

Circles of Support and Accountability (COSA)

MINISTERING TO TODAY'S
LEPERS AND KEEPING
CHILDREN SAFE



CLARE ANN RUTH-HEFFELBOWER, D.MIN

PROTECTING OUR CHILDREN AND YOUTH
CONFERENCE, OMAHA
NOVEMBER 7-9, 2014

Our calling...

I tell you the truth, anything
you did for even the least of
my people here, you also did
for me.

--Jesus

Who are the least?



A dilemma...

How do we protect children while also ministering to those who have committed sexual offenses?



Ministering to today's lepers: Circles of Support and Accountability (COSA)

**BUILDING SAFER
COMMUNITIES BY PROVIDING
CIRCLES OF SUPPORT AND
ACCOUNTABILITY FOR
RELEASED SEX OFFENDERS**



Creating safe communities . . .

Jessica's Law . . .

COSA . . .



Circles of Support and Accountability

Guiding principles . . .

- We acknowledge the ongoing pain and need for healing for victims and offenders.
- We believe that healing is possible for both victims and offenders.
- The community bears the responsibility for the restoration of victims of sexual abuse and for the safe reintegration of offenders.
- The community has the capacity to create a safe community.
- We each acknowledge our own personal responsibility to our fellow community partners.
- We seek to create community with offenders in responsible, safe, healthy, and life-giving ways.



COSA: Two Guiding Principles

• No more victims



• No one is disposable



The challenge of prisoner re-entry



- Transition from prison to community is difficult under the best of circumstances
- Sexual offenders face obstacles of registration, housing, employment, ostracism, community fear

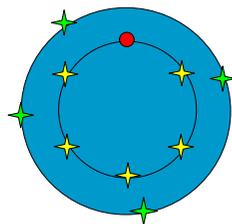


A Dangerous Situation

- Many released sexual offenders receive little or no support or encouragement to get help and live safe
- Laws are passed and restrictions put on sexual offenders to “keep the community safe”
- The community and potential victims have few real safeguards



Circles of Support and Accountability



● Core Member ★ Volunteers ★ Professionals

History of Circles

- COSA began in 1994 as a pilot project of Mennonite Central Committee of Ontario, Canada in response to the needs of the community and a released sex offender at high risk to re-offend.
- Circles are being established in
 - All Canadian provinces
 - Several states in the U.S. as well as various countries

Mission Statement

To substantially reduce the risk of future sexual victimization of community members by assisting and supporting released sexual offenders in their task of integrating with the community and leading responsible, productive, and accountable lives.

The Role of a COSA

The Circle strives to provide a safe and healthy environment for the offender by fulfilling the following roles:

Walking in friendship with the Core Member through everyday life, emergencies and difficult times

Confronting the Core Member about his attitudes and behaviors

Advocating with various systems. The circle cooperates with parole, police, neighborhood groups, victims and professionals.

Mediating community concerns

Celebrating anniversaries, large and small victories in the Core Member's and the Circle's journey

Volunteers

- Community volunteers work to keep the community safe by facilitating reintegration of released offenders
- Training provided for volunteers
- Optimal Circle size is 5 volunteers
 - full Circle meets regularly
- Volunteers and Core Members make an initial one-year commitment
- Circle's involvement is long-term, and may continue for several years
 - demands on members decrease as Core Member adjusts

Volunteer recruitment

- stability in the community
- known in the community (references checked)
- maturity
- healthy boundaries
- availability
- balance in
 - lifestyle and experience
 - viewpoint
 - age
 - gender

Volunteer training includes . . .

- restorative justice
- overview of criminal justice system
- understanding the parole system
- effects of institutionalization
- sex offender treatment issues
- victim/survivor concerns
- victim sensitivity

Volunteer training includes . . .

- working with the media
- group dynamics
- conflict resolution
- boundaries
- the COSA model
- COSA functions
 - support
 - accountability

Who are we talking about?

Offenders who

- are considered "High Risk"
- have high needs (social, emotional, spiritual, physical)
- have little or no pro-social support in the community
- understand and are willing to agree to a covenant negotiated with the COSA
- desire and are ready to voluntarily enter into a supportive relationship with a COSA
- are selected by COSA team as Core Members

Core Member experience

A 2007 study of COSAs across Canada showed that offenders who participated in COSA had a significant reduction in recidivism in contrast to the matched comparison group:

National Replication Study (2007)

- 83% reduction in *sexual* recidivism
- 73% reduction in *all types of violent* recidivism (including sexual)
- 72% reduction in *all types* of recidivism (including violent and sexual)

Core Member experience

After being in a Circle Core Members . . .

- are less nervous, afraid, and angry
- are more realistic in their perspectives
- are more confident, feel more accepted, and experience pride for not re-offending

Core Member experience

Without my Circle, I may have . . .

- had difficulty adjusting
- had difficulty in relationship with others
- become isolated and lonely
- turned to drugs or alcohol
- re-offended

Core Member experience

“COSA is a lifelong commitment because I need them and I’ve got nobody else. They’re my friends. They’re my family. They’re more than just support.”

Why do Circles work?

Offender Social Support

Released sex offenders who have positive, pro-social support in their community are at less risk of re-offending than those who have no such support, or whose supports are anti-social in nature.

(Hanson and Harris, 1999)

Why do Circles work?



COSA is there to keep me remembering. They are there and we talk and I always remember that the only way that I'm going to have a life like I have now is to never fall back on the behavior. I have to be accountable. There is no one else, no one else is going to do that part for me.

--Core Member

Why do Circles work?



...we experience that deep inner healing comes about mainly when people feel loved, when they have a sense of belonging. . . This healing flows from relationships . . .

--Jean Vanier

Keeping Children Safe



WE HAVE A RESPONSIBILITY TO PROTECT CHILDREN



A Balancing Act – Three Tenets...

- We have a responsibility to assure that children and youth will be safe in our congregations from sexual abuse, sexual assault and harassment...
- We are called to treat every person with worth and dignity, and to offer a congregational home to all who are seeking one...
- We have a responsibility to educate ourselves about child sexual abuse and healthy childhood sexuality, to be well informed about sexual offenses and offenders and to develop processes that will help us make good decisions...

-Rev. Debra Haffner

A Balancing Act – Three Tenets...

- We have a responsibility to assure that children and youth will be safe in our congregations from sexual abuse, sexual assault and harassment *even* or perhaps *especially* when we do not know if there is an offender in our congregation. Indeed, we have a responsibility to see that our congregations are sexually healthy congregations and free of sexual harassment, abuse, and exploitation for all of our members – children, youth and adults – as well as visitor and staff.

-Rev. Debra Haffner

A Balancing Act – Three Tenets...

- We are called to treat every person with worth and dignity, and to offer a congregational home to all who are seeking one like ours, while honoring that in the case of an individual with a history of sex offenses, there must be limitations to congregational involvement. That commitment means that only in rare cases will a person be denied access to ministry and fellowship. In the words of one congregation's policy, we must provide "compassion, support, affirmation, and protection against further harm."

Rev. Debra Haffner

A Balancing Act – Three Tenets...

- We have a responsibility to educate ourselves about child sexual abuse and healthy childhood sexuality, to be well informed about sexual offenses and offenders and to develop processes that will help us make good decisions about the actions that we are called to take. We must be willing to listen, to use a democratic process, and to be humble about our own certitudes in creating these policies.

Rev. Debra Haffner

Key elements of Protecting Children and Including “Lepers”

- Develop a protective environment
- Build awareness
 - Needs of those who have experienced sexual abuse
 - Anticipate that these conversations may trigger some who have experienced abuse
 - Be aware that some who have experienced abuse have never disclosed the abuse
 - Needs of those who have committed sexual offenses
 - Facts related to sexual offending
- Develop a plan
- Implement plan
- Check-in regularly to ensure plan is working effectively

Many resources are available...

- Dove's Nest – *Protection and Inclusion: Guide for Congregations on Safely Including Persons Who Have Committed Sexual Offenses*
- Jeanette Harder – *Let the Children Come*
- Debra Haffner – *Balancing Acts – Keeping Children Safe in Congregations* <http://www.uua.org/documents/haffnerdebra/balancingact.pdf>
- Debra Haffner – *A Time to Heal: Protecting Children and Ministering to Sex Offenders* (LifeQuest)
- Tim Horton – *Guidelines for Offenders at Church* <http://aemehalo.com/guidelinespdf.pdf>
- The Center for Sex Offender Management (CSOM) <http://www.csom.org>
(provides facts about sexual offending)

It's possible!



Then wolves will live in peace with lambs,
and leopards will lie down to rest with goats.
Calves, lions, and young bulls will eat together,
and a little child will lead them. . . .
They will not hurt or destroy each other
on all my holy mountain,
because the earth will be full of the knowledge of
the LORD,
as the sea is full of water.

Isaiah 11:6,9

Contact us . . .



Circles of Support and Accountability – Fresno, Inc.

info@cosa-fresno.org
<http://cosa-fresno.org/>
559-374-2015

Clare Ann Ruth-Heffelbower, Director
clareann@cosa-fresno.org

Monica Heredia, Circle Coordinator
monica@cosa-fresno.org
