



Promising Practices

Circles of Support and Accountability: An Innovative Approach to Sex Offender Reintegration

The [Circles of Support and Accountability \(CoSA\)](#) model represents a groundbreaking, restorative justice approach to support reintegrating individuals who have committed sexual offenses and present as high risk and high need. By fostering supportive accountability, CoSA holds participants responsible for their actions and provides essential reentry support. This approach addresses a gap in the traditional punitive responses to sexual violence, which often fail to effectively prevent re-offenses.

CoSAs are composed of an inner circle, typically a person released from prison for a sexual offense called a core member, and three to five volunteer community members who provide support and accountability and an outer circle composed of professionals such as law enforcement, probation and parole, treatment providers, victims' advocates and others. The role of the inner circle members is to

engage the core member, hold them accountable and connect them with needed services and resources, such as identification documents and housing. The outer circle provides a higher-level of technical expertise. Typically, CoSAs also employ a coordinator who manages the program and ensures that inner circle volunteers reach out to outer circle members when and if needed.

Participation is contingent on core members accepting responsibility for the harm done by their actions. Volunteers can range in background and life experience, but often come from the faith community. These volunteers play an extremely vital role in the model, as they are meant to model healthy relationships and provide support to the core member on a variety of interpersonal skills including how to resolve conflicts.

The Philosophy Behind CoSA

People who have committed sexual offenses have three times the number of [Adverse Childhood Experiences \(ACEs\)](#) and, due to the nature of their offenses, may have limited family support, which can lead to difficult reentry into society. CoSAs emphasize support for the reentering individual, or core member, but as an overarching goal, the program aims to prevent further sexual violence in the community. As such, the key tenets of the program are no more victims, no one is disposable, no one does this alone, and the community is responsible for its victims and those who offend against them.

CoSA is focused on high-risk high need individuals, and as such, conforms to the principles of the risk, need and responsivity model, used to craft tailored recommendations for prison release.

Circle practices, as communal and egalitarian conflict resolution, come from indigenous communities, both in the United States and Canada, and are a key element of restorative justice practices. The first CoSA began in the 1990s in Canada, utilizing volunteers from a local faith-based community.

Implementation and Results



In the United States, [Vermont is a leader in the CoSA space](#)—the state has funded programs since 2006, and in 2009 received a Second Chance Act grant to evaluate the CoSA process. [The study](#) noted that the strength of these types of programs lies in the power of healthy relationships as a crime deterrent. In Vermont, CoSAs operate through community justice centers across the state and are supported by Department of Corrections funding.

Vermont has also expanded participation in its CoSAs beyond individuals convicted of sexual offenses to include individuals convicted of other serious offenses as well. Like all CoSAs, core members must choose to participate in the circle. Typically, inner circles meet weekly for a year, sometimes longer, while outer circles meet quarterly for check-ins and status updates.

[Research indicates promising results for CoSAs](#)—both through return on investment (ROI) and through lower rates of recidivism for core members with sexual offense history deemed moderate or high risk/need. A [2016 study](#) by the University of Vermont evaluated the outcomes of 139 circle participants and 139 individuals receiving no CoSA experience and found circle participants were half as likely to commit a felony three-to-four years post release.

Ultimately, the CoSA model is about recognizing the humanity in individuals who have committed sexual offenses, involving the community in collaborative solutions, and fostering a voluntary path to healing and accountability, all aimed at preventing future victimization and creating safer, more compassionate communities.

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