holding me accountable.                     | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

## Pre-CoSA Questionnaire—team members

Please circle the number that best describes your core member’s life and situation. Your answers will not be shared with anyone.



1.	Our core member tries to imagine how the victim of their crime has been affected.	1	2	3	4	5
<hr/>						
2.	6 Our core member believes people should obey the law even when they think the law is wrong.	1	2	3	4	5
3.	Our core member can interact with people and have fun in healthy ways.	1	2	3	4	5
4.	Our core member feels the CoSA team shows concern for him/her.	1	2	3	4	5
5.	Our core member’s family supports him/her.	1	2	3	4	5
6.	The CoSA team is helping the core member become the person s/he was meant to be.	1	2	3	4	5
7.	The core member feels badly for the crimes s/he committed.	1	2	3	4	5
8.	The people that the core member cares about believe that s/he has changed for the better.	1	2	3	4	5
9.	The core member sees him/herself as a contributing	1	2	3	4	5

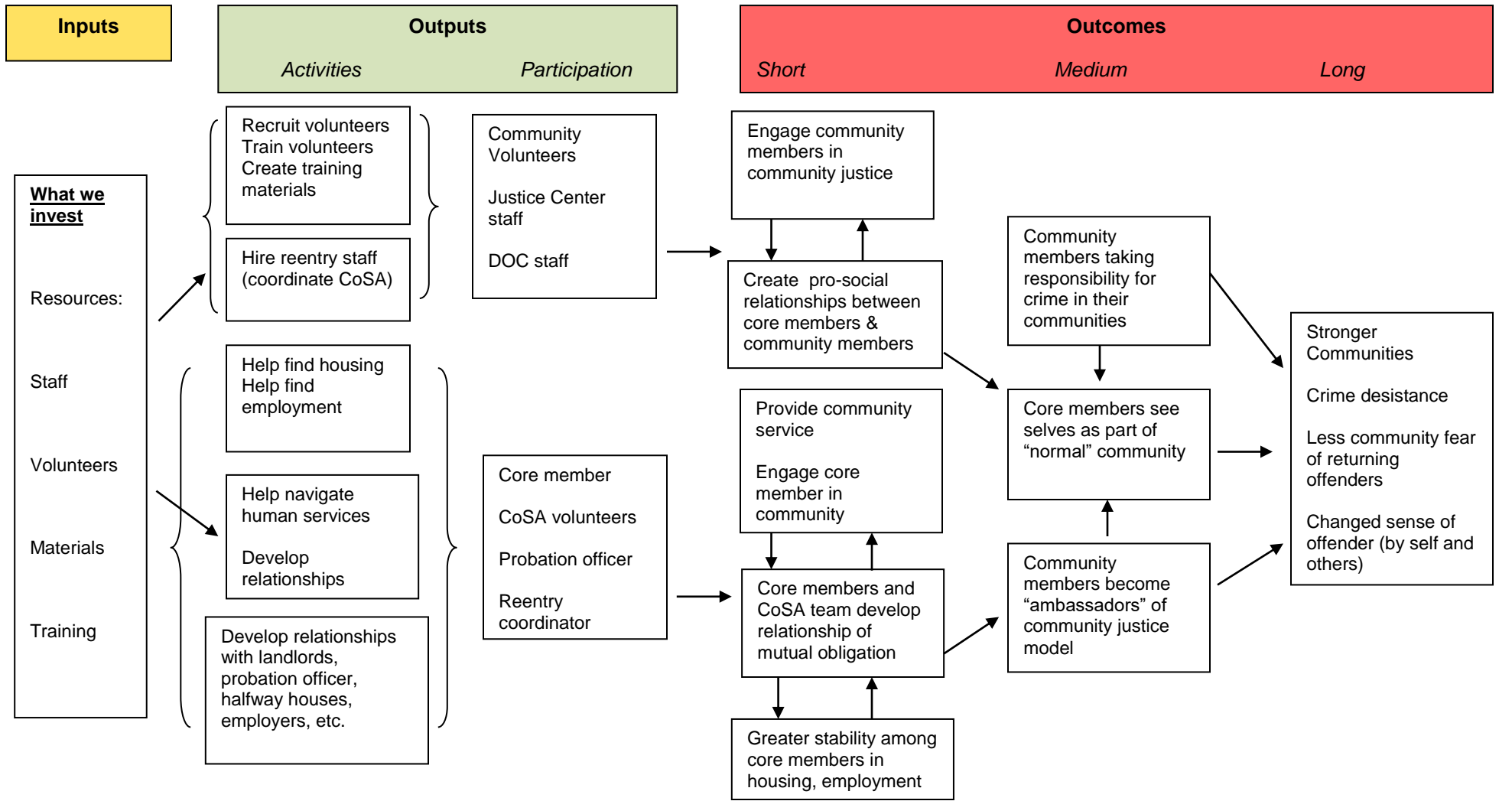


member of the community.

- |  |   |   |   |   |   |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| 10. Our core member feels hopeful about the future.                                  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 11. Our core member has friends who do not have a criminal record.                   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 12. Our core member cares about the people on the CoSA team.                         | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 13. Our core member doesn't want to let the CoSA team down.                          | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 14. Our core member sees him/herself as a criminal mainly.                           | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 15. Our core member enjoys spending time with the CoSA team.                         | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 16. Our core member understands the importance of being open and honest with others. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 17. Our core member is okay with people holding him/her accountable.                 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

## APPENDIX C

**Program: Vermont Circles of Support & Accountability Logic Model**  
**Situation: Serious offenders released without supports in the community**



### Assumptions

- Core members need opportunities to develop non criminal identities by feeling included in conventional communities
- Core members will develop sense of mutual obligation with CoSA members

### External Factors

- Limitations on where core members can live or travel
- Limitations on what activities core members can do