

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

July, 2008

Vol. 2, No. 2

Circles

The last few months have been busy ones for COSA! Ten Circles have been formed. It's exciting to see the Core Members and their Circles maturing. We are about to celebrate the one-year anniversary of the formation of our first Circle.

This has been a year of exciting experiences and a year of learning for us. Here are some things of note:

None of our Core Members have reoffended!

We have learned how important it is for a group of supportive individuals to walk with a sex offender who is determined not to reoffend as he seeks to reenter the community. See the article on the back of this Newsletter to hear about this first hand from one Core Member. As you might guess from the article, strong bonds of friendship and support have developed among Circle members in this Circle and in other Circles.

Each Core Member has grown significantly as we have worked with him. It is extremely rewarding for volunteers as they see the value of the Circle for the Core Member.

Employment is a major issue for most of our Core Members. Anyone with a felony on his or her record has an extremely hard time finding a job. For registered sex offenders it is even harder. We recognize that employment is a very important part of an offender's reentry into the community and we hope to work at developing relationships with some employers that can assist our Core Members in finding work.

Two of our Core Members are currently in prison on parole violations. One has a 5 month violation and the other 12 months. Is this failure? We choose to look at it as at least partial success—they didn't

reoffend, although they did each violate one of their conditions of parole. We are staying in contact and continuing to work at support and accountability with them.

Building More Circles . . .

We are receiving more referrals all the time. They come from a variety of sources—parole, family members, attorneys, other organizations. We are also receiving inquiries from individuals who are on parole or probation. Not all fit the category of "High Risk Sex Offender," but all could benefit from a Circle (as could any of us!) We are consciously becoming more selective as we identify the individuals with whom we will work.

Currently one new Circle is in the process of being formed and we are talking with several other potential Core Members. This, of course, means more volunteers are needed. 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.

Sharing the COSA Vision and Experience

In May we presented a workshop at the California Coalition on Sexual Offending (CCOSO). The workshop was well-attended and there was much interest in the COSA concept. Since then we have received inquiries from around the state as to whether COSA is available in other areas or whether we can work with particular individuals. We will be presenting two workshops at the Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers (ATSA) conference in Atlanta this fall.

Community Involvement

In May the Fresno County Board of Supervisors passed an emergency ordinance changing the

residency requirements for registered sex offenders from 2000 to 3000 feet from schools and parks and adding libraries, day care centers, and school bus stops to the restricted areas. This makes it very difficult for a sex offender to find a place to live in Fresno County. Evidence shows that there can be unintended consequences to restrictions like this. Offenders for whom life becomes too challenging are more likely to reoffend. In response to this new ordinance, we have been meeting with members of the Fresno County Board of Supervisors, advocating for the formation of a Fresno County Sex Offender Management Council which could make recommendations for policy based on evidence-based practices. Alicia Hinton, COSA volunteer and graduate assistant, is working with staff of one of the Supervisors on a proposal for such a Council.

Extra Help for COSA

With all of the activity, COSA has been in dire need of extra help. This summer we have been blessed with Alicia Hinton coming on staff part-time as a graduate assistant. We have also had a volunteer give some time to helping in the office with administrative tasks. In August we will have a volunteer from Mennonite Voluntary Service come to work with us for the next year. We are clearly in an expansion mode.

Future Funding

Speaking of expansion—one of our current activities is looking for funding possibilities for the future, both for continuing what we have begun and for expanding COSA. Our current funding from California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation runs through June, 2009. We have submitted one grant application and are looking for other possibilities. Anyone with any suggestions of where we might turn for future funding, please contact Clare Ann.

Evaluation

An evaluation of COSA is currently underway by Dr. Bernadette Muscat of California State University Fresno. She has spoken with Core Members and volunteers. If you are a volunteer and were not able to participate in a focus group, contact Clare Ann. It's not too late for your thoughts and experiences to be included.

Coming Events

COSA Barbecue and One-Year Anniversary Celebration

Saturday, Aug. 23 4:00-7:00 p.m.

Mennonite Community Church

5015 E. Olive, Fresno (NE corner of Olive & Willow)

Watch for more information

COSA Orientation & Training

Will be scheduled soon—dates to be announced

A Core Member's Thoughts About COSA

Before I was violated, I was pretty much isolated, doing everything for myself and not relying on anybody or having any support. My concept was that the only person that was going to get anything done was me. I did that for 15 months. And then I got violated for a very simple thing basically because I was not being observant of where I was and my surroundings. Then when I got released, my parole officer suggested I get in contact with COSA.

When I first met with my COSA Circle at the Mennonite Church, I didn't know them and they didn't know me. I thought the best thing to do was to just open up and let them know everything all the way back to 1976. They didn't back away which surprised me. They listened and they heard me out. And as the meetings went by it became clear they were there to be supportive. They weren't there to be judgmental. They weren't there to make orders or to tell me what I had to do. They shared their life with me and their hardships. They shared their worries and their fears, which gave me the opportunity to make the same choices.

I told them everything about me, even the most personal things. If they're going to be a supportive group then they have to know everything about me. That's important because they can't be supportive of me if I'm not willing to be honest with them. They shared their hopes and dreams, their angers, their fears, and so I feel I can do the same with them. They know me and they know my limitations. They are willing to help me and to work with my limitations. They are willing to help me make my life as full as I can, to help me get through my parole and to help me reach my freedom. And they're willing to stand there beside me once I'm off parole. COSA is a lifelong commitment because I need them and I've got nobody else. They're my friends. They're my family. They're more than just support.

Without COSA my life would be completely isolated. I was alone before and I thought I was getting along. I thought I was doing all right for 15 months and because I didn't have someone to point things out, to give me suggestions, to help me look at things maybe I was doing something that might be risky, and they help point those things out so I can turn those things around. I think if it wasn't for COSA I might be just as unobservant as I was the first time I got violated. It could happen again because I'm not thinking. I think I'm doing well but when I discuss things with COSA they can make suggestions about things I might want to check on first. And it helps me think things through. I wouldn't be without my support group and like I said, it's lifelong. I intend to stay free, and without a support group I don't know if I could guarantee that unless I lock the doors on myself and just never went out. And I can't see living a life like that. I need COSA. - John