

Circles of Support and Accountability: Engaging Community Volunteers in the Management of High-Risk Sexual Offenders

ROBIN J. WILSON, ANDREW McWHINNIE,
JANICE E. PICHECA, MICHELLE PRINZO
and FRANCA CORTONI

Robin J. Wilson is Professor and Program Co-ordinator, Humber Institute of Technology and Applied Learning, Toronto, Canada; Andrew McWhinnie is Director, Andrew McWhinnie Consulting Services, Victoria, British Columbia; Janice E. Picheca is Psychologist, Correctional Service of Canada; Michelle Prinzo is Psychological Associate, Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, Toronto, Canada; Franca Cortoni is Director of Programs Research, Correctional Service of Canada

Abstract: The release to the community of a sexual offender is frequently accompanied by intense coverage in the news media. Too often, the type of coverage these releases receive serves only to force many offenders into hiding or out of one community and into another. Forced to move to another community, the scapegoating process starts all over again. It is well known that secrecy and isolation are critical elements in sexual offending behaviour. Thus, forcing offenders into hiding does nothing to increase community safety or offender accountability and, arguably, increases the risk that new victims will be created. The most problematic releases are those in which sexual offenders arrive in a community with few or no links, and with little access to appropriate treatment and supervisory services. This article outlines a restorative approach to the risk management of high-risk sexual offenders in Canada using professionally-facilitated volunteerism. The Circles of Support and Accountability model grew out of an ad hoc, faith-based response to a situation much like that described above in South-Central Ontario, Canada. The resultant pilot project has since reached its twelfth anniversary and the model has proliferated both nationally and internationally.

In the summer of 1988, a notorious sexual offender, Joseph Fredericks, succeeded in achieving a conditional release allowing him to serve the remainder of his sentence in the community under supervision. He subsequently kidnapped, raped, and killed eleven-year-old Christopher Stephenson. Fredericks, himself, was later murdered in jail. Although other tragedies had occurred around about the same time, the Stephenson

case seemed to galvanise Canadian society and acted as a catalyst for sociopolitical change regarding the management of sexual offenders in Canada. In the ensuing years, and with the spotlight falling on some of our culture's sports and entertainment icons, sexual offending has become one of the most hotly-debated social pathologies. In their recent book *Innocence Betrayed*, Silverman and Wilson (2002) have likened the public's abhorrence of – and morbid fascination with – child molesters to a 'moral panic'. Certainly, it was unlikely that readers of major Canadian daily newspapers in the late 1980s would have happened upon words like 'pedophile' or 'predator' in print. However, today, hardly a news week goes by without a story making use of one or both of those words in describing some terrible event in a Canadian community.

Official Control

The recommendations of the Coroner's Jury in the Stephenson Inquest of 1993 had a dramatic impact on the Canadian judicial system. Indeed, the past ten years have been marked by numerous attempts to ensure greater official control of offenders. In Canada, these attempts generally fall in the following categories: (i) changes to sentencing practices; (ii) orders of prohibition; (iii) peace bond modifications; and (iv) sexual offender registries (SORs).

Canada has a long tradition of conditional release and parole; however, incidents like the Fredericks case have caused lawmakers to consider that there may be some offenders who should not be released at any point prior to sentence completion (referred to as warrant expiry date (WED) in Canada). In most cases, criminal offenders in Canada are allowed re-entry to communities under strict supervision, after having served two-thirds of their sentence. This is called statutory release. Facilitated re-entry has long been considered the safest and surest means of re-engaging offenders with their community, following sentence. However, in the 1990s, the Corrections and Conditional Release Act was amended to permit the detention of certain offenders until their WED. The following criteria must be met in order to 'detain' an individual past their statutory release date (SRD):

1. The offender must be serving a sentence for an offence involving crimes of violence or crimes against persons, and
2. The commission of the offence caused the death of or serious harm to another person and there are reasonable grounds to believe that the offender is likely to commit another such offence before the end of the sentence, or
3. The offence was a sexual offence involving a child and there are reasonable grounds to believe that the offender is likely to commit another sexual offence involving a child before the end of the sentence.

One of the more unfortunate side-effects of detaining offenders until the last day of their sentence (WED) is that these are often the very offenders most in need of a gradual, supervised re-entry to the community. They are

also the least likely to receive any form of assistance. Indeed, for many of these men (they are almost always men), the term 'reintegration' becomes something of a misnomer, as many of them were never 'integrated' in the first place. So, while the practice of detention is intended to protect the public for as long as possible by keeping the offender inside until the very last day of his sentence, it often has the opposite effect because it sets both the community and the offender up for failure. Further victims are almost a certainty.

Interestingly, in the realm of official control in Canada, it appears that some measures have been instituted as a means to accommodate the problems caused by earlier measures. For instance, the practice of detention has required the passage of at least two further pieces of legislation, both intended to manage the community risk of persons released at WED with no official supervision. In 1996, the Canadian federal government introduced changes to the peace bond section of the Criminal Code of Canada (CCC 810.1; 810.2):

Any person who fears on reasonable grounds that another person will commit an offence under certain sections of the Criminal Code of Canada, in respect of one or more persons who are under the age of fourteen years, may lay an information before a provincial Court judge, whether or not the person or persons in respect of whom it is feared that the offence will be committed are named. (Criminal Code of Canada, Section 810.1)

Generally, orders of this sort are sought prior to an offender's release at WED, and are brought before the Court by the Crown Attorney, acting on information contained in a police report based on information from a variety of sources. The offender, who is about to be released from prison after completing his sentence, is brought before the Court and charged with the peculiar offence of 'causing fear'. If convicted, he is sentenced to reside in the community under terms and conditions akin to being on probation or parole. In effect, the offender is sentenced not for behaviour he has already committed, but for behaviour he may engage in at some time in the future. Although civil libertarians have labeled this process (called '810 orders') 'proactive sentencing', and therefore an infringement of individual rights otherwise guaranteed under Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the Ontario Court of Appeal (*R v. Budreo* [2000] 142 C.C.C. [3d] 225 [ONT C.A.]; leave to appeal to Supreme Court of Canada dismissed [2000] S.C.C.A. #542) nevertheless upheld the constitutionality of the community's right to safety in abridging individual (that is, potential offenders') rights.

A further legislative attempt to ensure community safety came in revised dangerous offender legislation where, upon conviction, an offender could be sentenced to an indefinite term under revised dangerous offender provisions. As well, in a bid to ensure increased accountability for offenders at the expiration of their sentence for periods of up to ten years, new legislation was enacted in the form of long-term supervision orders (LTSO). Community supervision under the terms of LTSOs is now frequently given to those offenders whose risk profile did not warrant an indeterminate sentence (that is, designation as a dangerous offender).

In many cases, offenders handed LTSOs are also the same offenders who would be considered for detention and, indeed, many are nevertheless detained until WED, even though the imposition of LTSOs by the Court was made on the basis that the offender could be successfully maintained in the community under supervision.

Sexual Offender Registries

Although sexual offender registries (SORs) have been in place in the United States for many decades (for example, Jacob Wetterling Act, Megan's Law, Pam Lyncher Sexual Offender Identification and Tracking Act), Canada's first sexual offender registry, instituted in Ontario and named Christopher's Law, was only enacted in 2001. When the Ontario SOR was launched, it was heralded as a 'bold measure in community safety'; however, many have questioned whether the people of Ontario are really any safer now that Christopher's Law is in effect. A Canadian federal SOR was enacted in late 2004. SORs are based largely on three premises: (i) sexual offenders are 'predatory prowlers'; (ii) reoffence rates are high; and (iii) nothing else will work (John Howard Society of Alberta 2001).

Predatory Prowlers?

Relatively few sexual crimes (23% – Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics 1999) involve a stranger to the victim. In fact, it is generally known in the sexual offence literature that over two-thirds of offences occur in homes, specifically, the victim's home, and are committed by parents, step-parents, or a trusted family member or family friend. Further, it is also well known that the mixed feelings held by the child victim of a parent often prevent that child from reporting abuse by his/her parent. As a result, sexual offender registries are unlikely to protect people from victimisation by a parent or other family member. The public's view of a sexual offender as a sex-crazed, dirty old man with greasy fingers, hanging out in parks and playgrounds is patently false. In fact, the vast majority of child molesters seen by these authors look and behave quite similarly to most individuals in our communities, save for their sexual offending behaviour. For those few individuals who act on impulse (what some refer to as 'predatory' behaviour), the fact that they are listed on a sexual offender registry fails to act as a deterrent to their impulse behaviour. This fact has been demonstrated, sadly, in recent cases in both California and Florida, where known, duly registered sexual offenders have sexually reoffended. While SORs may act as a valuable law-enforcement tool, used to quickly identify potential suspects, they should in no way be thought of as increasing community safety and preventing further victims. Indeed, there is virtually no evidence in the literatures supporting such claims.

Reoffence Rates are High?

Essentially, the question to ask here is: 'Will past criminal records tell us who the future sexual offenders will be?'. A 1991 national survey of

Canadian sexual offenders in federal penitentiaries found that 25% of inmates currently serving a sentence for a sexual offence had been convicted in the past for sexual offences (Porporino and Motiuk 1991). Internationally, the average reoffence rates noted by Hanson in two benchmark meta-analyses of sexual offence predictor variables (Hanson and Bussière 1998; Hanson and Morton-Bourgon 2004) hover around the 10% to 15% range. Taking a rough average, the most likely scenario is that four out of five sexual offenders will not reoffend sexually. This means that a high proportion of currently active sexual offenders will not appear on any SOR. These are the sexual offenders we do not yet know about – those who have not yet been caught and who continue to offend.

Nothing Else will Work?

One review of studies relating to the effectiveness of treatment found that far more studies reported positive results (treated group with significantly lower recidivist rates than untreated) than inconclusive results (Federoff and Moran 1997). The Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers' (ATSA) Collaborative Data Project (Hanson *et al.* 2002) has recently demonstrated a treatment effect, in which the treated group reoffended at a rate considerably less than the untreated control group (10% *vs.* 17%, respectively). Results are also available showing that co-ordinated, multi-disciplinary approaches to community-based sexual offender management can further decrease recidivism (Wilson *et al.* 2000). Further, in terms of identifying who is at risk to reoffend sexually, research has shown that attitudes supportive of sexual offending are surprisingly poor predictors of sexual reoffence risk. However, Hanson and Morton-Bourgon (2004), in discussing these findings suggest: 'It may be that attitudes expressed within relationships of trust (e.g., in treatment) are more reliable risk indicators than those expressed in adversarial contexts' (p.16). The 'nothing works' argument is a tired old saw.

Compliance

In 1947, California was the first state to establish a sexual offender registry. There are now registries in each state, with the number of registered sexual offenders reportedly reaching a current US national total of nearly 550,000 (US National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, undated). However, issues related to compliance abound, with state SOR compliance rates varying from less than 50% to better than 80% (Center for Sex Offender Management 1999). The US National Center for Missing and Exploited Children suggests that a conservative estimate for 'lost' sexual offenders (that is, those who have not complied with regulations requiring them to report, among other things, their current address) stands at 100,000, owing to law enforcement's inability to track their whereabouts. They also say that the resources for supervising compliance with registration requirements are overwhelmed. With respect to Christopher's Law, the Ontario Government (Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services 2002) reported a 93% compliance rate for

signing onto the SOR. However, that percentage drops when one looks at the compliance rate for maintenance of current addresses and yearly check-ins (offenders listed on the Ontario SOR are required to report changes of address within 15 days, and are to physically check in with police on an annual basis). One could reasonably argue that those offenders who diligently comply with the terms and condition of any SOR are least likely to be a problem. It only makes sense that those who flout the law are those most likely to break it – either by refusing to register or maintain current data or, ultimately, by reoffending.

Despite the shaky premise on which SORs are instituted and the obvious difficulties in regard to compliance, SORs continue to be particularly popular with law enforcement, politicians, and the general public. Clearly, the police require accurate data regarding dangerous offenders and, for that reason, we believe that SORs do have some merit. Law-enforcement officials will argue – and we agree – that any tool allowing them to intercept the commission of a crime or even a crime ‘spree’ is a valuable protocol. However, we also strongly believe that the public has been misled into believing there are value-added safety issues of SORs. No matter how good any individual police service may be, it is unlikely that there will ever be sufficient resources to hire enough officers to ensure the totality of public safety. For us, a ‘best practice’ approach involves collaboration between respective operational, professional, and jurisdictional domains. This type of cross-jurisdictional communication is critical, and initiatives which encourage this type of communication and collaboration are to be encouraged. And, these initiatives must seek to involve the community in the process.

Circles of Support and Accountability

The offenders who cause the greatest degree of professional concern and community outcry in Canada are repeat sexual offenders released from prison at the end of their sentences. This occurs when the parole board judges an offender to be at such high risk that he cannot be released at any point earlier in the judicial mandate (see above). Paradoxically, these offenders, arguably those in most need of community supervision and professional attention, are those most likely to receive neither. Essentially, the day they reach the expiry of their warrant is the day they are no longer the jurisdiction of the government – they revert to being ‘free’ citizens. In a cruel system of logic that beggars description, the safety of both the community and the offender are jeopardised by a failure of the system to account for the ongoing needs of such offenders. Canadians were in dire need of a creative solution.

In the summer of 1994, Charlie Taylor was released from federal custody at the end of his sentence to a veritable media frenzy. As a repeat child molester, Charlie was well known to police and was the immediate topic of discussion in most households in the city to which he was released. The police answered the calls for action of the community with ‘around the clock’ surveillance, at a cost of tens of thousands of dollars in overtime.

Meanwhile, the local television station ran stories at every possible opportunity, complete with 'mug shot' photographs. Charlie was an instant pariah. However, he was also considerably institutionalised, having been in hospitals or other secure settings for the vast majority of his life, and he was developmentally delayed. But, lest the reader believe it is our intention to curry sympathy for him, be assured that Charlie had committed crimes that caused considerable and lasting harm for his victims. The key issue in the summer of 1994 was how to keep the community safe while ensuring that Charlie had a place in it.

The Reverend Harry Nigh was the pastor of a small, urban Mennonite congregation in the city to which Charlie was released. Prior to that release, institutional staff had tried to establish professional links in the community, to no avail. As a last ditch effort, the institutional psychologist contacted Reverend Nigh, whom Charlie had noted was formerly his religious leader. Initially, Reverend Nigh did not remember Charlie, and when he did remember him, his memory was that he didn't much care for him. However, in spite of his initial reluctance to have anything to do with this man, Reverend Nigh agreed to meet with Charlie and see what could be arranged. Together with several of his congregants, Reverend Nigh formed a group of supportive volunteers in a model that is now widely known as Circles of Support and Accountability (COSA – see Wilson, Huculak and McWhinnie 2002; Wilson and Picheca 2005; Wilson and Prinzo 2001; Wilson, Picheca and Prinzo 2005).

When a similar offender was released a few months later in neighbouring Toronto, the Reverend Hugh Kirkegaard, a colleague of Reverend Nigh's, decided to try the same approach. A short time later, the Mennonite Central Committee of Ontario (MCCO) accepted a small contract from the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) to establish a pilot project to investigate whether Reverend Nigh's approach could be operationalised and more broadly implemented. Parallel to that endeavour, a research protocol was established to ascertain the efficacy of Circles of Support and Accountability in promoting community safety, the results of which are discussed elsewhere (Wilson, Picheca and Prinzo 2005).

Formalised in 1996 (Mennonite Central Committee of Ontario 1996), the COSA model has now proliferated across Canada, into many of the United States, and has taken good hold in the Thames Valley, UK, with other projects in various stages of development around the world. What started out as an *ad hoc* response to a difficult situation has become something of an international *cause célèbre* in the toolbox of innovative community options for managing sexual offender risk.

COSA Mission Statement

To substantially reduce the risk of future sexual victimization of community members by assisting and supporting released men in their task of integrating with the community and leading responsible, productive, and *accountable* lives. (Correctional Service of Canada 2002, pp.6-7, italics added)

Target Population

The COSA initiative was originally conceived as a means to fill a gap in service left by government policy, that is, regarding those individuals detained until WED. These individuals are released without a formal process of aftercare and COSA has generally sought to work with those among them who are most likely to fail, presumably because of a lack of community support or other resources. These are also the individuals who are most likely to attract significant media attention.

Goal of the Project

The goal of COSA is to promote successful integration of released men into the community by providing support, advocacy, and a way to be meaningfully accountable in exchange for living *safely* in the community. In doing so, safety is enhanced for the community, particularly where risk exists for women, children, or other vulnerable persons. Simply put, COSAs promote safety for victims (past or potential) by validating their needs for healing and continued safety while, at the same time, supporting ex-offenders with their daily needs and holding them accountable for behaving responsibly. In return for remaining accountable, the ex-offender's rights as a citizen are protected.

COSA Mechanics

In Canada, Circles of Support and Accountability is a community-driven and professionally supported model. The inner of two concentric circles is comprised of community volunteers and the outer circle is comprised of professional groups, who offer support to the volunteers (see *Figure 1*). In other jurisdictions, such as the Thames Valley Region in the UK, and in the State of Oregon, USA, COSAs are professionally-driven, community-supported projects. In British terms, COSAs are 'statutory' agencies supported by the voluntary sector (Quaker Peace and Social Justice 2005). The positions of the 'core' circle and the 'supportive' circle are reversed.

In Canada, individuals from the community volunteer time to assist a released offender (known as a Core Member) as he attempts to integrate to the community. Volunteers are screened and trained (Correctional Service of Canada 2002) prior to being placed in a COSA, and have access to a pool of professionals (for example, psychologists, physicians, law enforcement, correctional workers, etc.). These professionals are called upon to volunteer their time and expertise to prepare, support, and educate community volunteers in their work with the Core Member. This professional group, drawn from the local community, act as a 'safety net' for the volunteers. Their advice is often sought, and is freely given. Through this type of collaboration and communication, community safety is greatly enhanced.

In the Thames Valley, COSA is a more treatment-focused project working with individuals still within the criminal justice system, where the

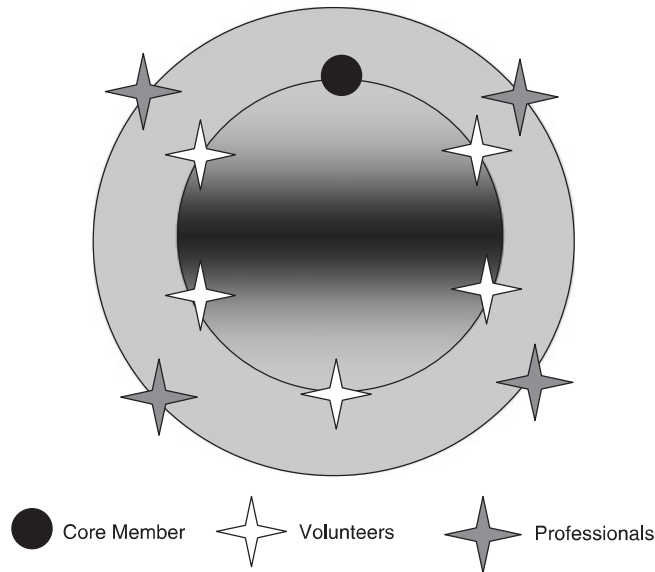


FIGURE 1
Graphic Representation of a COSA

community is cast in a supporting role for the work of professionals. Where appropriate, COSA works within the framework of a brilliant British innovation called the multi-agency public protection arrangement (MAPPA). There is now sufficient anecdotal evidence from the Thames Valley project (Quaker Peace and Social Justice 2005) to suggest that this professionally-focused model is working.

In Canada, however, COSA functions outside the criminal justice framework with individuals for whom there are no services such as those available to offenders in the Thames Valley. Under these circumstances, we feel the community-centred model is the one which embraces and validates the basic premise that, when faced with imminently dangerous situations, ordinary people, correctly prepared and professionally supported, are more than capable of taking care of their own safety needs. The 'conflict' is thus returned to its rightful owners – the community, and volunteers fill the gap. We have seen this in the aftermath of such tragedies as 9/11, the recent hurricanes in the US Gulf Coast, and the Ontario-Quebec ice storm of 1998.

In most Canadian communities, local COSA projects are guided by an advisory panel or steering group and, in some cases, by a board of directors. Usually, a local faith organisation sponsors the advisory panel or steering group while maintaining an administrative framework that supports the local project. In the Thames Valley project, collaboration between the Religious Society of Friends (The Quakers) and the Church of

England's Board of Social Responsibility comprises a steering committee along with local police and probation services units. Similarly, the Oregon Department of Corrections Chaplaincy Program operates a COSA variant through its Home For Good Program.

Across Canadian jurisdictions, the Circle of Support and Accountability model remains consistent in that a Circle is comprised of one Core Member, five to seven community volunteers, and a supportive group of professionals and administrators. The Core Member and volunteers comprise the inner circle depicted in *Figure 1*, while their support is found in the outer circle. For the most part, funding for this initiative has come from the Canadian federal government, although some private funders have had to be solicited in order to meet the growing demand.

Volunteer Recruitment

By far the biggest challenge faced by Canadian COSA projects has been that of volunteer recruitment. And, given that these initiatives are entirely reliant on the participation of volunteer community members, it is understandable that this issue will occupy much of a local project co-ordinator's time. Part of the difficulty comes in ensuring that the motives and capabilities of potential volunteers are appropriate to the task of providing support and accountability for high-risk sexual offenders in the community. To that end, COSA projects look for volunteers who:

- are stable in the community
- are known in the community (references checked)
- have demonstrated maturity
- possess healthy boundaries
- are available
- have balance in lifestyle and viewpoint (more on this under *Volunteer Training* below).

To date, the vast majority of the volunteers associated with these projects have come from the faith community, with virtually all faiths and denominations represented. This population has been described by some as having a 'calling' for volunteerism, or that they are 'natural born volunteers'. However, recruitment of volunteers, even from this reportedly proactive population, is not without its difficulties. Project co-ordinators often approach various local congregations looking for potential volunteers or for other support. However, some of these congregations have instead requested assistance with a problematic member of their congregation, not necessarily accompanied by a pledge to assist from that congregation. In other cases, local faith communities have said their resources were already overwhelmed. This is particularly the case for inner city congregations. Others have told us that their congregation was not the type where a convicted sexual offender would be welcomed.

Often, it takes one congregant who understands the need to spur a particular church into action. In one such parish in Ottawa, Canada, the entire Church has decided that part of their mission as a church is to

welcome the 'least of the least' into their midst. Several known sexual offenders – one with a fair degree of national notoriety – are 'out' in the church. As a congregation, they have embraced the idea of a Circle of Support and Accountability. With the help of professionals in their community, they have instituted safety plans around their new members. This is an example of a community caring for itself and its members in a proactive, knowledge-based manner.

As COSA projects mature and become a part of the social landscape in Canada, volunteers from secular backgrounds have also come forward. Indeed, in Vancouver, BC – Canada's third largest urban center – the local COSA project has come under the umbrella of a wellness college. Nonetheless, volunteer recruitment remains of critical import to the long-term existence of COSA.

Recruitment of professionals has also, at times, presented difficulties. Generally, COSA projects seek to include professionals already involved in the Core Member's life in the community (for example, the family physician monitoring medications and other similar issues). The biggest challenges centre largely on getting professionals to understand, accept, and support the work of the Circle(s). Law enforcement and corrections officials generally approach the idea of COSA with caution. Some tend to instruct COSA volunteers as if they were surrogate professionals, urging them, for instance, to erect and maintain boundaries that define professional relationships. The learning curve for professionals is that COSA volunteers seek relationships not based on professional respect and distance, but in terms of friendships. This means that there are times, when all safety concerns have been thought through and evaluated, that a volunteer may invite a Core Member home for dinner. Some professionals have had great difficulty with the idea that volunteers involve Core Members in their family and social circles. However, the 'currency' of a Circle's influence on the prosocial behaviour of a Core Member is founded on relationships of trust and friendship that are, at times, different from those founded on authority and professionalism. Integration cannot be achieved when there is an 'us-and-them' mind set.

Volunteer Training

Clearly, COSA volunteers were never meant to be seen as an alternative to proper professional care in the community for high-risk/high-needs offenders. Rather, the training regime instituted by COSA projects in Canada is intended to ensure that volunteers have enough knowledge of the dynamics of sexual offending to be effective in their role as volunteers. The benefit for the volunteers is that through training, volunteers become more knowledgeable members of their community. In this way, the capacity of the community to deal with the existence of threats to safety and for dealing with conflict in its midst is broadened and deepened through the experience of these volunteers. Further, being educated on how to recognise the signs of impending relapse assists volunteers in knowing when to involve professional assistance in the risk-management process.

The core components of the training programme are provided prior to volunteering in an actual COSA, with continuing education opportunities available via partnership with local professionals.

The first step in training, which actually provides an opportunity for screening of potential volunteers, is a half-day orientation session during which the basics of the project are outlined. This is available in two formats, one for potential volunteers and another for professionals willing to volunteer expertise to the project. Once volunteers are 'screened-in' following the orientation session, they progress through a four-phase training regime, consisting of an additional four days (or equivalent). The phases are: (i) 'The Core Workshop'; (ii) Skill Building; (iii) Forging a Circle; and (iv) Walking With a Core Member. The specifics of this training programme are discussed in the aforementioned guidelines (Correctional Service of Canada 2002). Topics of training over the four days or equivalent period include (but are not limited to):

- overview of the criminal justice system
- restorative justice
- needs of survivors
- the Circle model
- effects of institutionalisation
- human sexuality and sexual deviance
- risk assessment
- boundaries and borders
- conflict resolution
- group dynamics
- building group cohesion
- Circle functions
- crisis response and preparing for critical incident stress
- working with correctional officials, police, news media and other community professionals
- needs assessment
- building a covenant
- Court orders
- closing a Circle.

Potential volunteers must also undergo a criminal records check before they are admitted to the project. During the training period, co-ordinators and the professionals they involve in the training sessions have a chance to see potential volunteers in action. One of the most difficult tasks for a local project co-ordinator is to 'screen out' a potential volunteer during this phase. The cold, hard truth is that not everyone who steps forward as a volunteer is suited to this task. Often, the difficulty is found in a volunteer's ability to strike a balance between the needs of the Core Member, victims, and the community's need for safety. Additionally, difficulty may result as a consequence of a particular volunteer's inability to appreciate the consensus model at the heart of COSA. In a climate where finding good

volunteers is difficult to begin with, screening out a willing participant is very hard.

Resourcing

All COSA projects in Canada function almost exclusively on monies received under contract from the Correctional Service of Canada through its Chaplaincy Directorate. These contracts represent a unique approach by CSC. Recall that COSA works with Core Members who have been detained until their WED, and then released. The government has no technical authority to supervise or finance the management of offenders not currently serving a sentence. The funding is provided, interestingly, not on the basis of a legal responsibility but, rather, as a reflection of the government's moral responsibility to both the community and ex-offenders. The funds received as a result of these contracts are used to fund project co-ordination and community engagement activities in each of Canada's ten provinces. Generally, financial stability has been an issue of critical importance in ensuring the long-term viability of the Canadian projects. To date, this issue remains tentative.

Conclusion

This COSA Mission Statement above clearly outlines an admirable goal; however, community perspectives continue to be that sexual offenders are untreatable and destined to fail over and over again, creating more victims and greater community suffering in the process. In establishing the Canadian projects, the goal has been two-fold: (i) to respond to a clear need in the community for co-ordinated, grassroots risk management, and (ii) to investigate whether high-risk sexual offenders could be safely returned to the community using a model blending community volunteerism with professional facilitation. Support for the continued expansion of the COSA model has been found in anecdotal results from projects in a variety of international jurisdictions (for example, Quaker Peace and Social Justice 2005). Empirical evaluation data supporting the model are now also available. Specifically, the effectiveness of the world's pioneer Toronto pilot project has been established (Wilson, Picheca and Prinzo 2005), with statistically significant decreases having been demonstrated in regard to both sexual and violent reoffending.¹

Post-Script

A few months after this article was first offered for publication, Charlie Taylor died on Christmas Day 2005, after a long battle with diabetes. At the time of his death, he had spent eleven years and six months in the community, completely free of any sexual or violent offending. Charlie maintained contact with his Circle volunteers – his 'friends' – until the very end.

Note

1 *Acknowledgements*: Portions of this article were adapted, with permission, from a chapter by Wilson and Picheca (2005) written for *The Sexual Offender*. The views expressed in this article are not necessarily those of the Humber Institute of Technology and Applied Learning, the Correctional Service of Canada, or the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health. The authors would like to thank Eileen Henderson, Rev. Harry Nigh, Rev. Hugh Kirkegaard, Det. Wendy Leaver, Gerry Minard, Evan Heise, Ed Vandenburg, Rick Cober Bauman, and Rev. David Molzahn for their ongoing work in the COSA project in South-Central Ontario, Canada. We also acknowledge COSA volunteers and project managers from coast-to-coast in Canada whose work is often accomplished with little support or acknowledgement. Their contribution to our collective wisdom is incalculable. Last, but by no means least, we are particularly indebted to the Core Members across Canada who have shown much courage in the face of great adversity and challenge – all the while demonstrating that the ‘lowest of the low’ can make a worthwhile contribution to society.

References

- Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics (1999) ‘Sex offenders’, *Juristat*, 19, Ottawa: Statistics Canada.
- Center for Sex Offender Management (1999) *Sex Offender Registration: Policy Overview and Comprehensive Practices*. Available at: <http://www.csom.org/pubs/sexreg.html> (accessed 10 September 2006).
- Correctional Service of Canada (2002) *Circles of Support and Accountability: A Guide to Training Potential Volunteers, Training Manual 2002*, Ottawa, ON.: Correctional Service of Canada.
- Federoff, J.P. and Moran, B. (1997) ‘Myths and misconceptions about sex offenders’, *Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality*, 6, 263–76.
- Hanson, R.K. and Bussière, M.T. (1998) ‘Predicting relapse: a meta-analysis of sexual offender recidivism studies’, *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 66, 348–62.
- Hanson, R.K., Gordon, A., Harris, A.J.R., Marques, J.K., Murphy, W., Quinsey, V.L. and Seto, M.C. (2002) ‘First report of the Collaborative Outcome Data Project on the effectiveness of psychological treatment for sexual offenders’, *Sexual Abuse*, 14, 169–94.
- Hanson, R.K. and Morton-Bourgon, K. (2004) *Predictors of Sexual Recidivism: An Updated Meta-Analysis* (User Report 2004-02), Ottawa, ON.: The Department of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada.
- John Howard Society of Alberta (2001) *Offender Registry*. Available at: <http://www.johnhoward.ab.ca/PUB/offender.htm> (accessed 10 September 2006).
- Mennonite Central Committee of Ontario (1996) *The Green Manual*, Toronto, ON.: Mennonite Central Committee of Ontario.
- Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services (2002) *First Year of Ontario Sex Offender Registry a Success*. Available at: http://ogov.newswire.ca/ontario/GPOE/2002/04/05/c1651.html?lnatch=&lang=_e.html (accessed 10 September 2006).
- Porporino, F.J. and Motiuk, L.L. (1991) *Preliminary Results of National Sex Offender Census* (User Report R-29), Ottawa, ON.: Correctional Service of Canada. Available at: http://www.csc-scc.gc.ca/text/rsrch/reports/r29/r29e_e.pdf (accessed 10 September 2006).
- Quaker Peace and Social Justice (2005) *Circles of Support and Accountability in the Thames Valley: The First Three Years April 2002 to March 2005*, London: Quaker Peace and Social Justice.
- Silverman, J. and Wilson, D. (2002) *Innocence Betrayed: Paedophilia, the Media and Society*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

- US National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (undated) *Sex Offender Laws*. Available at: http://www.missingkids.com/missingkids/serolet/PageServlet?LanguageCountry=en_US&PageId=1545 (accessed 10 September 2006).
- Wilson, R.J., Huculak, B. and McWhinnie, A. (2002) 'Restorative justice innovations in Canada', *Behavioral Sciences and the Law*, 20, 1–18.
- Wilson, R.J. and Picheca, J.E. (2005) 'Circles of support and accountability: engaging the community in sexual offender risk management', in: B.K. Schwartz (Ed.), *The Sexual Offender*, vol. 5, New York, NY.: Civic Research Institute.
- Wilson, R.J., Picheca, J.E. and Prinzo, M. (2005) *Circles of Support and Accountability: An Evaluation of the Pilot Project in South-Central Ontario* (Research Report R-168), Ottawa, ON.: Correctional Service of Canada.
- Wilson, R.J. and Prinzo, M. (2001) 'Circles of support: a restorative justice initiative', *Journal of Psychology and Human Sexuality*, 13, 59–77.
- Wilson, R.J., Stewart, L., Stirpe, T., Barrett, M. and Cripps, J.E. (2000) 'Community-based sexual offender management: combining parole supervision and treatment to reduce recidivism', *Canadian Journal of Criminology*, 42, 177–88.

Date submitted: October 2005

Date accepted: December 2005