



and
RE·COUR·SE
Mediation Services

**Community Forum on the Future of Restorative Justice in Sonoma County
February 5, 2009, Steele Lane Community Center
Summary of Findings**

Challenges to Implementation and Expansion of Restorative Justice

Among the challenges identified by participants, getting people to rethink how we approach juvenile and criminal justice emerged as a key issue. The Restorative Justice approach involves community members in holding offenders accountable and deciding how to make things right. While this approach is very appealing, countering forces exist. For example, there is considerable investment in existing systems, which capture most of the funds available for justice. In addition, there is a culture of fear around criminals that results in political support for punitive approaches to crime. One of the problems here is that most people have no idea of what restorative justice is or how it can benefit the community in many cases.

There may also be a certain amount of comfort that people take in being isolated from responsibility to the community: “Let the courts handle it, I’ve had enough and don’t want to be bothered anymore.” This is balanced by the frustration of many crime victims who feel excluded from participating in the justice process in ways that are meaningful to them. Restorative justice is, at its core, a victim-centered process that powerfully addresses this concern. But this aspect of restorative justice may not be widely understood.

A challenge to implementing restorative practices in schools is lack of awareness of what these practices are. In Sonoma County many educators equate “restorative practices” with restorative conferencing, and conclude that it is too time consuming to be practical. Schools are also severely impacted by funding issues. The challenges are how to communicate an accurate description of what restorative practices are and their benefits to schools, and how to move them upward on the list of priorities for training and implementation.

Opportunities-Next Steps-Where to Begin

Participants suggested that one or more work groups be convened for strategic planning. It is important that we begin by defining what outcomes we want, so we can focus our work. A matrix of existing restorative practices in Sonoma County would be a good place to begin. In

future meetings, three particular focus areas are recommended: (1) Restorative Justice in the Criminal/Juvenile Justice Systems; (2) Restorative Practices in Schools; and (3) Building Community Awareness and Support. To support all of these areas, it is important to include as broad a constituency as possible in ongoing forum meetings.

Additional Comments:

Several forum participants testified that they had personally benefitted from restorative justice processes. However, there was also a call to balance anecdotal evidence with research studies that support the efficacy of restorative justice and school-based restorative practices.

Law enforcement voices suggested that it is not helpful to try to position restorative justice as a panacea for our society’s criminal justice needs. Organizers of the forum were encouraged to keep not just the strengths, but also the limitations of restorative justice in perspective. This will help enhance the credibility of restorative justice within the law enforcement community.

There was a call to continue the conversation through more community forums. Some participants felt that it would be helpful if restorative justice professionals in the room took more of an observer and listener role, so that those from other disciplines would have more opportunity to share their ideas.

Outreach to include more people and perspectives in future forums was suggested several times.

Finally, several people offered to give their time to focused work groups. However, a preliminary step will be to form the groups and crisply define their charters.

Summary of Attendance:

Law enforcement:	3
Judicial	1
Probation.....	2
Education:.....	1
Community – Based Organizations (not Restorative Justice)	8
Restorative Justice Professionals:	8
Other:	10
Total:.....	33

Appendix: Selected Quotes, Organized by Theme:

Challenges

- Get people to think differently
- Changing the paradigm in our culture to taking accountability in our community
- Our culture allows for us to avoid dealing w/people directly-opening our hearts is not big in our culture
- Isolation from responsibility
- Seeing how parents often feel no remorse after committing a crime
- RJ allows a young person a chance to hear & develop empathy
- Coordination of how people get together that aren't used to working together
- Our culture/community still doesn't know what RJ is
- Fear of people-"lock them up" how do you change that? RJ shows that everyone is human & has the potential for goodness.

Opportunities-Next Steps-Where to Begin

- Need to deal with the inertia
- Serious work group to put together a strategic plan that takes into consideration opportunities-what interventions we want as a community
- Strategic plan just for this
- Presenting ideas to people in a way that people will listen-consider your audience (liberal, conservative, etc.)
- What are the outcomes? What is out there in the community?
- Define what outcomes do we want & work toward them
- Establish what your vision & goals are
- Matrix of RP is a draft is a place to start
- Letter of summary from this meeting

Economic Focus:

- Crime issues, how much we incarcerate people (\$); not as viable for lower level offenders

- Current economic process will likely get worse & RJ would impact at lower cost
- Economic troubles may lead to increased stress, acting out, increase in crime-RJ may be able to intervene and give other opportunities
- Money issue affects government, non-profits, community; together we can create more value; we don't want to further marginalize populations

Marketing & Community Education:

- Education/Publicity let people know & understand Restorative Justice/Practices (5xs)
- Continuation of these kinds of conversations
- Changing people's ideas about "what changes people;" punitive model doesn't work
- Chance to model & communicate to impact community
- Having the appropriate model for appropriate situation-don't do things in pieces
- Educate community, elicit their help
- Having a continuum of services for the specific situations

Early Childhood, Families, Schools:

- In schools-zero tolerance not working-administrators are frustrated
- (School administrators) have to expel a lot of kids
- The need to deal w/the issue of violence in families-if we build healthier families we build healthier communities
- Early, early, early education
- W/out RJ people (especially kids) don't have a chance to understand their actions
- Restorative practices in schools (5xs)

Collaboration & Community Building:

- Collaboration-talking to other agencies
- Bring in the rest of our community, especially Spanish speaking community
- Together we can build a sustainable model

- When we're fearful, we withdraw-we need to promote staying in touch
- Effective for people coming out of prison; try to do something right & build a sense of community
- These RJ processes can compliment others
- Belonging (sense of it) RJ does create this-we need to use this process in any way we can
- To keep our community whole and not revert to incarceration
- How do we have circles of respect & dialogue in our community?
- Circles of respect
- Circle practice: learning how to be a circle keeper in your community
- Recruit more supporters