

January 31, 2022

Open Letter of Support for Circles of Support and Accountability

Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA) is a Canadian program based on restorative justice principles designed to assist individuals convicted of sexual offences as they re-enter the community at the end of their sentence. The CoSA model, which originated in Canada, has since been replicated in numerous countries in Western and Eastern Europe, the United States, Australia and New Zealand.

Sex offenders released to the community, often at warrant expiry, are without a formal process of community support or supervision. CoSA was created to address this shortfall by providing a supportive and accountable relationship to these offenders (referred to as core members) who are at risk to reoffend sexually. Core members are often released from prison with no family, friends, or support in the community. Many of them are institutionalized after having spent long periods of time in prison and many have a history of abuse and deprivation.

CoSA's operational framework relies on the development of relationships with pro-social members of the community through a circle format. For many core members, this is the first time in their lives that they are engaging in healthy relationships with people who genuinely care about their well-being (and who are not paid to spend time with them). The relationship itself, and the voluntary nature of the relationship, are seen as fundamental to CoSA's success.

Restorative justice principles and practices guide CoSA's operational format, and grounds how CoSA frames wrongdoing and what to do about it. Restorative justice begins with a belief that crimes harm relationships and create obligations to right the wrong. CoSA promotes meaningful accountability on these terms, while helping the core member build social capital. From a relational theory perspective of justice, CoSA allows the community, through volunteer members, to build relationships with core members that promote healing and well-being for everyone, while meeting the relational needs of core members and holding them accountable to the community.

In the initial stages, the circle is focussed on helping the core member work through the practical issues related to life outside of prison (e.g., finding housing, accessing a food bank, obtaining employment, and getting a driver's license) and manage the conditions of a Criminal Code of Canada s810 order or a Long-term Supervision Order. As the circle members become more familiar with one another, they can begin to address more complex issues (e.g., triggers for reoffending, danger of breaching, depression, self-harm, family issues, frustration, and anger). CoSA plays a pivotal role in providing support for integration to core members outside of more formalized support structures, an element that seems to motivate core member commitment and continued involvement in CoSA. Both formal service providers and circle volunteers note that CoSA fills the gap between prison life and life after incarceration with a support service that stands "outside the 'system'", in an intermediary role between legal/correctional services and integration into society.

CoSA has proven to be effective in preventing further crime. A number of research studies have shown significant reductions in recidivism by core members as compared with control subjects who did not participate in CoSA (see bibliography attached). Concomitantly, findings from cost-benefit analyses of CoSA programs have demonstrated substantial savings in criminal justice system costs associated with the avoidance of further criminal behaviour and victimization.

We, the undersigned, recognize the valuable contribution that CoSA has made in promoting the safe and healthy reintegration to the community of individuals who have served sentences for sexual offences, and we strongly support further funding of CoSA programs in Canada.

Sincerely,

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Circles of Support & Accountability – Bibliography

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