

# COSA News

## Circles of Support and Accountability

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

September, 2008

Vol. 2, No. 3

### Circles

We have nine active Circles right now, after one Circle was discontinued over the summer. The last two months have been a period of stabilizing and strengthening the existing Circles. After summer vacations we've taken stock of where we are and are in the process of adding several new volunteers to existing circles. It continues to be exciting to see growth taking place in Core Members. We continue to marvel at the transforming power of community as we work to make "no more victims" a reality. We anticipate receiving more referrals from parole in the near future.

### In the COSA Office. . .

The past several months we have been blessed with additional help in the COSA office.

*Alicia Hinton* worked over the summer as a graduate assistant and was a great resource as she provided much-needed help. She is now focusing again on her studies at the Center for Peacemaking and at San Joaquin College of Law.

*Paulette Lovelace* worked with us for the month of August as volunteer coordinator, helping us take some giant steps forward in volunteer recruitment, training, and support.

THANK YOU to both of these very capable women!

In late August *Jordan Zickafoose*, a Mennonite Voluntary Service worker, came to work with COSA. He will be with us for at least one year. See his introduction in the next column. He's a great addition to the COSA staff. It's been great to have the extra help and his enthusiasm is contagious!

We will be moving the COSA office into another house here on Townsend Ave. in the next month. We're looking forward to having more space.

### Introducing Jordan . . .

*Hello all! I am pleased to write this letter introducing myself as the new Program Assistant here at COSA in Fresno. I am a Mennonite Voluntary Service (MVS) volunteer serving for one year, but hopefully it will work out that I may be able to stay for two. I am a recent graduate of Bluffton University (class of 2008) with a BA in Music Business from Lima, Ohio. By the end of my senior year, I knew I wanted to do some voluntary work, so I signed up for MVS. When deciding where I was going to be placed as a volunteer, I was contacted by a MVS support person here in Fresno explaining what opportunities there were here in Fresno. I was very interested in Restorative Justice. COSA was brought up and very briefly explained to me. Immediately I was excited to know such a program existed and that I might be able to be part of it.*

*To make a long story short, I was able to get on board the COSA train and here I am. I have enjoyed so much learning about the process and being placed in several circles. To see this program in action is a beautiful and powerful thing. I look forward to seeing how many circles we can get running and where this program will go. It is clear COSA is needed all over the world, and I hope the United States can start producing more COSA's around the country. I encourage anyone in the Fresno area to get in touch with Clare Ann Ruth-Heffelbower (Program Director) or myself about getting more information on COSA and possibly becoming a volunteer. I would also encourage anyone outside of Fresno, if you are interested in this program and have time and a passion for healing in every situation, please contact us and find out how you can start a circle in your own city/state. I look forward to writing many more letters about my experiences with COSA in the next year and hearing from new enthusiasts.*

### **What Happens in a COSA Circle?**

We need volunteers for the Circles that will start in the next few months. What does a COSA volunteer do? Here's a description what happens in a COSA Circle written by one of our volunteers:

*As a COSA volunteer the most common question I get asked by potential volunteers is "what do we do in Circles?" And I find that what we do is so simple that it is really rather hard for people to believe me. Most potential volunteers think they need to have special skills or training, but that isn't so. What we do is just sit together and talk about our lives – it's as simple and as powerful as that. And who doesn't have experience doing that?*

*The core members tend to isolate to protect themselves from criticism, judgment and the possibility of being violated for something we as non-offenders wouldn't even think twice about in our own lives. Having a group of people to talk to, accept them, listen to them, and share our own lives with them is a very powerful experience; something that we "regular folks" in society just take for granted. In a Circle we build trust with each other by sharing and following through with our agreements; such trust is a rare experience for a core member. The Circle members (volunteers) develop trust that the core member is doing everything he can to live a good and productive life. The core member develops trust that the Circle members have his best interests at heart. Together, volunteers and Core Member work at accountability and the goal of "no more victims."*

*Each core member has a unique set of needs. One may need help with the simple, mundane things in life, another with finding work, another with developing greater victim empathy, another with staying sober, another with relating to parole, another may need a buddy to attend a family function they otherwise couldn't go to.*

*Do you still think you have nothing to offer? Some core members simply need a compassionate ear, or someone to bake them a birthday cake because otherwise they would spend it alone, or someone to bring them a special Thanksgiving meal. My core member recently needed a buddy so he could run his 10K in over fourteen years. I can do that.*

*With such diversity, Clare Ann, the COSA director, does a great job of finding the right fit between volunteers and core members. If you're still unsure of what you may have to offer or if COSA is right for you, why not attend a circle meeting as a visitor to see for yourself the power of a Circle?*

### **COSA Volunteer Training**

Two volunteer trainings are scheduled this fall:

*September 26-27*

Fri., Sept 26 6:30-9:00 p.m.

Sat., Sept. 27 8:30 a.m.-3:30 p.m.

*November 14-15*

Fri., Nov. 14 6:30-9:00 p.m.

Sat., Nov. 15 8:30 a.m.-3:30 p.m.

The trainings will be held at Fresno Pacific University. For more information or to reserve a place at the training, call Clare Ann or Jordan at 453-3448.

### **COSA Barbecue**

About 30 people gathered on August 23 for the COSA barbecue and one-year anniversary celebration. There was lots of fun, good food, new friends, and deepened relationships with old friends. It is especially powerful to see Core Members incorporated into a gathering like this. Helping people move out of an isolated lifestyle is an important part of preventing reoffending.

### **COSA Funding**

We have been privileged to have stable and adequate funding for our start-up through our grant from California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. This grant runs through June 2009. We are now looking for funding beyond that date. We are looking for grants that might be available to us as well as considering other options. Please contact Clare Ann if you have leads or suggestions.

### **Article on COSA**

An excellent article on Circles of Support and Accountability appeared in the July 2008 issue of *Prison Service Journal*, published in the UK. The article even mentions Fresno as a place where there is a COSA program! You can download the article from:

[http://www.hmprisonservice.gov.uk/assets/documents/10003BCCcircles\\_of\\_support&account.pdf](http://www.hmprisonservice.gov.uk/assets/documents/10003BCCcircles_of_support&account.pdf)

Here's a quote from the article:

"The job of CoSA should not be sidelined as a really 'neat' re-entry model for high risk offenders. Its function is more than that. CoSA is an act of community *building*. To miss that is to have missed what the 'buzz' is all about in CoSA. Research . . . suggests that this model reduces sexual recidivism remarkably, but many are compelled to ask why that is. In our estimation, it is because the power of intentionally-formed community, working in collaboration with the formal justice system, has been brought to bear on a vexing social problem."