

2008 Innovations Awards Program APPLICATION

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ID # (assigned by CSG): 08-M-25MN

Please provide the following information, adding space as necessary:

State: **Minnesota**

Assign Program Category (applicant): **Public Safety/Corrections**

1. Program Name **VOCARÉ–Victims, Offenders & Community – A Restorative Experience**
2. Administering Agency **Minnesota Department of Corrections**
3. Contact Person (Name and Title) **Tim Hansen, Restorative Justice Planner**
4. Address **1450 Energy Park Drive, Suite 200, St. Paul, MN 55108**
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9. Please provide a two-sentence description of the program.
VOCARÉ groups bring individuals together to learn directly from one another about the impact of crime and the restorative potential of open communication. Victims, offenders and community members meet for an intensive weekend or over multiple weeks in a respectful environment to address the causes and consequences of crime in a structured personal way.
10. How long has this program been operational (month and year)? Note: the program must be between 9 months and 5 years old on March 1, 2008 to be considered.
VOCARÉ groups began in the Spring of 2006, and we have completed 8 groups since then.
11. Why was the program created? What problem[s] or issue[s] was it designed to address?
Crime victims/survivors were requesting opportunities to dialogue with offenders (not the offender from their personal cases, however) about why crime happens and to explore whether or not offenders truly understand the impact of their criminal behavior. Offenders were expressing the desire to learn more about how their criminal actions had affected individuals and society as a whole and to have an opportunity to be accountable for their crimes as well as to try to explain what led to their actions. Both parties were expressing a desire for “something good, some learning, something positive” to come out of the horrible circumstances they had endured. Community involvement encourages all individuals to recognize that crime does not happen in a vacuum and that we each share in the responsibility to address the needs of victims and uphold societal values and expectations.
12. Describe the specific activities and operations of the program in chronological order.
Two VOCARÉ Facilitators are chosen by the Restorative Justice Planner Tim Hansen. They are selected from a bank of trained individuals who have received extensive training in Victim Sensitive Offender Dialogues. Once the facilitators are chosen, they are responsible for the coordination of the project at the specific correctional facility in partnership with designated facility staff.

Offenders apply and are then interviewed and selected based on specific criteria. The application process includes completing a written questionnaire which is then submitted to the facilitators. Based on the results of the questionnaire an appointment is scheduled to conduct a face to face interview. The facilitators consult with case managers, psychology staff and other staff at the facility. One final factor that determines which offenders are selected for the group is the attempt to 'match' their criminal charge to the victimization experienced by the selected victims/survivors. For example if the victims selected for the group were; a parent of a murdered child, a spouse of a murder victim and an assault survivor, then offenders with similar offense histories would be preferred. For the weekend format there are 3 offenders who will be invited to participate. The multi week version includes 4-5 offenders.

The Facilitators interview and chose the victims/survivors and community members from a list of potential candidates that have expressed interest in VOCARÉ. Strong partnerships have been developed with several victim service agencies including Parents of Murdered Children, From Death to Life, Survivors Resources, MADD and other various victim services. The application process for victims/survivors includes an extensive face to face interview. The victims/survivors are chosen based on a number of factors, including their readiness, willingness and motivation for wanting to be involved. Consultation with victim advocates and other identified support persons in their lives is an important part of the selection process as well. The community members are chosen based on their willingness to commit to the project and to talk about the impact crime has on the community as well as any experiences they have personally had related to crime. Community member have included college students, criminal justice professionals, clergy, victim advocates and other interested individuals. For the weekend format there are 3 victim/survivors and 3 other community members chosen. The multi week versions could include 4-5 victims/survivors and 4-5 other community members.

Once the group has been chosen they come together for an orientation which clarifies the expectations of the VOCARÉ project. Values and guidelines are defined that will be the foundation for how the group proceeds. Each participant will be expected to share their story in an honest and open manner. Time is given after each story for comments, reflections and questions from the group. The format of the group is based on the Circle Process in which a talking piece is used which empowers the person who has the talking piece to speak uninterrupted. The rest of the group is empowered to actively/deeply listen to the person speaking. The talking piece can be suspended for more open conversation at the discretion of the Facilitators. There is consideration taken as each session is nearing the end to debrief and check in with each participant.

Consideration is also taken regarding the impact on group participants during their participation. Officers in the unit where the participating offenders live are made aware of the VOCARÉ project and how these offenders may be affected. Individual Case Managers will also be informed. The participating offenders will be encouraged to seek out positive peer support for the duration of the group as well. Psychology Staff are aware of the VOCARÉ project and have agreed to be available before and after the project to assist with any preparation or debriefing the offenders may need.

Victim/survivor and the other community participants are required to have a designated support person available to connect with in the event that they need to process the VOCARÉ experience more deeply outside the group experience. Everyone's personal wellbeing is a concern through out the project.

Facilitators check in with all participants through out the experience. Post group surveys are handed out to solicit feedback on the program successfulness.

13. Why is the program a new and creative approach or method?

The criminal justice system often separates and isolates those most directly impacted by crime. The offender has representation that often advises him or her to be silent about what happens so that the “best deal possible” can be negotiated through the legal system. The victim or surviving family members are often silenced through the justice system as well. Facts are gathered from them and then the state takes on the case on behalf of society.

Minnesota Department of Corrections has a mission statement that includes “Holding offenders accountable while offering opportunities for change, restoring justice for victims and creating a safer Minnesota.”

The VOCARÉ program is based on the restorative philosophy that if crime is a wound, justice needs to be about healing. It's based on the premise that providing opportunities for those most directly affected by crime to communicate with one another can bring about greater accountability and improved future behavior of offenders and help provide greater healing for those harmed by crime. Almost all victims are haunted with the question of “Why did this happen?” In most cases the offender is the only person who can truly answer that question. Proudly, Minnesota is among the 21 states that currently offer Victim Offender Dialogue-VOD services to victims wanting to meet face to face with the direct offender in their case. But most victims of severe crimes are not willing, able or interested in meeting directly with the person that harmed them or killed their loved one. And some offenders are unable or unwilling to meet face to face with direct victim in their case as well.

Creating a dialogue situation where victims can meet with and talk to an offender who committed a similar crime has proven to be extremely beneficial. And an offender having the opportunity to meet with and speak to individuals who may have some similar experiences to those affected by their criminal actions can be challenging but also very impactful. VOCARÉ was developed to provide these types of surrogate dialogue opportunities for victims and offenders. The results have been described as “incredibly healing” and “life renewing”. A recent study has also shown a dramatic decrease in the number of discipline violations with offenders who have taken part in VOCARÉ groups. There seems to be a greater sense of accountability for their actions and a greater willingness to improve their life situations.

14. What were the program's start-up costs? (Provide details about specific purchases for this program, staffing needs and other financial expenditures, as well as existing materials, technology and staff already in place.)

The start up costs were minimal for this project. The main investment was in training of facilitators. The required 6 day training was \$800 per person. Once trained community facilitators are compensated \$750 - \$1,000 for conducting groups. There are costs associated with providing assists with travel, meals and lodging for some victims and other community members as well.

15. What are the program's annual operational costs

Each group costs approximately \$4,000 to conduct. We have completed 8 groups to date.

16. How is the program funded?

Limited funds are available through the Departments of Corrections to support these groups. We are currently seeking grant funding to support expanding the program. Offenders have also raised over \$5,000 in an effort to provide for the financial needs of victim participants. These funds are used to pay for gas, lodging and meals for victims who have to travel a long distance to take part in a VOCARÉ group.

17. Did this program require the passage of legislation, executive order or regulations? If YES, please indicate the citation number.

No it did not.

18. What equipment, technology and software are used to operate and administer this program
Nothing special – just phones and email to be in touch with the participants.

19. To the best of your knowledge, did this program originate in your state? If YES, please indicate the innovator's name, present address, telephone number and e-mail address. This particular dialogue structure between offenders, victims and other community members was created in Minnesota in collaboration with the University of Minnesota Center for Restorative Justice and Peacemaking. The main innovators included Tim Hansen and Chris Furlong at the Minnesota Department of Corrections; Sheryl Wilson, Annie Roberts, and Dr. Mark Umbreit at the Center **for Restorative Justice and Peacemaking**, 284 Peters Hall, 1404 Gortner Ave, St. Paul, MN 55108, (612) 624-4923, Fax: (612) 625-8224, rjp@umn.edu.

20. Are you aware of similar programs in other states? If YES, which ones and how does this program differ?

There are similar projects in TX, WI, PA and WA. However, these programs are designed for the purpose of developing deeper victim impact understanding for the offenders involved in the groups. Victims are involved only to the extent that their story can impact the offenders. VOCARÉ differs in that all participants, victim, offenders and other community members are included equally and the shared outcome of deeper understanding for everyone is held as the central focus.

21. Has the program been fully implemented? If NO, what actions remain to be taken?

The demand is growing for more and more VOCARÉ groups to take place both inside correctional facilities and in the community. Resources are limited and until further funding is secured the number of groups can not be expanded to meet the need.

22. Briefly evaluate (pro and con) the program's effectiveness in addressing the defined problem[s] or issue[s]. Provide tangible examples.

After participating in VOCARÉ dialogues, victims and community members have changed their attitudes dramatically about whether or not offenders show remorse and accept responsibility for their crimes. They also discover that the wounds and healing of offenders are critically important to community health and safety. Offender accountability is also impacted. A cohort of 24 offender participants had a combined total of 477 behavioral violations prior to VOCARÉ sessions, compared with only 27 violations after participating. These results indicate that reducing recidivism for restorative justice participants is a serious possibility for future exploration and evaluation. MN DOC researchers are involved in an ongoing evaluation of restorative justice activities.

Participants (victims, offenders and community members) of a recent group volunteered to describe their experience. Here are examples of their descriptions:

My motivation changed from being a selfish one to wanting to help others to heal.

VOCARÉ changed my life.

I realized that his story is just the other side of my story.

I saw that I was becoming what I fear and hate.

I'm transformed.

I am through with secrecy.

We are marginalizing people and our society needs to do better.

That's a part of the world that by the sheer grace of God I never really comprehended existed, and I don't know how you lived through it.

I got what I needed, after not getting it from years of costly therapy and confrontation.

We're all part of the same story.

We need to get this out in the open. Openness leads to prevention.

I'm not naïve about harm and violence, but the way out is the path of reconciliation, and recognizing what we have in common.

Project supporters are excited to see that the impact is as much about society as a whole - building and restoring community health - as about individual growth. A current project

challenge is to understand how to bring these transforming experiences to the community to have a larger impact.

23. How has the program grown and/or changed since its inception?

The current program has evolved overtime. Initial groups were larger and were conducted over multiple weeks. We reduced the size of the group to provide time for deeper dialogue and reflection amongst all participants. Also providing an intensive weekend version has allowed individuals who could not make multi week commits to be involved. Participants whose crime or victimization involved a sexual offense were initially excluded. We recently completed a very successful group that focused specifically on sex offenses. We are now preparing to conduct a group focused on domestic violence – a topic previously excluded as well. We are learning that perhaps with skilled facilitators, careful screening of participants and appropriate program over site no subject is beyond the possibility of restorative dialogue.

24. What limitations or obstacles might other states expect to encounter if they attempt to adopt this program?

There may be initial hesitation from crime victims and victim advocates to support and/or be involved in such groups. To often victims have been ‘used’ for offender treatment programming. It will take time to building strong working relationships and the trust needed to overcome this concern.

The need for appropriate training is crucial for all individuals facilitating these types of dialogue groups. Careful over site and consultation by a program Coordinator is also essential to the success of this type of program.

There may also be security concerns expressed by correctional facility staff about bringing outsiders into a correctional facility, especially for the intensive weekend version of this group. All procedures developed must be in compliance with designated security protocols. There is a way to screen participants and structure this type of group process so that everyone remains safe. We have not had a single security incident related to these groups and the outcomes have been amazingly successful for all involved.