

Circles of Support and Accountability: Restorative Justice Approach for High-Risk Offenders

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What is CoSA?

- Made-in-Canada reintegration program, based on restorative justice principles, for individuals (known as Core Members/CMs) who have committed sexual offences
- Allows the community to play a direct role in the restoration, reintegration, and risk management practises
- Trained and screened Volunteers act as role models and companions, offer support to CMs to succeed
- CMs held accountable for their behaviour, decisions and choices; and work closely with Volunteers who flag concerns, if required, to authorities

CoSA's Mission: *to substantially reduce the risk of future sexual victimization by assisting and supporting released individuals in their task of integrating into the community and leading a responsible, meaningful, and accountable life.*



Restorative Objectives of CoSA

- Building safer and healthier communities
- Enabling responsibility-taking for harmful actions and choices
- Generating an environment of empathy to better understand the needs of victims and the impact of sexual harm on them
- Provides a careful balance of engagement between **support and accountability**
- Supporting CMs to develop new and positive life strategies



The Research is Overwhelmingly Clear

- Evidence-based studies on the effectiveness of CoSA work have repeatedly shown reductions in offending among CMs
- Canadian studies alone have found that participants in CoSA committed between 70 and 83% fewer offences than those who did not participate in the CoSA program
- A 2018 study by Grant Duwe, Minnesota Department of Corrections, demonstrated that participating in the CoSA program significantly reduced sexual recidivism, lowering the risk for new sex offences by 88%



CoSA's Operational Model

- Developed in consultation with partners across the country and internationally and implemented in 2017
- Represents a broad consensus view of what CoSA's approach is and a best practice in offender reintegration
- Allows CoSA sites to ensure that common standards are met and maintained nationwide
- Provides flexibility to CoSA sites across Canada to adapt to their local communities and circumstances



Role of the Circle

- Circle is an intentional community composed of trained and screened staff and community members/Volunteers
- established for the benefit of the CM and the community at large
- facilitates constructive exchange and direct connection with the CM through regular in-person group and one-on-one meetings, and other activities
- empowers and supports the core member to become better connected to the wider community context and over time, to establish and nurture lasting relationships



Goals of the Circle

- Hub for support connection for CM's
- Personal transformation through circles
- Model healthy social network
- Guiding core members toward stable reintegration
 - Ongoing risk assessment
 - Goal setting and progress
 - Ensuring a balance between support and accountability



Support AND Accountability

- Circles support honest discussion through establishing clear boundaries, ensuring a safe space for transparent and open communications
- Honouring the circle's goals and commitments promotes an environment of trust and respect over time between the CMs and Volunteers
- Circles assist CMs to understand and manage their personal risk factors, to recognize their strengths, and to develop new skills and self-understanding in a safe and inclusive environment
- Helping to break the cycle of offending and prevent further harm ultimately contributes to the safety and well-being of the community



Key Priorities for Local Sites

- Use an evolving Best Practice framework
- Allows for public and partner engagement
- Encourages excellence in policy and standards
- Qualifications and training for lead staff
- Volunteer recruitment, screening, preparation, and oversight
- Core member referral, screening, intake, and record keeping
- Circle preparation, functioning, and closure



Core Competencies for Staff

- Commitment to restorative justice principles
- Understand law enforcement, corrections and criminal justice, mental health, and sexual violence and victimization
- Training/experience in conflict resolution
- Collaborate with other community resources
- Manage challenges with discretion, sensitivity, maturity, and confidentiality
- Maintain personal support and self-care
- Experience with a high-needs, high-risk population



Accountability Milestones for CMs

- Identifying behaviours
- Accepting harm done and impact of sexual victimization on others
- Looking for patterns
- Unlearning old/negative behaviours
- Learning new/positive behaviours



Strategies for Safety and Well-Being

- Clarify **organizational boundaries** and set clear **personal boundaries**
- Ensure staff, volunteers, and core members feel **safe, supported, and included**
- Work to **build awareness** of the needs and well-being of all **affected by harm**
- Promote an environment of trust and respect



Strategies for Safety and Well-Being

- Be **consistent**: act safely in the program and build safety in the community
- Informed awareness of **risk issues**
- Recognize **position of power and trust** - abide by the **law**; encourage core members to respect their **legal obligations, report breaches**



Volunteer Code of Conduct

- Speak and act with **safety** as a first priority
- Maintain appropriate **boundaries**
- Understand obligations around **confidentiality**
- Function as a **transparent team** with other volunteers
- Maintain open and regular **communications** with CoSA staff
- Ensure a balance of **support and accountability**
- **Keep no secrets**



Code of Conduct for Core Members

- Speak and act with **safety** as a first priority.
- Ask about **reporting obligations** if unsure.
- Maintain **confidentiality**.
- Respect the time **limitations and personal boundaries** set by volunteers, and **organizational boundaries** set by the site.
- Do not connect with volunteers on **social media**.



Code of Conduct cont.

- Maintain **financial boundaries**.
- Check with circle to request if a **visitor** may attend.
- Ask for clarification to abide by the **circle agreement**.
- Be **on time for meetings**.
- Advise staff if no longer able to **commit** to the circle.
- **Keep no secrets**



Challenges for CoSA in Canada

- Five-year demonstration funding through Public Safety Canada ended in March 2022
- Lack of secure, long-term funding will jeopardize the ability of local CoSA sites to continue to operate
- Creating partnerships with the Provinces and Territories for support is critical
- Short-term funding via for example, Correctional Services Canada, will help fill a critical gap on an interim basis



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