

Vermont's Restorative Justice Program

A Pilot in Burlington's Old North End

By Samantha Anderson and David Karp

With recent national attention directed toward offender reentry, it is no surprise that one of the nation's pioneers of restorative justice, the Vermont Department of Corrections (VDOC), has applied restorative principles to their reentry program. In general, VDOC is modifying their "reparative board" model to galvanize community volunteers into action. In partnership with the Burlington Community Justice Center, VDOC is currently piloting a program in Burlington's Old North End, the state's highest crime district and frequent destination for released inmates.

The "restorative justice panel" consists of community volunteers who meet with returning offenders to offer advice and support. As VDOC further develops the program, it envisions the formation of panels that include both community volunteers and relevant professionals (depending on offenders' needs, these may include treatment providers, education, housing, and employment specialists, for example). They also envision a parallel wrap-around support process to address victims' needs and concerns. Panels will eventually meet with offenders upon entry into prison, drafting a plan of responsibilities that offenders must complete before and after release. Such "offender responsibility plans" will include tasks that will help offenders understand and repair the harm they caused to victims and the community, as well as tasks to assist their successful reintegration.

Support and guidance

In the Old North End of Burlington, VDOC and the Burlington Community Justice Center have created the first reentry panel. Upon release from prison, designated offenders returning to this community have the option to meet with

the panel. As part of our ongoing evaluation work with VDOC, we recently had a chance to observe the panel in action and converse with panel members. One panelist explained they are "not there to judge [offenders] but are there to offer support and guidance." The panel members also suggest ideas for how the offender can restore the damage their crime has caused the community. A VDOC staff person explains that panelists "welcome people into the community and they are a support as long as people are committed to what they need to do. They understand [offenders] have harmed the community somehow but they also understand that people go to jail and they come out and they support them in changing their life. It's basically community

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members saying welcome back and we want you to do well.”

On the evening we observed the panel, they met with an individual whom they had seen once before. The panel members remembered this individual’s case very well and had had high hopes that he would succeed. Unfortunately, since their last meeting, the offender got into a dispute with his living partner, and she claimed he had been verbally abusive and drunk. The following day, the offender met with his parole officer and was remanded to jail for a week because of the dispute. The offender explained to the panel that his living partner was not of stable mind at the time and was making false claims, although he acknowledged that in most cases both parties share culpability. Authorities at the scene confirmed the claim that she was behaving as if she, herself, had lost control. He told his story clearly without making excuses and appeared genuine. The panel members explained to him that when they had heard that he had returned to prison, they were very disappointed. It was clear by the offender’s expression that he was also disappointed. The panel explained to him that they felt that way because they had such faith in him after their first meeting. He understood and expressed appreciation for their support.

The panel asked him various questions about his current living situation and employment status. He explained that he had a new companion whom he lived with and that he had a steady job. The offender spoke about the difficulties that he was experiencing as well as the things that were working out for him. Panelists sought assurance that he had resources available to him and that he was truly staying on the right track. He also described a custody battle that he was struggling with and panel members offered him some advice as well as applauded him for dealing with it through the legal system rather than taking matters into his own hands. The panel members were satisfied with his answers and that he was working hard to succeed.

Looking to repair the harm

The offender also expressed his desire to work with youth as a way to repair harm. He had been involved in a gang in the past and wanted to educate youth about the choices that

lie before them, to help prevent them from entering into a criminal lifestyle. The panel members were very pleased with his desire to educate and they offered a lot of encouragement. A staff member at the VDOC told the offender that he would help arrange an appropriate service opportunity.

The meeting closed with the panel members inviting the offender to return in three months. The offender was very willing to do so and the members expressed their wish that he would still be making progress. The offender thanked them for their help and investment in him; the members wished him good luck as he exited.

Developing relationships

Afterwards, the panelists all felt this individual had it in him to do well—“he’s got it,” stated one panel member. The support in the room was impressive; each member was confident in this man despite his initial setback. Although they may be overly optimistic about this offender—time will tell—our conversation with panel members suggested that they are not naïve, and think hard about how to talk to offenders productively and, more generally, how to improve the program. They particularly look forward to the implementation of the program at the point of prison entry. They want offenders to meet and become acquainted with the panel before their release. They strongly believe that if a relationship was developed earlier on, then the offender is more likely to look to them as a source of support.

Ultimately, we were most impressed by how much the panel members seem invested in these individuals. They want them to have a successful reentry and to live as productive citizens. Panelists also believe that this success is contingent on offenders understanding the harm they caused and taking concrete steps to repair it. In a country where returning offenders typically try to hide their past because they fear the community will only create new obstacles in front of them, it is refreshing to meet a group of volunteers committed to offering support. More importantly, it is encouraging to observe a correctional agency attempting to institutionalize this good will.

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