

THE PENNSYLVANIA PRISON SOCIETY'S RESTORATIVE JUSTICE PROGRAM

The Pennsylvania Prison Society's Restorative Justice Program seeks to change the lives of incarcerated people and the prison environment by challenging all to embrace values of accountability, respect, restoration and nonviolence.

"My mind kept rolling back and forth after the RJ seminar. It opened up ways of seeing victims and what they go through when a crime is committed. It made me wonder "What would it be like if someone killed my father?" The most hurting thing for me is that after knowing all this being a lifer does not give me the opportunity to redeem my family, my community and myself."

- Restorative Justice Seminar Participant

The program provides opportunities for incarcerated men and women:

- To explore the victim experience and ways in which to be accountable for their crimes
- To explore their own personal experiences with victimization and their needs for healing
- To apply restorative justice principles in their everyday lives

The Restorative Justice Program invites community members to assist incarcerated individuals in their journeys of responsibility and personal healing and in rebuilding relationships with the broader community. In addition, the Restorative Justice Program strives to build relationships with the Department of Corrections and victim service providers and advocates, including the Office of the Victim Advocate.

Current program activities include:

- 24 hour prison-based restorative justice seminar
- Day of Responsibility
- A body in motion
- Opportunities for shared dialogue
- Mediation support services

"The last RJ class helped me to see crime and justice from different sides; victims, families and the community. It made me realize that what I did harmed many people. It also reminded me how I connect with people and how that connection can be opportunities for either growth or destruction."

- Restorative Justice Seminar Participant

The program supports the efforts of restorative justice committees formed by incarcerated men and women at various prisons around the state. The members of these committees develop projects that educate about, and put into practice, restorative justice within prison.

The Restorative Justice Program is currently exploring the creation of a prison-based victim services model. This model would serve men and women who become victims of crime while incarcerated or when their families and communities of care become victims on the outside.

People behind the walls have taught us what restorative justice is for them.

Definitions of restorative justice written by incarcerated men and women:

Restorative justice looks at who has been hurt by a crime and how their needs can be met.

Restorative justice is the attempt to replace what was taken. Be it concrete or abstract. Restorative justice is a healing balm for victim, offender, community and family.

Restorative justice means recognizing and accepting one's responsibility for the destruction of human relationships and making concrete efforts to repair and promote healing.

A chance to try and repair the harm. A chance to improve upon one-self.

Restorative justice is healing broken relationships and abuses by people, for people.

The willingness to openly commit yourself to admitting your wrongs and facing those you wronged.

Restorative justice is the act or philosophy of bringing victim and offender together in order to humanize the process of justice and satisfy the hurts or violation experienced by the victim.

Building back our communities with those who made mistakes, healing all those harmed - building instead of blaming.

It puts victim and offender first. It tries to right the wrong and restore relationships.

An approach to justice through which the needs and concerns of the victim, offender, and community are addressed.

"Making it right" without harming those involved.

Restorative justice brings all parties together to work at a way to right the wrong and provides a venue for victims and offenders to be heard.

Restorative justice addresses the healing of both the victim and offender. Also, it's a process by which the offender can be reintegrated into the community.

Working toward bringing victim/offender and community to a sense of repair for the future. Work toward repairing harms done and making right for all parties.

The ability of the victims, offender and community to interact and seek solution to preventing future occurrences. Accepting responsibility for role in offense and all parties being accountable.

Restorative justice is the process where the victim, offender and community define the justice process. Restorative justice brings about the healing of the community, victim and offender when a crime occurs.

Why are people who have committed a crime interested in restorative justice?

We have heard the following reasons from incarcerated men and women...

Restorative justice connects with what is in their hearts about their crime and what they would like to do to make amends.

They believe that it is part of the human drive to want to make things right and to build peace.

They know things will be better if the "problem is solved."

They want to understand the impact of their crime and to hear what victims think and feel following the crime, including what they think and feel towards the offender.

They want to promote the idea of responsibility and have opportunities to be responsible.

They want to strive for a personal greater good and for personal growth.

Restorative justice provides a vision for a different way of doing things in one's personal life. Sometimes one needs to "step away" from an interaction (avoid violence) and sometimes you need to "step toward" an interaction (build peace).

They want to make amends directly to the person who they hurt.

They want to talk about what they did and why.

They want to express remorse and share how they feel about the crime.

It provides them a forum to explore self-forgiveness, forgiveness from others and reconciliation.

It can stop hatred, anger and retribution.

The Power of Restorative Justice

By Barb Toews, Restorative Justice Program Manager

The following column is reprinted with permission from Correctional Forum (September 2002), a quarterly publication of the Pennsylvania Prison Society.

The Pennsylvania Prison Society is committed to advocating for a humane, just and restorative correctional system, and promoting a rational approach to crime. As an offender advocacy agency, the Prison Society is in a unique position

The Prison Society's Restorative Justice Program is currently focused on understanding the role of restorative justice in prison and how the philosophy can be used to provide services and resources for incarcerated men and women. This article offers perspectives from Marie Scott, Bryan McMichael, Jafar Saidi and Bruce Bainbridge, all of whom are individuals incarcerated with life sentences at Muncy, Dallas, Huntingdon and Graterford, respectively. Their thoughts reflect four key reasons why restorative justice has a role to play in prison.

Restorative justice offers a new set of values to guide the justice process:

"It has the potential of generating a new dispensation and definition of justice" which has spiritual foundations in healing, forgiveness, character and compassion. (Jafar Saidi)

"It brings a humane element to a system. . . . it seems to me there are a multitude of undercurrents that maintain the current system. Each having its own ideas of punishment, revenge in someone else's name, and retribution that seems to be out of focus." (Bruce Bainbridge)

It is "an alternative to the punitive, combative, and devastating ideals [incarcerated individuals] have always known." (Bryan McMichael)

Restorative justice offers an opportunity for meaningful accountability:

It assures "victims that offenders are taking responsibility for the impact of their crimes on victims. It also assures offenders that changes they make while accepting that responsibility serves a far greater purpose than their previous lack of responsibility. . . ." (Marie Scott)

"Investigating the idea that it's not the state whose been harmed, but the community, including the victim, can go a long way towards dispelling the long

held belief that completing one's sentence absolves the offender of any further obligation or responsibility for the effects of the offense." (Bryan McMichael)

"It brings accountability in a realistic way, responsibility and obligations on a much more meaningful level. A direct result of my action." (Bruce Bainbridge)

Restorative justice offers a way to respond to the harms that have been experienced by individuals who have committed crimes and to contribute to their personal growth:

"The concept is a process for me that is more about promoting healing, growth and a sense of well-being [and it] certainly prepares me to go back to my community - or my immediate community - to function better." (Bruce Bainbridge)

"There are so many scars inside prisoners, it is incredible that we survive. . .we humans are products of our past which is a part of our today. . . .unwittingly, with a great deal of denial, we repeat these physical, emotional and mental patterns. The only way to stop the cycle and break the pattern is to go back and deal with the pain. . . .explore the feelings, unpack the guilt and free ourselves from the baggage we picked up along the way." (Jafar Saidi)

Restorative Justice offers hope for change:

"The transformative potential of restorative justice seems to be our best ticket out of the mess we have created." (Jafar Saidi)

Efforts to be responsible "will not go unrecognized." (Marie Scott)

"Had I not become more aware of restorative justice and its attributes, I probably would not have as strong a hope and compassion for the families I've hurt so much nor the willingness to believe things do change and happen to those that genuinely believe in a better future." (Bruce Bainbridge)

The Prison Society shares the vision of and hope for the possibilities of restorative justice with Bruce, Marie, Jafar, Bryan and the other incarcerated men and women who are interested in the power and potential of restorative justice.

Ideas for doing restorative justice

Here are some ideas ...

- Learn more about the idea of restorative justice
- Reconcile and strengthen relationships with your family and loved ones
- Support those around you who are crime victims
- Look at how you have been impacted by violence and find ways to heal
- Work with young people to help build their self-esteem and to help them feel like they belong
- Get involved with programs that are offered in prison
- Read books about justice and peacebuilding
- Mentor young people to help them live responsible lives
- Take an impact of crime class
- Make donations of money or time to organizations that help people in need
- Draft a letter to your victim (Department of Corrections policy says that you may not send the letter)
- Maintain relationships with people from your home community
- Pay your restitution (restitution is payment to the victim for damages caused by the crime)
- Imagine what "restoration" means in your life and try to make it a reality
- Participate in activities and projects that involve community people
- Journal about your involvement in crime and make an effort to be responsible for your actions
- Make changes in your life
- Learn about organizations that strive to improve human and community conditions
- Look for ways to practice restorative justice in prison

(Ideas generated through conversation with incarcerated men and women; prepared by Barb Toews, Pennsylvania Prison Society)

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One sees great things from the valley, only small things from the peak. - G. K. Chesterton