

Anchorage Reentry Coalition
Meeting Minutes
11/17/23
Hosted online via Zoom

Representatives in attendance included those from the following organizations/groups:

Alaska Department of Corrections (Reentry Unit; HARS); Running Free Alaska; NeighborWorks Alaska; Partners for Progress/Partners Reentry Center; Alaska CHARR; The Arc of Anchorage; Dept. of Health (DBH; Breast & Cervical Cancer Screening); Alaska Public Defender Agency; Sen. Tobin's Office; New Life Development, Safe Families Project; Anchorage Public Library; AK Reentry Partnership; Prison Fellowship Academy; CDVSA; Road to Success; Alaska Mental Health Consumer Web; Anchorage Coalition to End Homelessness; Tanana Chiefs Conference; Alaska Justice Information Center; United Way; RuRAL CAP

Total Attendees: 34

Jonathan Pistotnik (Coalition Coordinator, Anchorage Reentry Coalition; jpistotnik@nwalaska.org)

Mr. Pistotnik opened the meeting and introduced the speakers and meeting agenda.

Chris Barton, Restorative Systems Administrator, Vermont Department of Corrections
(chris.barton@vermont.gov) - Vermont Community & Restorative Justice Circles of Support and Accountability

Mr. Barton introduced himself and began by providing a timeline and brief history of Circles of Support and Accountability (COSA) implementation in Vermont; he explained that VT began piloting restorative justice programs as far back as 1994 and that COSAs were first being implemented in Canada that same year. Mr. Barton presented some key events, including explaining that COSAs first began in VT in 2005. It was stated that Federal grants helped with initial funding and in 2015 the State Legislature approved funds for COSA programs. Mr. Barton explained that COSA programs are funded through the VT DOC and delivered by local community justice centers; at the peak there were 20 justice centers throughout the state running COSA programs.

Mr. Barton explained that COSA is a "reentry and integration program that works with high-risk individuals convicted of sexual and other offenses." He explained that some of the changes VT DOC made to the intervention from the original Canadian model was to work with those of moderate to high-risk vulnerability, to include those releasing on supervision, and to have paid reentry coordinators that serve as a liaison between program stakeholders and those involved. COSAs use volunteers to work collaboratively with the core member (the reentrant) to help integrate/reintegrate them back into the community. Mr. Barton provided COSA mission, goals, and principles. Mr. Barton reiterated this is intended for medium and high-risk individuals, and that for each COSA there are usually 3-4 trained community volunteers, a reentry coordinator, along with the core member; it is intentional to have a small group of people working with the core member and that there is value to have volunteers that are working with the core member that are not paid professionals but rather people that simply care about helping others. Mr. Barton went on to explain the balancing act that corrections has with the community providers; there is both a legal contract and a social contract at work with COSA programs.

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He explained more about what the volunteers do and expectations: 1 year commitment; weekly meetings; modeling healthy relationships and mentorship; holding core member accountable; and supporting core member in making amends for past harms. Mr. Barton explained that COSA is a restorative practice and is intentionally supportive rather than punitive, permissive, or neglectful. There have been 760 COSAs that have been started over the last 20 years in Vermont, and success is measured by completion of the year-long program, prevention of further victimization, no new charges, and integration into the community. Mr. Barton presented results from an academic study that demonstrated the positive impacts of COSA participation.

It was explained that in VT there was a shift towards restorative justice initiatives, and that buy-in by leadership, the justice centers, and the community all helped get COSAs going in VT. Mr. Barton shared that there was hesitancy and skepticism by some probation officers, but after it began to show results there was a great deal of support for COSA and a lot of buy-in. He added that COSA can work in rural locations, and that it is not necessary to deliver this intervention in an urban environment.

RESOURCES & LINKS

- PPT slides for this presentation are available.
- Vermont DOC, Restorative Justice: <https://doc.vermont.gov/content/restorative-justice>
- Vermont COSA & RJ Landing page: <https://humanservices.vermont.gov/highlighting-promising-practice/circles-support-and-accountability-cosa-and-restorative-justice>

Other Updates & Other Business

Jonathan Pistotnik - Mr. Pistotnik stated the Alaska Digital Equity Plan is open for public comment and that there is a specific section in the plan that focuses on incarcerated people and reentry, and there is substantial federal money attached to this plan. Mr. Pistotnik strongly encouraged the audience to read the plan and submit feedback. Mr. Pistotnik also reminded the audience that the annual RRR Conference was coming up and that there was still an opportunity to register.

Digital Equity Plan: <https://broadbandforalaskans.org>

Teri Tibbett (Alaska Reentry Partnership; advocacy@akreentry.org) – Ms. Tibbett explained that January 21-24, 2024 there will be a legislative fly-in, where people from around Alaska with interest in advocating for reentry and justice issues can come to Juneau and meet with lawmakers that will impact this population or this work. She explained it is lobbying so people that are prohibited from lobbying due to employment restrictions should be mindful of that. There is no funding attached to this to cover any costs affiliated with travel; there will be planned meals, an advocacy training, meeting with legislators, and there will be a reentry simulation hosted by the Juneau Reentry Coalition.

Louie Flora (Staff to Sen. Tobin) – Mr. Flora introduced himself as a staffer to Sen. Löki Tobin, who is a member of the Senate Judiciary Committee, Health and Social Services Committee, and Dept. of Corrections Budget

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Subcommittee. Mr. Flora welcomed people to come to Sen. Tobin's office while they are in Juneau for the fly-in. Mr. Flora also stated that a bill was being developed geared towards modifying the parole board statute to create more diversity on the parole board, create term limits, and increase the number to 7 members; the intention is to continue to develop that bill and introduce it during the session.

Lisa Morely (Interim Executive Director, Council for Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault) – Ms. Morely informed the audience that, in collaboration with two professors from UAA, she has been involved in hosting restorative justice talking circles (one in Anchorage and one in Juneau) and will be hosting one in Fairbanks. Mr. Morely shared an article that was written about CDVSA and restorative justice. She also explained that there are efforts to rewrite standards pertaining to domestic violence programming and also partner more closely with tribal-affiliated restorative justice programs.

Article link: <https://alaskabeacon.com/2023/11/15/alaskas-domestic-violence-council-explores-restorative-justice-methods-in-court-sentencing/>

Paul Williams (Reentry Case Manager, NeighborWorks Alaska; pwilliams@nwalaska.org) – Mr. Williams introduced himself and reminded the audience that NWA has a reentry program, and that he is available to help clients. He welcomed referrals and expressed an interest in collaboration.

Todd Stafford (Prison Fellowship Academy; todd_stafford@pfm.org) – Mr. Stafford is the Manager of the Prison Fellowship Academy at Palmer Correctional Center. He explained that there were 28 graduates of the program on Oct 31, and that the goal of the program was to reduce criminogenic behavior, encourage pro-social behaviors, and promote the values of good citizenship. Mr. Stafford explained that the program operates across the country, and that in some instances recidivism rates among participants can be as low as 10%. It is a 13-month program and they are set to launch a new cohort soon. Mr. Stafford stated that the program was initially launched out of Goose Creek in 2020, but due to COVID it was halted; it was subsequently moved to Palmer Correctional Center last year. He also explained that Prison Fellowship is a Christian organization, but people of all faiths or no faith may participate; he explained that there is some partnership with the Chaplaincy but it is not considered a part of the formal DOC Chaplaincy program.

Video link: <https://youtu.be/x0h1DGMV0Jg?si=V1FG4st8w8NSCso2>

Amanda Hillberry (SAME Justice AmeriCorps Program, Public Defender Agency) – Ms. Hillberry stated that she has a team of AmeriCorps members that are looking for a project to work on; if an organization has a project that could use some volunteer support they may be able to lend a hand. Feel free to reach out if this may be of interest: Amanda.hillberry@alaska.gov