

COSA News

Circles of Support and Accountability

Center for Peacemaking and Conflict Studies
Fresno Pacific University
Fresno, California

cosa@fresno.edu 559-453-3448
<http://peace.fresno.edu/cosa/>
Clare Ann Ruth-Heffelbower, Program Director

Building safer communities by providing circles of support and accountability for released sex offenders

April, 2008

Vol. 2, No. 1

Circles

The number of Circles keeps growing! Seven Circles are currently meeting. That puts us on target with our goal of having seven Circles formed by the end of March 2008. Three more Circles are in the formation process and we have an appointment to meet with another potential Core Member soon. We may find ourselves ahead of schedule in Circle formation!

Participation in COSA continues to energize volunteers as they see the difference it makes for Core Members. Core Members freely express their gratitude for their Circle and reflect on the difference it is making in their lives. Here are a few things we've heard recently from Core Members—

One man told about how he grew up with family members who were addicts and alcoholics and who were in and out of prison. "I thought I would break the cycle," he said, "but I didn't. I still want to break the cycle. I need your help to do it."

Another Core Member reflected on the fact that he's never had any friends—just acquaintances. He looks forward to changing that with his Circle.

Still another man talked about struggles he's been having related to work and frustrations with the difficulty of getting a permanent job with felonies on his record—not to mention a sex offense! He reflected that he has recently felt the same as he did at an earlier time when he dealt with such challenges by returning to drugs and eventually to prison. "I didn't have a Circle then," he said, expressing the difference it makes have a group that supports him and to whom he feels accountable.

Building More Circles . . .

Our referrals from parole have been increasing. Things have yet to be put in place so we can begin our intake/screening process while an offender is

still in prison. While that is still our goal, we are discovering that Circles play an important role in an offender's reentry at whatever point they are formed. The support of positive human relationships is needed at all points along the way!

Volunteers Needed!

With the exciting growth we're experiencing, we continue to need more volunteers. The three Circles in the formation process call for 12-15 volunteers—and referrals keep coming! Ex-offenders are asking for help and we don't want to turn them away! If you would like to volunteer, know someone who would like to volunteer, or would like more information, contact Clare Ann at 453-3448 or email her at clareann@fresno.edu. Clare Ann can also put you in touch with current volunteers who are eager to share about their experience. Be sure to read the article in this newsletter, "Why I Am a COSA Volunteer."

Orientation and Volunteer Training

Orientation provides an introduction to the COSA program. Volunteer Training is for volunteers and for persons who might consider being volunteers. Consider attending an Orientation or Training to help you decide if you would like to serve as a COSA Volunteer.

COSA Orientation

Tues, April 15 7:00-8:30 p.m.
University Mediation Center (4888 E. Townsend)
Fresno Pacific University

COSA Volunteer Training

Fri., May 9 6:30-9:00 p.m.
Sat. May 10, 8:30 a.m. – 3:30 p.m.
Fresno Pacific University

For more information or to reserve a place at the orientation or training, call Clare Ann at 453-3448.

Why I Am a COSA Volunteer

Released sex offenders are labeled “the worst of the worst.” So why would anyone actually choose to work with them, to give them our time, to share a bit of our lives with them and give them the time of day to hear their stories? For me, the answer is multifaceted.

My first and highest priority for working with COSA core members is that as a survivor I am passionately committed to “no more victims.” I intimately understand the devastation that sexual assault has on the lives of people. And, I believe that only by helping these core members change their behavior can we make a difference in their lives and dramatically increase the chances that they will make no more victims. COSA’s reported success in Canada is remarkable (83% reduction in recidivism!), and we can have the same success here in Fresno.

Secondly, I firmly believe that “no one is disposable.” People who commit sex offenses are no less a child of God than I am. Jesus did not turn away from the miserable and afflicted. And while I imperfectly strive to be a model of loving kindness, I know that our core members have a much greater chance of success in a Circle where they are held accountable for their actions at the same time that they are lifted up by my appreciation and respect for their commitment to changing their lives.

A key part of COSA is that it is a voluntary program. These people are asking for our help, and most of society rejects and scorns them. They have very few people to turn to, very few re-entry programs that will accept them, extreme restrictions on their housing and movement in society, and hardly any chance to get a decent job. The stress upon re-entry into society is intense and only serves to increase their chances of re-offending. The most important time for society to step forward is during this critical time of transition – and they are asking for our help.

And let’s face it - they are going to be released into our community whether we like it or not, whether we are aware of it or not, and whether we help them or not. We can’t rely on the police or parole to watch them twenty-four hours a day. If I want my community to be a better and safer place, then I feel a responsibility to be a part of that. And, our core members want that, too. They do not want to re-offend. Ultimately, this brings me a sense of peace that sustains me through this work – a sense of peace that I am making a difference, for myself, for the core member, for our community, and for our children that deserve to live a life without the trauma of sexual assault. There is no greater work that I could do.

I invite you to join this rewarding work and look forward to hearing the stories of your Circle’s success!

Peace and Blessings, Alicia Kinton

Sharing the COSA Vision and Experience

We have increasing opportunities to share the COSA story. We presented a workshop at the American Society of Victimology Symposium in Fresno in March. In May we will be doing a workshop at the California Coalition on Sexual Offending in San Francisco.

COSA Beyond Fresno . . .

A recent article in the journal of the Association for Treatment of Sexual Abusers (ATSA) reported on COSA in the United Kingdom. A COSA program adapted from the Canadian model became operational in the UK with three pilot projects in 2002. Since then 70 Circles have been formed. Over a six-year period, no Core Member in that program has been reconvicted of a sexual offense. There is interest in expanding COSA to other regions of the UK.

Meanwhile, here at home questions have been raised by several people as to whether COSA could expand to Tulare County. There have been inquiries from other areas as well. Opportunities abound!

Don’t forget!

**COSA Orientation
April 15**

**COSA Volunteer Training
May 9-10**

**COSA Needs
You!**