

Restorative Practice in Preparing Prisoners for Resettlement, Integration and Return to Their Communities

1. The return to community after a prison sentence presents the offender and the community with opportunities for creative restorative approaches towards reintegration and reconciliation. Sadly the experience is often perceived as a risky one by prisoners and as an unwelcome one by their wider community. Restorative Justice approaches can address some of these tensions through preparation and an open approach communicating the progress of the prisoner, his/her concerns about returning to their community and intentions on release, key agencies, individuals and groups that may be able to assist in the process of return.

2. Restorative processes seek to involve the key stakeholders in a conflict in reaching resolutions that are willingly and voluntarily entered into. The conflict inherent in return to the community after a prison sentence can bring:

- uncertainty for the prisoner facing a changed environment and relationships that have moved on
- stress for the ex-offender's family who are receiving back a changed person with questions about their intentions
- concerns among members of the community who may remember the crisis in behaviour which led to the offender being convicted and sentenced to custody
- anxiety for the Criminal Justice/and community groups receiving the ex-offender back into their responsibility and locality.

3. Traditionally prisoners have been prepared for release through the focus the Criminal Justice Agencies have on crime matters in concentrating on the offender. Much effort has gone into informing the prisoner about processes he will face and giving some information about agencies he can call upon. Little is done with local community members or with the family in an interactive way apart from through probation service preparation for temporary release that may be available. The Probation Service leads on much of this community based interaction.

Traditional Criminal Justice Dynamics

Using restorative principles we could develop the resettlement planning for prisoners. We could pay regard to the context of return of the offender to his community to his family and to the criminal justice and other agencies eventually involved with him.

Restorative Justice Dynamics

Using this model of restorative justice:

- the complexity of the process of the offender returning to his community is evident
- the need for the key agencies - police, prisons, probation - to work together becomes clear
- the need to pay regard to the offender's community (family), the victim and his/her family and the community groups in the locality is also apparent.

4. This dynamic can be explored in the development of a conferencing process during the temporary release/home leave of a prisoner, to which the key stakeholders

involved in the process of receiving him back into the community are invited. This provides all with:

- the opportunity of meeting to review the issues of returning home
- any unresolved anxieties remaining from the offence
- the risks that community members feel are still present
- the commitment the prisoner may wish to make to the agencies and community members
- the concern the family may have about their involvement by association with the prisoner
- the responsibilities the agencies may feel to maintain supervision and vigilance which should be explained for all to be aware of the process of accountability

5. The conference could best be convened by an independent community-based agency in order to provide focus and legitimacy for the process of sharing concerns and reaching understandings. The meeting should be prepared for by the agency outlining:

The Purpose

to provide a safe and inclusive process for the prisoner to leave prison to benefit the prisoner, his family and the community

The Process

through an arranged meeting of interested stakeholders to discuss concerns and seek resolutions, gain understanding and develop an agreement for future action from all parties

The Desired Outcome

everyone will have been able to voice their concerns and face each other rather than harbour anxieties, resentments, suspicions and fears

the meeting should conclude with a written understanding in which the prisoner commits himself to certain behaviours (including ongoing treatment programmes) in which community groups offer support and involvement, in which the agencies outline their responsibility and define expectations of support available and the family accept the complexity of the situation within which they may be able to support their loved one.

The Follow Up

This work will be followed up in subsequent home leaves and in prison-based work - and eventually on the prisoner's release through supervision.

6. In the presentation material during the conference it will be important for the Prison to support the prisoner in describing the process, gains and problems inherent in a prison sentence - particularly as it comes to its conclusion. The Probation Service may be best placed to support the family during the conference in relation to the pain they have experienced during the sentence and in their ongoing concerns of adjusting back with the family changed. The Police may wish to represent the concerns of the community and the victims of crime in the area to whom the prisoner is felt to be a

risk - this may involve a commitment to offer support to the offender in relation to risk of relapse.

7. Given the response from victims and offenders seen in other examples of the restorative justice process it is clear that a major benefit is feeling they have had a say in the process and this is reflected in the higher completion rate of action plans subsequent to a restorative justice conference than in other non-custodial disposals. The likelihood of the process assisting in the resettlement process is considerable and any project commenced should evaluate the effectiveness of the approach both in relation to reconviction rates but also in terms of the prisoner's feelings about returning from prison and those of the community receiving the prisoner back.

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